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One Little Finger: An Outcry for Inclusive Society

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Abstract: Disabled bodies have always been subject to pity and indifference. The need for acceptance and inclusion is a particular demand for differently-abled. Malini Chib's autobiography *One Little Finger (2011)* is one such outcry of a crippling body who is having not only an active but also an extraordinary mind which can receive people's affection, love and indifference too. Through her autobiography, Chib has raised the common voice of struggle of differently-abled for finding an identity. This paper will explore the heroic battle of Chib against misfortune, stigmas, stereotypes and preconceived notions of society. It also presents the voice of all differently-abled in the search for independence and identity, and shows their zeal to live a full, meaningful life despite their disability.

Keywords: Disabled, Indifference, Crippling Body, Stigma, Stereotype

Malini Chib's autobiography *One Little Finger* is one little step to do changes in the world's outlook towards disability. Chib is a disability rights activist and writer from Kolkata who presented her own life's history to talk about disability. She is suffering from cerebral palsy (a neurological condition that affects motor skills and makes walking, talking and eating difficult activities). She has talked about every aspect of her life in the autobiography that covers the time span since her childhood to her adulthood. This book took almost two years for her to write, due to her physical state. It is her one little able finger that makes the thoughts flow. In this book, she has been very honest and has shared every feeling and emotion which she felt in this world. She has emerged as a source of inspiration for disabled people as she took several initiatives which changed their lives forever. She has mentioned

different attitudes of people towards disabled and how it varies from place to place. She believes that it is not the disability of a person which creates a problem for the person but it is the society which really makes their life tough. She has also introduced the term 'invisible disability', that can be seen in everybody as no one is perfect or totally independent

She begins her autobiography from the very beginning of her life when she was in her mother's womb and when during delivery, she was stuck in umbilical cord which resulted in her disability. On her birth, doctors told it clearly to her family members that it was really hard for her to survive and if she would survive, she will have to live a vegetable life. That was a hard time for her family and her mother too who later slipped into depression due to it. Chib has talked about the attitude of people and doctors. For doctors, she was just a project to learn better as she couldn't feel any emotions from their sides. However, her parents were very active and never lost their hope. They visited many doctors and finally, it was declared that she was suffering from cerebral palsy which is almost incurable. As she says:

Every doctor my parents met in India told them I would be a vegetable and nothing could be done for me. The doctors confidently told them that the damage to my brain was irreversible. (5)

Chib finds that she is lucky as her parents were very supportive and they did whatever was in their hands. She further opines that the worst thing that can happen to a child with a disability is that he or she is left alone. Fortunately, this was not her condition. Her parents, according to Chib, left everything and went to London for her treatment and stayed there. Moreover, Chib is not only supported by her parents but by other family members also. Her uncle, who was a physician at Royal Post Graduate College, was always in touch with leading paediatricians of Ormond Street Hospital Cambridge. However, Chib has slammed Indian doctors and their attitude towards disability throughout her autobiography. She finds the West better than India for disabled people. In addition to this, she has attacked and criticised the attitude of Indian people towards disability. People talked in front of her and her problems without addressing her. She has clearly mentioned that how she is completely able to comprehend the attitudes and how people thought on the contrary. She penned this pain by saying:

I knew that I was different and trapped in a dysfunctional body, but did others realise that I had a mind, a spirit separate from this body?Did they realize that my mind

was normal? Did they consider thinking that my desires were just the same as theirs? (54)

Through her book, she has proved that how important is the attitude of people and doctors in the treatment of disability, though it is incurable.

Moreover, she remembers her as well as her parent's time in India with pain and humiliation. Disclosing another chapter of her life and of course in her book she mentions how her family, on the recommendation of psychologists, moved ahead and brought her brother Nikhil into this world. When after the birth of her brother, her family and she came back to India, she found it again the same. India was not changed enough to accept disabled as they were. As a result, she started facing the same problems. The doctors were also the same as they treated her just as a medical object on which they can perform their tasks. Her pain, when she compared the Indian doctors with the doctors in the West, is depicted in her following statement: "...the more I thought of it, the worse I felt, these people were rough, hierarchical dominating, intimidating and wanted to prove that they were superior professionals" (17).

In India, she felt that she was merely a vegetable despite fulfilling most of the criteria of having a sound mind. She failed to have a normal life despite her extraordinary IQ level that was 120. She was judged to be 'above average showing initiative and imagination' (9). She commends the English standards of judging such children as she says: 'A graphic description commonly used to describe children like me in England was apparently 'an intelligent mind with a disobedient body. (9)'

After completing her degree, she went to the USA and finds it as the most disabled friendly in the world. There every place was an accessible library, park, hotel, restaurant, theatre, museum etc. She said about the USA that:

What I found hugely amazing was the disabled people themselves were in charge and were placed in positions of power... I saw many disabled people like me or more severe than me is in positions of power, heading disability organizations. (84)

While in India, when she got her first job in Bombay, she felt lots of problems. As she said:

The basic problem of working in India was the lack of accessibility. Even the toilet for people with disabilities was not accessible neither canteen was accessible nor

lift was good. Even for the toilet, there were steps. So finally I had to leave the job. (104)

She went back to London with her mother, where the old medical model of disability is changed into the social model of disability. She also visited Paris with her childhood friend and has nicely portrayed the beauty of the place. It is remarkable that in the West she could go anywhere on her own, each and every place was accessible which diminished her feeling of disability.

