

Cross-Cultural Differences in the Representation of Disability in Literature

Sahil Batham

University of Delhi, Delhi, India
E-mail address: sahil.bathm@gmail.com

Abstract

The proposed paper compares Mahesh Dattani's *Tara* (1995) and Robert Zemeckis's film *Forrest Gump* (1994) based on the novel *Forrest Gump* (Winston Groom, 1986) with reference to literary theories, imperfect definitions, terminologies, and models revolving around disability citing critics like Simi Linton, Shilpaa Anand, etc.

How Indian literature centers around the ideas about disability that prevail throughout Indian society, Dattani's *Tara* (a two-act play) - reflects upon this very idea of stereotypical norms in India regarding disabled individuals around the late twentieth century. Dattani has made the reader/viewer contemplate the possible day-to-day problems the disabled go through, which leads them, however unwillingly, prone to being a focal point in society. The idea of *impairment* can unquestionably be considered relevant through the presentation of the missing limb because of which the protagonists' narratives are noteworthy.

Forrest Gump turns out to be another apt choice for our study. In the west, the disabled go through problems undoubtedly different from the east. For instance, the protagonist's low intelligence makes the other characters in the film take advantage of his other merits, like physical strength. Such a study of disability makes western ideas interesting for Indian scholars and vice versa. The protagonists' specific problems remain in focus throughout the texts and visual representations. I try to examine how the lives of the disabled are portrayed in various forms of literature, and how ideas like setting, timeline, money, etc., play crucial roles in bringing changes in different narratives.

Keywords:

Disability; Literary theories; Impairment; Terminologies; Society; Culture

The Question

What is a disability? The question is not as easy as it looks, for many people confuse disability with impairment. Impairment is defined as a physical defect of a person's body or mind, while 'disability' is considered a 'social construct' if looked at from the socio-political model of disability. As it turns out, there cannot be *one* universally accepted definition of the term. This observation only makes disability studies vaster. This difficulty of unsuccessfully defining 'disability' is where the idea of having multiple definitions of the term 'disability' through various models stems.

There is the Moral Model of Disability, where different religions and cultures have different beliefs about the disabled. Views based on this model are of the idea that one's disability is there because of some divine or evil influence. For example, the Buddhist and Hindu theory of Karma believes that one's immoral actions in the past life cause disability. Many Catholics believe that if the disabled pray faithfully, their disability shall be forgiven by the Almighty.

The Medical Model of Disability is of the idea in which one sees disability as a 'disease' (in some cases) or a process of 'diagnosis' which can (or cannot) be fixed by medical treatment.

The Socio-Political Model of Disability states that disability is nothing but a social construct. The scholars who study this model critique that the problem with a disability doesn't lie in the impairment of one's physical/mental abilities, but it is merely a construction of ideas from the viewpoint of a huge population that is able to do things that a comparatively smaller section of the population (the disabled) is unable to.

The Socio-Political model leads to the problem of objectification of individuals who are disabled in society. Simi Linton points out with the example of special scholarships the disabled are offered within various disciplines, 'The overwhelming majority of scholarship on disability, wither utilizes or implies the third person plural: "they" do this, "they" are like that, "they" need such and such. This contributes to the objectification of disabled people and contributes to the experience of alienation disable people so often report.' (Linton, Disability Studies/Non-Disability Studies 531)

Daniel L Preston proposes a set of questions for scholars of different disciplines to ponder upon, in order to understand the significance of disability in various texts. I find two of those proposed questions to be very profound for our objective of studying the representation of disability in literature:

- Which characters in the text are treated differently from the others? Why?
- What stereotypes are present in the text? (Preston, 58)

These questions are very fundamental for studying how disability is represented in various texts across different cultures. The objective of this paper is not to be mistaken as providing insights into all the cultures and how they look at disability, rather, I set an example, through the texts *Tara*, and the film *Forrest Gump*, of how to look at the differences in problems that the protagonists go through, and how those problems are stems of the different models of Disability we discussed earlier.

