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Reading Disability in Tagore's 'Drishtidaan'

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Abstract: If the recent postcolonial and the postmodern discourses have sought to draw our attention to the seemingly marginalized planes of existence – the third world, the queer, the poor, the tribal etc. - Tagore at the beginning of the twentieth century had attempted to focus on the issue of disability through a text like *Drishtidaan* (1898) from his short story collection *GolpoGuchcha* (1926). Tagore uses the narrative text to locate 'disability', much like later day disability theorists have contended, at the intersection between individuals and the socio-cultural environments. But in rendering Kumu, the blind protagonist, as an idealized notion of suffering femininity, is not Tagore somewhat complying with the literary's historical devaluation of people with 'disabilities'? Why, we may contend through this paper, is this reductionist reading of the woman with 'disability'?

Keywords: Disability, Normalcy, Stigma, Impairment

Long before the postcolonial and the postmodern preoccupations with the hitherto marginalized planes of discourse- the poor, the disempowered, the 'third world'- Rabindra Nath Tagore, at the cusp of the nineteenth and the twentieth centuries, had, through a text like *Drishtidaan*,¹ focused on the issue of 'disability'. The blind protagonist Kumu holds centre stage in her story of struggle against the oppressive regimes of both the patriarchy and the 'normal' society, with its emphasis on 'ability', and social role playing. The paper attempts to resist a reductionist reading of the female 'disabled' body or being as inefficient, incapable and dependent. The narrative text unfolds to reveal Tagore's location of 'disability' at the intersection between individuals and their social and cultural environments. But, if Tagore's short story is an attempt to debunk the literary's complicity in the historical

devaluation of people with 'disabilities', it does so at the cost of rendering Kumu to an idealized notion of suffering femininity.

Written in 1898, *Drishtidaan* revolves around a typical Bengali girl Kumu, married off at the tender age of eight to Abinash, an aspiring doctor. When she reaches the age of fourteen, she conceives but tragically goes on to give birth to a dead foetus. This effects Kumu to such an extent that she starts experiencing various bodily discomforts from physical weakness, headache to blurred vision. The husband as an ambitious and aspiring doctor ministers various medicines to cure Kumu of her physical ailments. The narrative duly captures the initiative, the enthusiasm and confidence of the husband -as -doctor in his pursuit of a remedy for the wife- as -patient. The intervention of Kumu's elder brother in the scheme of things is unwelcome and his advice to bring in external help is not appreciated by Abinash at all, who has by that time come to realize Kumu as his sole property. In the ensuing passages we glimpse at the moral dilemma of Kumu as she struggles to appease both the husband and the brother, who are representative guardians of her being and responsible for her welfare. Is it not an oft quoted verse, "Her (the woman's) father protects her in childhood, her husband protects her in youth and her son protects her in old age; a woman is never fit for independence",² that the laws of Manu prescribe for women? Instead of the father, it is the elder brother here in the text who satisfies this obligation and therefore responds to the medical crisis of Kumu, going against the policy and practice of Kumu's husband. It does not occur to either of the two vanguards of patriarchy ever to ask Kumu about her desired method of cure. Things take a turn for the worse and the husband too comes to realise the need for a medical intervention from outside. Consequently, a 'white' doctor is called forth to literally stem the rot, the decline, the rapid decline of Kumu's visionary capability. We might here as well question the design of the author which requires the intervention of a European doctor, in possession of superior, and advanced knowledge than all the 'native' doctors? What transpires after is the realisation of the need to operate on Kumu's left eye, which happens to be too strenuous and ultimately leads to the complete blinding of Kumu.

One way of apprehending 'disability' arising out of 'impairment', as proposed by Richard Jenkins, is to focus on three possibilities -(i) impairment occurred or ... diagnosed at the birth or during early

childhood, (ii) impairment result (ing) from subsequent illness or injury, and (iii) impairment (as) part of the 'normal' aging process.³

In Kumu's case we understand that it was clearly not a case of congenital blindness, not a consequence of the 'normal' aging process but out of an illness. This illness, we believe, could have been cured had there been timely and effective intervention. Such an intervention was delayed by the husband-as-doctor who thought of himself as capable of handling his wife's medical emergency. Kumu was virtually rendered into a guinea pig on whom the husband (as a representative figure of patriarchy) could conduct various kinds of medical experiments. The violence of the patriarchy results in the blindness of the submissive, subservient female, tortured and maimed for life and beyond repair. Tagore does not allow Kumu to ever question Abinash's skills as a doctor; does not have her berate Abinash for causing her blindness. Rather, Kumu sees her blindness as a form of divine intervention in her blessed and blissful marriage, a possible punishment for sins committed in her previous birth. Quite often it is assumed how 'ability' is a blessing and therefore 'disability' a curse, a sign of God's wrath, His form of retribution for a man or a woman's sin. Such an assumption surfaces in *Upagupta*, another of Tagore's creation, where the dancing girl, who had once revelled in her youth and beauty, would lie at last, struck with 'black pestilence', her body spotted with sores of small pox. Her sin, like Prakriti's in *Chandalika*, was an attempt to drag a Bhikshu from his pride of renunciation into the world of lust and desire. The small-pox then is a form of punishment for such an offence, and with the whole society shunning her, excluding her. She had been hurriedly removed from the town to avoid her poisonous contagion:

