

## The Sociological Norm and Systematic Disempowerment

Puranjai Chauhan

*Dyal Singh College, New Delhi, India*  
*E-mail address: zippedey@protonmail.com*

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### **Abstract**

Literature and films being the dominant forms of expressing reality, disability as an understated phenomenon in the daily lives naturally finds less attention in these very media. Disability though like other terms is unintentionally misused, it needs to be looked at through a new lens. This paper is an attempt to provide focus on the sociological aspects of the term and how non-observable differences disempower individuals. Any society develops certain norms and the subsequent expectation of fulfillment of these norms, the expectation which is enforced through psychological means divide the society into a binary. Study of literature and cinema helps us to identify the reaction by society and the treatment of such disabled individuals, which in the process of a character's evolution through a narrative contains the potential to expose the society's hypocritical nature and frail moral standards.

### *Keywords:*

disempowerment; society; literature; social model; norm

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Disability is in common parlance associated with an observable physical or mental condition that is distinct from the majority and hampers optimum functioning as labelled within a specific cultural framework. But disability in any given society rests not only on observable differences from the majority but also the social norms of constitution of 'healthy' apart from the said differences. As a result, not only those differences would be classified as disability which restrict functions desirable in a society, but the ignored functions would be accorded neglect too.

It builds upon the social model of disability's second assumption that impairments and disabilities need to be distinguished and impairments per se do not disable but societal practices of disablement

result in disability. Society governing the structures of control, disability in effect hampers the realization of a norm. This normalization of supposed faculties not only in biological terms but sociological as well has immense potential to disempower individuals.

For instance, in any society of the 21<sup>st</sup> century violence by individuals is outlawed. Only the state has the monopoly of violence. By this logic, any person who doesn't understand this concept suffers legal penalties either in the form of fine, imprisonment, execution all depending upon the intensity of the 'crime' committed. The term 'mental condition' has negative connotations divorced of the perspective that this condition may not necessarily be inherent (and thus, impairment) rather externally imposed.

The negative connotations help the state to distinguish such 'aberrations' from the society which follows the norm, thereby not only controlling citizens by force but by the mind too. In the documentary *The Monopoly of Violence (2020)*, the protestors are grouped with the rioting mob and all the protests decreed illegal. This captures not only popular imagination but confers legitimacy to state action against them. They are labelled as the 'others', those who cannot perceive the norm of law and order expected from a civilization. Following a norm does not automatically imply reward but does necessarily entail punishment upon violation and more significantly the fear of it preceding any such action, thus minimizing the possibility of it.

If we take a literary instance then the character of Batman doesn't fit the norm, he is labelled a vigilante and in popular understanding he is a deviant. But through virtue of category, he is disabled.

Then in this instance, Batman's grievance with the status quo of rampant corruption, violence and maladministration becomes an impairment as he is not able to follow the norm of the ideal citizen of carrying out his daily activities as guaranteed to him by the state. The lack of any outlet to correct it through mechanisms guaranteed by the state through social contract becomes disability as his grievance devours him. This would lead to the development of the narrative of tragic hero as he fights to correct the disability. But the presence of a disempowering social structure is succeeded by an empowering narrative as he assumes the duty to combat crime. This is a unique treatment as he undertakes the burden not for acquiring social validation but to correct disability of the whole society.

In this light, his treatment by the artist and subsequently by the world within which he is situated becomes an interesting case study. In Gotham almost every common citizen suffers but Batman takes up violence. Thus, every citizen is disabled but Batman chooses to correct that disability but is stopped in his pursuit not only by the society's fear of him and because society still believes in the state having the monopoly of violence, but also by the law enforcement agencies themselves as they consider him a 'freak' and a threat to the monopoly. This triad of fear of clashing with the powerful, belief in obsolete structures and opportunistic behaviour of the few prove to be the greatest obstacle in his pursuit.

In the article *Misreading the Body*, it is argued that Hoffman illustrates how differences between the sign and the signifier causes the meaning to change. As some meanings are specific to a culture, the

result aimed at changes. For instance, in *Omkara*, Langda Tyagi's limp and negative traits connect with the Indian audience's stereotypes of a disabled person possessing negative character traits. The act of giving responsibility to Kesu Firangi and bypassing Tyagi might even be overshadowed in popular minds. Moreover, it might be said that before he even initiates his evil plan the disability serves as an omen of what is to come. If Bruce had already been established as a firm man, Tyagi's establishment as disabled serves the narrative. The divergent contexts and audience enable the story to be conveyed differently.

### The norm and disempowerment

How society reacts to people different from the majority is shown in Hoffman's treatment of the character Zaches who suddenly becomes acceptable as rejection and stigma disappear once the supposed imperfection is overcome. He is seen to have a perfect body and mind and even lauded for the achievement of others. This highlights the hypocrisy of the society and the benefits adherence to a norm accrue.