Further, in her book, she mentions how she and her mother worked to make the life of disabled persons better. Both of them worked out various initiatives for the inclusion and acceptance of disabled to the mainstream of society. Her mother Dr Mithu Alur has played a detrimental role in establishing ADAPT (Able and Disable All People Together) spastic society which independently exists in 16 Indian states and it helps to bridge the gap between able and disabled people at the local level. Chib herself holds a degree in Gender Studies from the University of London, with a specific focus on feminism and women with disabilities and strongly advocates the inclusion of disabled in normal society. She has also advocated making our society and public buildings disable friendly.

Chib has also talked about the importance of technologies which really helps in her life. Being from a rich family she got all the facilities very easily she has an electric wheelchair and a device for communication. There are lots of disabled in the society who are still struggling to get basic facilities for which she is working.

In her book, she has also talked about the exposure of disabled children to the outside world. She believes that disabled children should have a fair chance mix up with other children and this is a good option to develop their skills. She also shares her various experiences such as her experience of the first day in school, the experience of loneliness when her other friends went to a movie, the experience of failing in class, her desire of having a lover like other girls and so on and so forth. She always longed for true love though she was not able to get it. Various boys came near but no one was interested in her as a girlfriend. She said;

However, like most women of my age, I loved the company of men. I would try and seek them out and initiate a conversation, but unfortunately, the 'poor little bastards' had never been taught to reach beyond their own needs and so, they did not know what to do with

me. Only a handful of men would make that extra bit of an effort to understand my atypical speech. But they never really went beyond superficial chatting. (64)

So in this experience, the gender issue of disabled persons is highlighted. There was only one boy, Zubin, whom she liked and who understood her language extremely well. Her love for Zubin is reflected in the following sentence: "He understood my speech completely, I found him to be warm, compassionate and caring. My affection for him grew deeper and deeper" (73).

However, her love for Zubin had a painful ending as he was gay. When she was revealed to this fact she cried silently for days. She always yearned to be seen beyond her body and live a normal life which only proved to be a dream.

She has devoted a major part of her book dealing with her feelings of love and sexuality. An American feminist writer and researcher, Susan Rendall has also written on this issue and has referred such people as 'rejected body' which is sexually unattractive. Chib has also written an article on this topic- *'No sex please, you're disabled'* in which she boldly acknowledged that 'like most women, sometimes I craved to be in the arms of a man. Most men look at me as asexual' (146). And due to her unfulfilled sexual desire, she cried a lot. However, with increasing age, her sexual feelings lost their intensity and she accepted it.

Malini Chib has constantly talked about gender role in disability and reads a lot about women with disability. She has referred to how a disabled woman faces difficulty in her everyday life. A disabled woman might need help with personal care, housekeeping, child care and several other responsibilities. On the other hand male, disabled persons are free from these duties as well as various other socially assigned stereotypical duties. According to her, in India, the life of a disabled male is comparatively easy than a disabled woman. As such a male can get a normal woman for her bride but vice versa is not possible. Thus, she is credited for introducing the notion of gender in disability.

Chib has written many papers on the theme of disability. We can imagine her determination by the fact that she has written 50,000 words in this book by using just her single finger which took two years to complete. Through her books and papers, she has emerged as the voice of the people with disability who feel like her but can't speak or write. Malini has expressed her happiness after acquiring her new identity as a writer of her autobiography as this has spread a voice across the globe.

In 2005, Chib started lecturing at the Institute of Education but faced difficulty due to her disability which again proved to be a barrier. After leaving this job she got a new one in a bookshop. For this, she praises India which passed the Disability Act in 1995 and thus created jobs in public sectors. Even at the present time, she is working as an event manager at a bookstore in Bombay. Being in the job, she is still working as a disability activist and empowering people with disability all over India.

On 16th of January 2005, a landmark event allowed wheelchair participants to run the standard chartered Mumbai marathon for the first time in India and Malini was behind this historic victory. She conducts empowerment courses in Bombay, Delhi, Jharkhand and Gujarat.

Conclusion

Chib's book is not about stereotypical thinking of disability that after reading produces a sympathetic effect in readers. The book does not convey the idea that disabled are always in pain and they are crying for your help. This is not to show pain and misery of disabled people, however, this book is written with an aim of changing the perspective of so-called normal people and people suffering from any kind of disability at the same time. Through this book, Malini Chib has introduced the world with the inner world of a speechless disabled and was forced to think over. She is not expecting to be treated specially but equally with equal rights.

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