What woman lay in the shadow of the wall at
his feet, struck with the black pestilence, her
body spotted with sores, hurriedly driven
away from the town?⁴

Her's is the fate of offenders, of sinners, guilty of moral and sexual misdemeanours. In western literature, the classic example is of Oedipus, who having slept with his own biological mother, albeit unknowingly, and having murdered his own father, the worst cultural taboos, is punished in the worst possible way- he blinds himself and leaves human society, goes into exile. Similarly, Kumu believed that if her fasting and devotion had blessed her with a husband like Abinash, her sins of the previous birth contributed in her losing him, first through the loss of her vision of

him, and then through the physical and emotional distancing between the two of them brought on by the complexities of the situation. Kumu emerges, in the course of the narrative, as an ideal Indian woman who can possibly find no fault with the husband even at the cost of losing out on one of the vital faculties of the body. She positions herself against someone like Labonyo, her neighbour in Calcutta, given to questioning the absolute knowledge and authority of the husband. Kumu ascribes this trait of Labonyo to the corrupting influence of the city of Kolkata, which shrivels the human heart, denies it the nourishment of compassion, understanding and sympathy. The modern and the mechanical city is the corruptor of human virtues.

The overriding concern of Kumu, after losing her vision, happens to be of her truncated existence, her inability to function as a perfect wife to Abinash, caring for his health and hearth. Manu dictates how the Indian wife is to be typically kept busy in household work: "Let the (husband) employ his (wife) in the collection and expenditure of his wealth, in keeping (everything) clean, in (the fulfilment of) religious duties, in the preparation of his food and in looking after the household utensils."⁵ Blind Kumu realises the inadequacy of her being which is that of Abinash's wife and housekeeper and is distraught at the change. The United Nations provides an understanding of the definitions and distinctions among 'impairment', 'disability' and 'handicap':

Impairment: Any loss or abnormality of psychological, physiological or anatomical structure or function.

Disability: Any restriction or lack (resulting from an impairment) of ability to perform an activity in the manner or within the range considered normal for a human being.

Handicap: A disadvantage for a given individual resulting from an impairment or disability, that limit or prevents the fulfilment of a role that is normal, depending on age, sex, social and cultural factors for that individual.⁶

Handicap is therefore a function of the relationship between 'disabled' persons and their environment.

Kumu not only experiences 'impairment' but also 'disability' and 'handicap': her blindness is her 'impairment' that ultimately restricts her functions to perform as a 'normal' sighted Hindu wife, and puts her at a disadvantage that limits or prevents the fulfilment of the role of a wife

and mother prescribed by society. With blindness, Kumu is rendered incapacitated and the responsibility of running the household and taking care of the blind wife now lay on Abinash. Tagore has his protagonist internalising the social values attached to the Hindu wife, managing the 'private' world; being 'able' bodied and possessing necessary prudence, economic knowledge, morality and virtue to shoulder the responsibility of running the family of the husband. Disability theorists argue how in an ideal situation there are to be no discrimination against the 'disabled', no exclusion from the mainstream and 'normal' society-"Although persons with disabilities have a legal right to live in the least restrictive environments and with non disabled persons on an equal basis, such interactions are hardly equal."⁷ The physical limitation of Kumu is magnified by her acute awareness of the social prejudice against her 'disabled' existence. This inadequacy leads her to propose a second marriage of Abinash, which translates into the ultimate sacrifice made by the contrite Hindu wife. In another of Tagore's short story titled *Subha*, the husband of a deaf girl actually goes on to marry a second time and to a girl who is at least physically 'normal' in all respects. In *Drishtidaan*, Kumu's proposal is initially rejected by Abinash but later reinforced by Abinash's paternal aunt who proposes a marriage between the doctor and her niece Hemangini. Tagore makes a subtle distinction between Kumu and Hemangini through the connotative meaning of their names. Hemangini, who would be a counter to the 'disabled' and imperfect Kumu; Hemangini with her perfect flawless body, nubile, young and virgin, desirable to the male, virile and economically successful Abinash. Hemangini is the viable alternative to the damaged Kumu- "For the Indian Patriarchy; the woman is a sexual resource, a compilation of a womb, breasts and vagina for its use. She is a negotiable, marketable commodity."⁸ Abinash, as the prosperous doctor of the muffed town of Hashimpur, even tries to impress and buy the affections and attention of Hemangini with an ostentatious pearl ring, in the process obliterating all the love and devotion of Kumu towards him and his household.

