



ISSN 2455-7544
www.daathvoyagejournal.com

Daath Voyage : An International Journal of Interdisciplinary Studies in English

A Refereed Open Access Journal
Vol 9 No 1 March 2024

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: An International Journal of Interdisciplinary Studies in English
(A peer reviewed open access journal)

ISSN 2455-7544

www.daathvoyagejournal.com

Vol.9, No.1, March, 2024

Beyond the Norms: Disabled Characters in Selected English Novels by Indian Women Writers

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Abstract: Disability studies remain a comparatively unexplored area in India in spite of the fact that it has evolved as a separate new critical discipline of study in the West. Likewise, Disability as a theme, character, imagery etc is very less experimented in Indian English literature. Nevertheless, Limited writers have effectively projected disabled characters into mainstream literature. Women's writing in Indian English achieved broadening mainstream literature with the voice of marginality. Although, women's writing could not achieve better in this 'arena of disability'. This paper introduces a comprehensive exploration of Indian women's contributions to Indian English literature in the contemporary period and their unique portrayal of disabled characters within their respective novels. It investigates how these women's writers have crafted multi-dimensional disabled characters, thereby challenging not only societal norms but also the conventional literary portrayal of disability. Few Indian women writers have made significant strides in English literature by incorporating disabled characters into their novels. These representations not only provide a platform for marginalized voices but also challenge societal norms and prejudices.

Keywords: Women's Writing, Indian English Literature, Disability.



Indian women writers in English have made the most significant contribution in the field of the Indian English Literature Especially English novel. The Indian women writers have made the most remarkable contribution to the sphere of fiction, which as Mulk Raj Anand says, has “come to stay as part of world literature.” Indian novel has grown considerably in bulk variety, and maturity. The development of Indian novel follows certain definite patterns, and it is not difficult to trace its gradual progression from the imitative stage to the realistic to the Psychological to the experimental stage. (Yesapogu 01) There are many Indian women writers who have carved a niche for themselves in the literary world and have received international fame.

Women Writing in Indian English Literature as par with male writers contributed. Women write new and unsaid image of women and the layers of inner feelings, desires, quest for identity etc. Women writers have helped women to find the language to articulate their true feelings through their writings.

The voice of Indian women writers also dealt with historical, cultural, philosophical and much more basing their themes around mankind. The Indian women writers have concentrated their themes around sociological, Diasporic elements, feminine subjects, science and technologies, explorative writings, and much more. (Yesapogu 02)

Till 19th century male writers monopoly existed and it Women writing started to have a rise in number after post-independence in India. Meena Shiradwadkar writes in this context:

Literature, which until recently was male dominated has started reflecting the sparks that have emanated from this struggle of the woman to be herself. (20)

Disability studies remain a comparatively unexplored area in India in spite of the fact that it has evolved as a separate new critical discipline of study in the West. Likewise, Disability as a theme, character, imagery etc is very less experimented in Indian English literature. Nevertheless, Limited writers have effectively projected disabled characters into mainstream literature. Women’s writing in Indian English achieved broadening mainstream literature with the voice of marginality. Although, women’s writing could not bring disable characters in many literary texts. Particularly, In novels very handful of such works are written by women. There are many autobiographies and semi autobiographies are written by women. such as Malini Chib’s *One Little Finger*, Shivani Guptha’s *No Looking Back* etc.



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Male writers could not achieve better in this 'arena of disability.' Few male writers in Indian English Literature portrayed disabled character in their novels. Such as: Firdaus Kanga's *Trying to Grow* and Indra Sinha's *Animal's People*, Rohinton Mistry's *Such a Long Journey (1991)*, Rushdie's *Shame (1983)* Disabled people suffer from social exclusion as they do not fit into the social norms of what it represents to be able-bodied. They show how disabled person is treated as object in the society, cannot be brought under the mainstream of the society

In Disability studies, the disability is not seen in the lens of medical model, rather it considered as 'culturally fabricated narrative of body'. Medical model finds the disabled persons as dis-abled and the one to be cured. Whereas cultural approach seem body as embodiment of social meaning. That means in disability study, one studies stigma they face and how disabled react to the social exclusion.

