

A disability reading of Rabindranath Tagore's "Vision"

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The world is an open text, and to be more specific, a literary text. One of the outcomes of reading a literary text is to expand awareness and awake to the less known realities of life. There are places, people, events which have escaped the historians. It has been because the grand narrative has always subdued the mini narrative. However, literature has recorded those untold narratives. It recounts the stories of marginalized communities, unexcavated places, and forgotten trials. In this manner, assisting in moving the margins towards the center.

There have been many writers who have rendered voice for the voiceless. In a very prolific way, they have surfaced the long buried realities. M. G. Vassanji writes about a less known community which has both historical and cultural significance. Likewise, Anosh Irani records in his works, the plight of homeless individuals leading a stray and wretched life. Further Irani and Mahesh Dattani have presented the predicament of transgender community and HIV infected individuals. They are literary texts representing Dalits, tribals, and Afro-Americans. There also have been literary texts portraying disability which is seldom deliberated.

Disability is one of the most important aspects which require awareness and thinking. Approximately, ten percent of the world's total population is disabled. The term 'disability' is an umbrella term encapsulating various aspects of disability: visual impairment, hearing impairment, speech impairment, mental retardation, physical impairment and learning disability. This might not affect every one individually; nevertheless, it is a social component which requires awareness and acceptance.

The theme of disability in literature is universal. It has been ever presenting the literary works – from the Greek classics to contemporary texts. Sophocles presents Tiresias as a blind prophet and Margaret Atwood presents Jenine as a blind handmaid. The disability theory enables the reading of a literary text in the light of disability. It investigates into treatment of disability in the society through literature. It seeks answers for questions – I) how is disability portrayed in the text? II) How is the disabled person treated by other nondisabled? III) How to improve the lives of disabled individuals in the society?

Rabindranath Tagore's "Vision" is one such literary text depicting disability in the context of family and society. Tagore has been a versatile writer, conveying art and culture through his different forms of literature. He is a well-known poet, a short story writer, a novelist, and one of the greatest dramatists. His works deal with various themes, like, nature, God, society, myth, and man as an individual. The Nobel Laureate has been adept in bringing out the synthesis of East and West through his works. He is a modern writer with traditional outlook. "Vision" which is 'Dhristidaan' in Bengali is one of his widely read and most appreciated short stories. It is about a married woman who loses her sight as a result of his husband's inadequate knowledge in medicine. However, she is content to be with her husband. The loss of her eyesight changes her outlook towards her husband and likewise, her husband also looks different at her. In fact, the entire society's attitude changes towards her. "Vision" limns forth the protagonist's mental agony and her treatment by the society.

Kumo is the protagonist in Tagore's short story, "Vision." She is married to Avinash and is a very devoted wife. The story begins with a tragic note that Kumo loses her baby in the child birth. Further, as a result of this, she suffers from some ailments, particularly in her eyes. Her husband being a student of medicine takes the charge of treating her. However, his derisory understanding of medicine and lack of practice leads to complete loss of eyesight.

On one hand, her elder brother who loves Kumo very endearingly pleads Kumo to consult an experienced doctor, on the other, her husband demonstrates his affection by treating her himself. The affliction begins at both levels. Kumo suffers physically because of the pain and inability to see. She suffers mentally as she is unable to disobey her husband or insult him by seeing another doctor. She reluctantly ignores the advice of her elder brother to change the doctor. She says, "While they were quarrelling, I was saying to myself that it was always the poor grass that suffered most when two kings went to war. Here was a dispute going on between these two, and I had to bear the brunt of it." Further, she feels it her responsibility to comfort her husband and reassure him that he is not guilty; on the contrary, he has provided her an opportunity to see everything through his eyes:

I felt that his voice was choking with tears, and so I took up his right hand in both of mine and said: "Why! You did exactly what was right. You have dealt only with that which was your very own. Just imagine, if some strange doctor had come and taken away my eyesight. What consolation should I have had then? But now I can feel that all has happened for the best; and my great comfort is to know that it is at your hands I have lost my eyes.

Kumo is the victim of patriarchal society. She believes that her male counterpart knows better than her. This knowledge or idea that men know more than women is a collective social attitude. As a result, Kumo lets her husband do what he feels right. Her confidence in her husband is unwavering and also irrational. She is ready to suffer, rather than to express her

pain to her husband. She experiences physical pain as a part of her eye condition which is augmented by her husband's medication. However, she does not even try to put across this to her husband.

Kumo is like a pendulum, oscillating from one end to the other. She is considered as a subject by her husband. In order to please him, she loses her eyesight which is the most important sense for any living being. Eventually, when it is decided that she can be treated by an experienced doctor, it is too late, "At last, with the consent of both, an English doctor came, and operated on my left eye. A woman with disability is doubly marginalized, twice victimized. She has several disadvantages. Kumo after losing her sight feels unworthy of Avinash and realizes that the society will urge him to remarry. She is apprehensive of what will become of her marriage. However, she attempts to brave this and does not discourage her husband from remarrying. In fact, she persuades, "Ah I" said I, "why did you take such a terrible oath? Do you think I asked you to marry again for your own sordid pleasure? No! I was thinking of myself, for she could perform those services which were mine to give you when I had my sight?"