By the time the alliance with Hemangini is proposed, Kumu had emerged as one who had more or less overcome her physical 'disability', and had once again taken over the running of the household and that too quite efficiently. If vision was lost Kumu utilised her other four senses to optimise her efficiency as a wife and manager of the household. This ability to cope with the loss of physical capability is contrary to what 'normal' society perceives of the 'impaired'. The

'normal' society 'others' the 'impaired', reduces them to a category of the unproductive. But "characterising persons with disabilities as burdens is not only inaccurate but perpetuates negativistic and paternalistic attitudes which become obstacles to disabled persons striving for more normal, productive, and satisfying lives."⁹

Despite Kumu regaining control of the household, what perplexes the readers is her inability to fulfil one central obligation of the married woman in Hindu society, she does not conceive and become a mother again. Sudhir Kakar, distinguished psychoanalyst and scholar, documents in *Intimate Relations*, how 'proverbs in praise of wives'¹⁰ abound in the North Eastern languages like Assamese and Bengali, and they invariably and quite predictably, focus and eulogise their maternal role- "Who could belittle women? Women who bear children!"¹¹ It is "stated concisely in the Smritis (the Law codes), elaborated in the Puranas (which are not only collections of myths but also contain chapters on the correct conduct of daily life), modified for local usage by the various kind of religiosi."¹² The literature of the patriarchy focuses primarily on the duty of the wife towards the husband, to produce an heir, preferably a male heir.

Now how do we reconcile ourselves as readers to this obvious fact of Kumu's life other than the blindness? Surely Tagore is not ascribing barrenness along with visual impairment to Kumu, as at the very root of Kumu's medical condition was the fact of her giving birth to a dead foetus. What we notice rather is the virtual non-existence of any sexual awareness, any sexual attraction between the husband and wife post 'impairment'. Abinash himself indulges in pleasures of the fresh outside marriage; he is instantly drawn to the youth and beauty of Hemangini but then he fails to perform his obligatory role towards his own wife. How can he not exercise his patriarchal 'right' over his wife? Right from the Vedic Age (3000 BC to 500 BC) there was an emphasis on the maximum exploitation of the wife's reproductive capacity. To enable the full utilization of the woman's fertile periods, one of "the Vedic rule[s] for matrimony contended that a girl was to be married off soon after her first period, and it was established that wasted fertile periods would accrue as a sin upon the father who did not follow this role."¹³ Thus, the deaf girl's father in *Subha*, to absolve himself from this sin, even uses deception to marry her off into a family in the city far from their native village Chandipur. Therefore, it is but strange when Abinash seems to do nothing to procure an heir from Kumu. Given that there was a phase in

Kumu's life when she had desired to withdraw from worldly life to a life of seclusion and devotion, it did not carry out for long and she quickly reverted back to her normal world of domesticity. Are we to deduce then that it could be her blindness that contributed to the desexualisation of her relation with Abinash? Is it her imperfection that consigns her to a life of sexual deprivation? She might have desired a complete and fulfilling relationship with Abinash, she might have wanted intimacy with him in spite of her loss of vision. Her loss of vision does not entail the loss of her subjectivity, her appetite, her desires, and her dreams. Her biological wants are not curtailed with her loss of vision. We witness how Kumu's selfhood is damaged with the society's indifference and insensitivity towards her needs. Anthony Synnott, writing about disability, has asserted how "the body is also, and primarily, the self. We are all embodied."¹⁴ And embodiment is the lived experience of the sensual and the subjective body. Kumu, though blind, still has a subjective body that the husband ignores, even fails to comprehend. It is not just Kumu but Hemangini too who is denied subjectivity and is reduced to a mere object of male desire. She is not once asked about her willingness to marry Abhinash. We understand the position of women, whether 'able' or 'disabled' to be that of a non-entity:

As a non-entity, the idea of woman's choice- her choice of life, love and dignity- cannot be entertained. Choice is the patriarchy's prerogative, its tool of supremacy, and a woman's very existence hinges on the wielding of that choice by men.¹⁵