Lennard J Davis in the *Enforcing Normalcy* states about in the task of rethinking and theorizing disability as:

one of the first steps is to understand the relationship between a physical impairment and the political, social, even spatial environment that places that impairment in a matrix of meanings and significations. (03)

In this paper, I am examining select novels of Anitha Desai and Jaishree. In clear light of the day the disabled character is baba and in *Ancient Promises* riya, protagonist daughter.

Anitha Desai is the best known of the contemporary women writers. Of all the contemporary novelists, she is indisputably the most popular and powerful novelist. She has made commendable contribution to the Indian English fiction (Yesapogu 04)

In the novels of Anita Desai (1937), there is the world of radical female resistance against a defined concept of normally. Women are mostly files quarters. In her psychological novels, she creates an image of suffering women preoccupied with her inner world, her sulking frustration, and the storm within the existential predicament of a woman in a male dominated society. Through her characters, she makes a plea for a better way of living for women (Dushyanth) Anitha Desai's one of the most promising novel is *Clear Light of the Day*.



Anita Desai's *Clear Light of The Day*, present solid Intellectually Disabled characters who assume a crucial part in the string of the message. These works produce types of subjectivity inside unambiguous desultory fields and the power relations advance specific implications, interests and even types of opposition. (Nikhil)

Clear Light of the Day by Anitha Desai is a novel set against the backdrop of Indian independence and partition. The story centres on Das's Family. It explores the complex relationship connections, its depth, suppressed emotions, dependency and search for one's identity. Das is having four offspring: Raj, Baba, Tara and Bin. Though the novel focusing on two daughters tara and Bin. Bin and Tara follows different trajectories: bin, a teacher living at the ancestral house in old Delhi and a great advocate of independence and individuality. She is said to have aged prematurely due to stress surrounding her household. She takes care of her disabled brother, baba and sick aunt even when everyone else deserts her. Bim is able to place a position for herself in society. She makes a decision, "I shall work- I shall do things. I shall earn my own living- and look after Mira Masi and Baba and- and be independent" (*Clear Light of Day* 140).

Whereas Tara lives in abroad and follows western values. She hate going school and not pursued higher education. Her ambition itself is to become a mother.

Baba is the disabled character in the novel. He is the son of Desai and lives in old Delhi. He is autistic. Baba is having large family. Baba born into the family as the youngest brother. He spends most of his time listening to music on a gramophone and becomes very distressed when it malfunctions. His family very much expected of his birth. they waited with love and caring. By birth he brings misery to the family.

Also, the disappointment that Baba's very life and existence were to them, his hopeless future, their anxiety over him. The children could only sense all this, they did not share it, except unwillingly. To them Baba was the perpetual baby who would never grow up—that was his charm, they felt, and never thought of his actual age. (130)

In larger scale it also shows how one's disability brings unhappiness to home. And society's outlook towards the disabled.

Baba's appearance described in the novel as:



He was in his pyjamas—an old pair with frayed ends, over which he wore a grey bush-shirt worn and washed almost to translucency. His face, too, was blanched, like a plant grown underground or in deepest shade, and his hair was quite white, giving his young, fine face a ghostly look that made people start whenever he appeared (08)

In the *Revising the Subject: Disability as "Third Dimension" in "Clear Light of Day and You Have Come Back*, Cindy Lacom examines the character baba as:

In the novel, *Clear Light of Day* Anita Desai explores the ambivalent role of characters with disabilities, both as sites of transgression and as repositories for cultural tensions in a postcolonial world. In it, Desai uses the family as microcosm for larger national concerns (Cindy Lacom)

In the midst of their negotiations exists their brother Baba, who is developmentally disabled. At one level, Baba represents the naive dream of detachment from postcolonial negotiations of power, i.e., that one can somehow remove oneself from such negotiations. He is literally left out of almost all arguments between his sisters and thus exempt from the anguish caused by such altercations. (Cindy Lacom)

According to Sorna, Anita Desai characterized Baba as feminized by his disability in explicit ways:

...he does not contribute in the public world, and he is extremely delicate. However, Baba additionally lives in a semiotic world, opposing section into the symbolic by means of his music and his mutterings. Though externally, Baba does grow up to be a man, mentally he still appears to be an everlasting child.