King Paphnutius's actions in *Klein Zaches* which outlaw witchcraft and mythical creatures and subsequently denies their very existence despite serving as a satire also shows the development of a norm. Not only were physical heretics forced to metamorphosize into the norm, but the society provided a norm to follow as a time immemorial reality.

People were disempowered by the elites in earlier eras just like it occurs in the democratic age. Earlier, as in the pre-Enlightenment era the explanations for deformities were sought in the supernatural. This way the newborn could be labelled as bearing a curse, misfortune, divinely ordained retribution and thus driven to the sidelines of the society. An aspect of disabled characters is them redeeming themselves by saving others and sacrificing themselves in the process as found in *The Mighty (1998)*. Presently, first, full functions are defined, then impairment is classified by scientific methodologies. Teratology itself has been called as discriminatory as it rests on a natural order of things and attempts to realize the full range of human functionality. In this way the body is 'scientifically' disempowered by the empowered. These two steps effectively create the power binaries between the fully abled and the impaired. The final blow is struck when facilities are not developed and the impaired made the disabled.

An instance of perpetuation of social stereotypes and reflection of the lack of level playing field is *The Mighty (1998)* where Kevin and his mother reinforce the idea of disability being restrictive and pitiful, based on the idea of a 'normal'.

The binary thus developed naturally leaves scope for reaction to and upliftment of such sections in diverse contexts. A frenzied mob arrives to deal with Zaches. The mob is aware of the outlawed nature of such people and the violence yet takes tools of violence in its own hands. Zaches could have not suffered had the illusion of naturalness still been in place. The example shows how people's morality

is fluid and the otherness of someone sits not in physical or mental features but the perception of individuals threatening the stability of the society.

### The hiding of the 'aberration'

Further, the masquerading of sanctioned features help to deal with one's identity crisis. In Matt Reeves's *The Batman*, Bruce Wayne never exposes himself to the city except when he attends the funeral of the mayor. His character being a thoroughly broken man is driven by only one emotion-vengeance. This emotion and the subsequent release on criminals make him socially and legally unacceptable. The costume is not a mask but his real identity, it is his costume of the widely acknowledged suit that hides his true self and makes him fit to attend a social event.

Similarly, in Todd Philips's *Joker*, Arthur is unable to freely express himself. His laughter, a motif despite being a psychological condition becomes a disability in the face of social unacceptability. Due to his whole repressed nature, the man is outcaste as captured through cinematography and depicted by his bent and walk. The mask towards the end of the film is not an appropriation of a separate identity but full expression of his real self which is no more constrained by societal restraints. Besides being an empowerment film, it exposes the many ills of the society.

In Marquez' *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, Remedios the beauty is described through other characters without explicit terminology as being mentally handicapped. This description fits well with she being culturally detached from the society and not understanding expectations and conduct of people around her. She is kept at home to preserve her from the gaze of the society and the subsequent catastrophic effect it has on people. Her disability resides in her ignorance of a world where everyone else is plagued by vastly diverging realities, her family being no exception. Her character's innocence serves to highlight the absurdity of human behaviour and how lack of conformity coupled with an asset (in her case, beauty) makes one free from all mental hindrances. This is comprehensively visible in the final treatment of her by the author.

A brief description of how the disadvantages of blind adherence to a norm also invite problems for individuals would also prove helpful. In 1984, Winston's varicose ulcer manifests the disgust with the society. It was a disability imposed on every person in Oceania and the physical discomfort a constant painful reminder. Interestingly, it subsides only when he regularly starts meeting Julia; an indication of escape from oppression.

Fincher's *Fight Club* and the protagonist's insomnia is thoroughly explanatory of the consumer-capitalism's dignity robbing effect on humans. Humans are transformed into subjects and means for profit, and active disassociation and acceptance of common identity, both in opposition to tenets of modern society- individualism and democracy are presented as the only method to attain freedom.

In *The Last Duel*, both the lead male characters' description of the events is highly illusory. It serves the implications of existing as a woman in 14<sup>th</sup> century France. Her private sphere is subject to public scrutiny and villainization. But men are also not divorced from patriarchy's effects, the most significant aspect is highlighted when Le Gris' final dialogue in the film summarize the magnitude of the entrenchment of delusions. Thus, norms do not just hide truth but convolute it beyond recognition.

## Conclusion

The development of the norm, its manifestation and its effects followed by individual attempts to either accept or reject it have been vividly portrayed. The norm's fatal effects on everyone and the wholesale denial of the route of escape serves to further the cause of scrutiny of cultural structures and of the cinema and literature that naturally springs.

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### Author's bio-note

He is a student pursuing B.A. (Hons.) Political Science at Dyal Singh College, University of Delhi.

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