But Tagore empowers Hemangini in a way that he does not Kumu. Hemangini can make a symbolic rejection of Abinash and his desire by vehemently throwing away the pearl ring but Kumu is not invested with any symbolic gesture of rejection of Abinash and his representative systems ever in the narrative. Even in the face of sexual deprivation Kumu does not turn into a rebel like Damini of Chaturanga (Four Aspects), who literally burns with the passion of physical desires. Kumu's repressed desires do not thrust her into a destructive behavioural mode for she is love struck, love for Abinash. It could be the cultural injunctions against female sexuality even within marriage that could have prevented Tagore from ascribing sexual agency to Kumu or it could be, a result of the cultural belief that de-sexualise the 'disabled'. Whatever be the causes and reasons, Tagore renders Kumu into an ideal woman, a devout and devoted woman capable of functioning without

any grudge, any malice towards the exclusionary practice of 'normal' society and the patriarchy. Women were to be "docile, beautiful...and cheerful at all times. They also had to possess the ability to create for their husbands a perpetually stress-free environment."¹⁶ Kumu's efforts to live with dignity are thwarted by the 'able' bodied people around her. She is denied the happiness of being loved by the husband, who embarks on procuring another wife using deception, lies and cunning to fool the suspecting woman. She is likewise denied from the pleasures of motherhood.

Yes, Tagore lets Kumu narrate her story, but does not invest her character with the lived experiences of 'disability'. Tagore does not ascribe negative or sinister qualities to Kumu as is normally given to 'disabled' people but he deifies her, puts her on a pedestal and removes her from the plane of reality. Abinash's character undergoes a change, a transformation from being a moral, conscientious and upright doctor to a dubious, money-minded, pleasure-seeking man but Kumu retains her moral bearing throughout the text. As a good wife, she attempts to intercede on Abinash's behalf to God and other human agents so as to shield him from curses, divine and human. Her near perfect conduct and morality further estranges her relation with Abinash, who finds it difficult to love and pamper her like a 'normal' flesh and blood human being. Tagore could be causing Kumu grave injustice in marginalising her thrice- first as a woman in a patriarchal society; second as a 'disabled' in an 'able' society, and third as a pristine and pure being in a world of corruption and materialism. Kumu is set apart from the rest of her society. Fiction is enforcing Kumu's marginal existence. If we accept the fact about the relevance and importance of literature in human society, we realise how literature "can have both preparatory and sustaining functions in the process of providing knowledge and altering attitudes towards the handicapped."¹⁷ Instead of empowering the 'disabled', Tagore is enforcing the stereotype in certain ways, in ways that the patriarchy and 'normal' society function.

Tagore, in continuance of a poetic tradition, uses a literary device in *Drishtidaan* that had been used earlier in western texts too. In Dickens' *A Christmas Carol*, a crippled Tiny Tim "is the symbol of innocence and hope who finally makes Scrooge mend his ways."¹⁸ Here, it is the blind Kumu who gifts 'true' vision to Abinash, the power to understand the true value of the devoted wife and the sanctity of the institution of marriage. Kumu, in Tagore's scheme, is simply a catalyst in the

maturation of Abinash. Tagore's drama, *The King of the Dark Chamber*, also plays out a similar theme of overcoming cultural prejudice, of overcoming a sense of outer ugliness, through the inner eye of love. Though the king is not affected with any physical limitation, he is 'ugly' and therefore repulsive to the Queen -

Black, black-oh, thou art Black like the everlasting night! I only looked on thee for one dreadful instant. The blaze of the fire fell on your features - you looked like the awful night when a comet swings fearfully into our ken - Oh then I closed my eyes - I could not look on you any more.¹⁹

King Surangama can meet Queen Sudarshana only in a room that is kept forever dark as if to create a space, where the power equation between the 'beautiful' and the 'ugly' pans out evenly. Can a society that privileges physical appearances and 'ability', find any worth in the 'impaired', when it does not in the 'ugly' apparently? It is the 'disabled' class that garners the most attention as a group that is 'ugly' and consequently 'doubly' repelling.

Tagore's short stories, *Drishtidaan* and *Shubha*, perceive of 'disability' as a punishment for the sins committed in the victim's previous birth. 'Disability' is not perceived as a mere variation, or the fallout of an accident or as a part of the 'normal' ageing process. It is God's wrath visited on the sinner, a form of punishment, a chastising, and a moral instrument. Is Tagore therefore not reinforcing the stereotypical, traditional understanding of 'disability'? Is he not relegating Kumu, for the most part of the story, to a life of suffering, pain and exclusion, derided and mocked by 'normal' society? And, if at the end, there is the promise of reconciliation and happiness, why is it mediated through the solitary pain and penance of Kumu? And why is there no realistic struggle within Kumu, as she copes with her blindness, an altered reality, a description of the process of living with 'her' body?

END NOTES

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