Baba as portrayed as angel (.. an angel descended to the earth, unsoiled by any of it (12). As women also described as angel to indicate the submissive, delicate and dependence. Disabled person also, apart from the gender, also considered the submissive, delicate and dependence being.

Ones own room shows how his/her own thoughts or in this novel baba's room presented as bare which shows his calmness, innocence and intellectual disability. Whereas the aunt mira's room seem crowded as her character. Though the same room was once her.

He was crouched low, listening raptly to the last of 'Don't Fence Me In' unwinding itself on the old HMV gramophone on a small bamboo table beside



his bed. The records, not so very many of them—there must have been breakages after all—were stacked on a shelf beneath the table in their tattered yellow sleeves. The string cot, the table, the HMV gramophone, a canvas chair and a wardrobe—nothing else. It was a large room and looked bare. (12)

Though baba's character is significant in telling connection with other characters. Such as the character of Bim is not fully studied without Baba. Even her identity underlies with him. But His presence in the novel is less than presence. Desai described as:

Baba sat there, on the veranda steps, beside a pot of petunias that flowered now in the dark with a kind of lunar luminosity, giving out a maidenly white scent that made one soon feel cooler, calmer. Baba's presence, too, was so much less than a presence, that it could not intrude or chafe. (62)

In Clear Light of the Day, Anitha Desai present the disabled character, Baba, multi dimensionally. She represents the real-life condition of disabled character in India. The social exclusion and othering faced by the disabled. Also presented the side of dependence of disabled and others sacrifice for it.

Ancient promises by Jaishree Misra is a semi-autobiographical text. This story canters around the life of Janu whose journey from a teenage girl to wife and a mother of disabled girl. In "*Woman's Painful Journey of Self-discovery in Jaishree Misra's Ancient Promises*", G Venkatalakshmi and Dr. J. Uma Samundeeswari states:

It is a story of Protagonist constant struggle that goes on her life as an affectionate and submissive daughter, an empathetic but guilty lover, a restless and depressed wife, a helpless and desolate mother - a woman constantly in search of an identity, a woman pursuing her rightful share of happiness.

Janu brought up in Delhi but having strong familial roots in Kerala. She was forced into a marriage by her parents, after they got to know that she was in love with a Delhi boy named Arjun who is of the same age. Janu's father was totally against the idea of a love marriage. According to him, the main cause for unsuccessful marriages is falling in love. (Nimila & Iyadurai) Her parents married her to socially higher



caste Maarar family. But her non Keralite culture and use of English words provoked them. Janu was never accepted in the Maarar family.

After marriage Janu's world was doomed by a mother-in-law, overbearing sisters-in-law, a reticent father-in-law, and a husband with a weapon of escapism. Janu hopes that if a boy child is born to her, she would get more acceptance in the Maarar family. But much to her disappointment she gives birth to a girl child that too with a mental disability. she understands that education is the only escape route in her life. She educates herself and finally on one of her trips to Delhi for a scholarship, she comes across her adolescent lover Arjun. She walks into his arms and adultery without any regrets as if it was the most natural act. Empowered by Arjun's love she finally fights the society's resistance to change. She breaks all the restrictions of the family and walks out as a free woman. (Nimila & Iyadurai)

Jaishree Misra novel basically portrays quest for kind texture in women's life in the busy patriarchal society, where in men have all the privileges, and woman are burdened with only responsibilities. Her novels are also built in the question of marriage and fidelity in the family system. The Protagonist's painful journey of self-discovery in *Ancient Promises*: Jaishree Misra in her *Ancient Promises*" highlights the constant struggle that goes on between the protagonist Janu and her parents because of her love affair. (Venkatakshmi & Samundeeswari 34)

The disabled character in this novel is Riya child of protagonist. Riya is a small child described by her own mother, Janu as "...Little mope-headed Riya" (262) Janu constantly indicates her disabled daughter as helpless. Riya is having intellectual disability, find difficult in basic thing done by children of her age. Jaishree Misra carefully drawn the picture of Riya.