In Indian context, disability is associated with divinity. It is believed that a person with disability has some saintly powers. This excludes the persons with disability from the society to a greater extent. The individuals in mainstream feel that the individuals with disability are superhuman. Kumo feels, "As he said the word "Goddess," he held up my face in his hands, and placed a kiss between my brows. At that moment the third eye of divine wisdom was opened, where he kissed me, and verily I had a consecration."

The idea that disability is divinity alienates and estranges individuals with disability from others. This is evident in the marriage of Komu and Avinash. He turns away from Komu as he is also influenced by the similar inspiration. He finds her asexual and superhuman. He confesses, my husband said slowly: "I will tell you the truth. I am afraid of you. Your blindness has enclosed you in its fortress, and I have now no entrance. To me you are no longer a woman. You are awful as my God. I cannot live my everyday life with you. I want a woman--just an ordinary woman--whom I can be free to chide and coax and pet and scold. On one hand, disability is regarded as a form of divinity and on other; it is believed to be retribution for having committed sins. It is a curse in disguise. Especially, in the Indian society, it is believed that the sins of the ancestors visit the children. What is more, the sins of the previous birth return to the sinner in the present birth in form of some deformity or disability. Komu believes the same and blames herself for her blindness. She reproaches herself, "My blindness," said I, "was itself a sufficient evil. Why should I make it worse by allowing hatred to grow up against my husband.

Kumo's grip on her marriage with Avinash loosens as a result of her disability. She is unable to participate in her married life as Avinash finds her as divine being. Lack of

communication between a married couple and other family members also leads to a break up. Communication involves more than talking. So when communication fails in a family life, it automatically leads to several fissures and immeasurable remoteness in an interpersonal relationship. Bad or broken marriage leads to the ruin of the family. Basavaraj Naikar in the book *Critical Response to Indian English Literature* remarks: "One of the difficult problems of human life is living together and in the most intimate and complete of these, marriage, the coming together of man and woman, the challenges are even greater. This involves a continuous, dynamic adjustment, acclimatization, occurring on many places - physical, psychological, moral, emotional and philosophical" (32).

The disability of an individual augments his or her mental strain along with the physical damage. Eventually, this develops into depression, loneliness, and an intense sense of insecurity. Kumo undergoes the experience of seclusion and alienation. She is confined to her sanctum of a room and a shrine, while her husband is away working. She yearns to reach out to him and comfort herself that she is still a part of his life:

Formerly, when my husband came back late from the hospital, I used to open my window and gaze at the road. That road was the link which connected his world with mine. Now when I had lost that link through my blindness, all my body would go out to seek him. The bridge that united us had given way, and there was now this unsurpassable chasm. When he left my side the gulf seemed to yawn wide open. I could only wait for the time when he should cross back again from his own shore to mine.

The individuals with disability are portrayed as sorry figure, reliant on other even for their basic needs. Even in this short story, Komu blurts out in her moment of anxiety to make Avinash comfortable that she can use some assistance. Evidently, it is the general tendency in the society that a person with disability is not capable of doing anything. As a result, the disabled are considered as less significant than the rest of the society. Tobin Seibers observes, "Ability is the ideological baseline by which humanness is determined. The lesser the ability, the lesser the human being" (7). They require care and become domestic liabilities. However, Tagore has depicted a woman who is able to perform her household duties despite her disability. Kumo is able to fulfill her quotidian duties.

The society is biased towards disability. The individuals do not empathise instead sympathise or alienate the individuals with disability. Komu's aunt represents the entire society's attitude towards a married woman with disability. She does not understand Komu's ordeal instead nag that she should let Avinash remarry and take another healthy wife. Komu recollects with distress, "The first thing she blurted out after our first greeting was this: 'Well, Kumo, it's a great pity you have become blind; but why do you impose your own affliction on your husband? You must get him to another wife.'"

The individuals with disability endure an ordeal which is intensified in due course as the society becomes indifferent. Komu's marriage is under threat as a result of her misfortune. This threat becomes severe when she senses that her husband is interested in another young girl. Despite his promises and vows, Avinash surrenders to the charm of remarriage. This makes obvious how the family turns against an individual with disability. Komu is helpless and in utter anguish. Her misery is elaborately expressed in her words, "O my Lord," I cried, "Thy face is hidden. I cannot see. I am blind. A disabled woman is doubly marginalised and twice subjugated by her own ill-fortune and the society. Disability is a biological and medical condition. However, the adverse impact of this on the individual can be less if the people around treat it in a positive way and look at the disabled with empathy. When the mental framework of the people is very rigid and embedded with engravings which protrude and scratch others, disability is perceived as a felony

Disability has been considered as a stigma in our early society. It has been considered as the wages of sins in previous life. Although, it is not looked at in the same light at present, it is still not received with empathy. What is more, individuals with physical abnormality are mocked and laughed at. Lack of awareness about education for persons with physical and mental disability is another distressing aspect of our social system. There are only a few people who are aware of social inclusion of such persons and they are either their family members or special educators.

However, this societal attitude can be changed in due course of time. Aronson says, "Hope is a way of acting. It implies more than faith, need or dream" (10). It is essential to hope for a changed society for the disabled individuals without attitudinal barriers. In the story, Kumo gets her husband back. Though, it is not as a result of Avinash's attitude towards disability, but, his sense of guilt. He feels guilty for deserting Kumo and realizes his duty towards her.

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