Riya is described in the words of the paediatrician who examined her:

"This child is definitely mentally handicapped. There is no doubt, see she has all the features, high arched palate, tongue-thrust!" concluding with a flourish, 'in fact I think that she will never even speak."

The paediatrician identified the child as dis-abled. And the life of Riya transitioned from able -bodies to dis-abled. Riya who seen as a normal girl become 'special' who needs special care. In the clinical terms of disability look at the physical or mental impairment. And that is medical model of disability. In social



model of disability happens by comparing to the normalcy. Riya become disabled in terms of societal norms. That's how she started to be excluded from the society. Othering started to occur. Society demands her to go to 'special school' is an example for that .

Comparison become 'able-bodied' makes a person 'dis-abled'. Generally a mother think her own child as perfect and they constantly confirms by comparing to other children. Riya's mother Janu compares Riya's ability in study to another child Vrinda.

Riya doesn't even know what number is, leave alone count them. Does your Vrinda knows her numbers?(139)

Even Riya's mother, Janu agrees with people who sympathize with her. There is situation where Janu feel embarrassed by her daughter's inability draw like other kids. Janu feels guilty by being part of 'the society' which excludes her daughter.

I was ashamed that I had once allowed an ignorant school teacher to convince me that Riya was lesser of her classmates for not being able to paint purple mountains. I knew that Riya's efforts to communicate make friends (145)

Janu talks to Lisa. she finds her make difficult to understand so she thinks:

It was like talking to a brick wall.Twin brick walls with lesser power of understanding than my Riya had in that malfunctioning little brain of hers.(140)

So in the mind of Janu constant image of riya comes as dis-abled or not normal.That's why even when the situation is serious here, she is comparing Lisa's inability to understand with her child's 'little brain.' This itself shows her constant struggle to fight with societal norms fails. Even the closed one of disabled people also injected with social stigmatization and discrimination.

The society see the disabled as 'other'.In this novel disabled character , Riya face othering from her own father and his family.

Marars remained untouched with Riya. Though Janu, could not rationalize that because Riya was their's own flesh and blood. And Riya.. would anyone bother about a child like her? Her own father and grandparents found her difficult to love (214)



Janaki of *Ancient Promises* represents a new woman who rebels against the patriarchal society by breaking the old traditions and beliefs. (Nimila & Iyadurai) Janu breaks 'socially accepted ethical cycle of women's life' to live with her lover. She thinks:

Riya's had been a blessing to free me from that circle of forced happiness. I wouldn't have to condemn generations after me to enter that spiralling cycle that just went on and on and on..(303)

People with disabilities across the world suffer due to human apathy and socio-cultural aversion. Disability itself is considered as evil. Disabled people is not considered as 'normal' and are excluded from society, so being a mother of the disabled gives Janu the freedom to break the societal norms.

This survey of women's writing to find out the representation of disabled persons across literatures points out that disability is a common phenomenon and locating a person with disability in the society is normal. Indian women writers like Anitha Desai and Jaishree Misra have made significant strides in English literature by incorporating disabled characters into their novels. These representations not only provide a platform for marginalized voices but also challenge societal norms and prejudices. Through their stories, they shed light on the complex intersections of gender, disability, and identity, creating a more inclusive and empathetic literary landscape in India. As Indian literature continues to evolve, the diverse voices of women writers promise to enrich our understanding of the human experience, including the experiences of those with disabilities.

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Vol.9, No.1, March, 2024

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