Let us begin with an analysis of Indian Society and how Disability is looked at from an Indian viewpoint. The idea of disability in literature is not new in India. In fact, it is very well depicted in the thousands of years old scriptures and religious books. We have already discussed the theory of Karma in the Moral Model of Disability. Mahabharata turns out to bring many examples of characters who are disabled, and therefore, linked to certain evilness. Consider Dhritarashtra for instance, the eldest of the three brothers of a generation of the Kuru lineage. Dhritarashtra was born blind, and therefore, could not become the king of the kingdom of Hastinapur according to the custom. Shakuni, one of the main antagonists of the epic, is often presented to us with a locomotor disability.

To say that the idea of looking at disability (in literature) in India is entirely taken from western literary disability studies would not be correct, although no one can deny the fact that in recent years, Indian views are beyond doubt influenced by the west. Shilpa Anand writes, 'histories of disability and disablement in India appear to resemble similar history projects in the West, but present certain problems in terms of themes, ideas and concepts because of the intrinsic aspects of the culture in question.' (Anand, *Historicising Disability in India*, 46-47)

Tara is a play that shows us the cultural differences disability can bring in literature and theatre. Let us analyze the play from a critical eye with the help of the aforementioned questions that Preston proposes. Side by side, I take *Forrest Gump* (a 1995 Robert Zemeckis film, based on the novel *Forrest Gump* by Winston Groom) into our study. The perks of this comparative study are getting to experience differences in problems the protagonists of the two different Eastern and Western narratives go through.

Which characters in the text are treated differently from the others? Why?

TARA: While reading or watching *Tara* one can easily answer this question by simply saying that the protagonists Chandan and Tara, who were born conjoined and shared a third limb, which had to be removed for the survival of the twins, and that is why they are treated differently from the others. But that is not where the answer should end. We see that both the protagonists have only one limb, which is the aspect of their physical disability. However, the plot reveals that Tara, in fact, could have had the third limb and survived. However, patriarchy, a deciding factor in decision-making in many instances in Indian society, had other plans. Pragma Gupta writes, 'Patel (the father of the twins) states that empowered by her father's wealth, Bharati (the mother of the twins) chose to give the leg to Chandan. Presumably in the hope of having an able-bodied son to carry forth the family's name.' (Gupta, *Tara: Family and/as Disability*)

But who is to say that a son, or even a daughter for that matter, *without* a limb, would turn out to be a burden for the parents or the family in the future? It is merely the social construct around disability, that makes Bharati and her father take the dreadful step. Patel should not be seen as an exception in this case either, because he too, as he himself said in a dialogue in the play, did not protest hard enough from preventing the surgery to happen. (Dattani, 102) Could it be seen as a possibility of Patel too, having an involuntary shift towards wanting his son to have the spare limb?

Much like gender hierarchies, disability also resembles different problems across different cultures. The stereotyping of the disabled in India, if looked at from the perspective of the Moral Model of Disability, resembles the idea of the association of the disabled in a negative light. In literature, too, it is the same. This, we have already discussed with the example of the ancient Indian texts earlier, considering the characters of Shakuni and Dhritrashtra.

FORREST GUMP: Forrest Gump had an IQ of 75. According to the rules (a social construct) of the Western school that Forrest got in, an IQ of at least 80 is required for a student to be able to pursue normal education, because the majority possesses an IQ of more than 80, and thus the majority is able. This lower limit of IQ to get into school is a good example of how disability is a social construct. Apart from this, in his childhood, Forrest also

possesses a locomotor disability. The movie begins with Forrest narrating a memory of his childhood when he was unable to stand straight, therefore was provided with braces on both legs to support him for walking. The attitude of his schoolmates, when Forrest got into the school bus for the first time, was that of unacceptance. No one wanted Forrest to sit beside them. When at last one girl named Jenny (the female lead of the movie) offered Forrest to sit beside her.

Forrest is not the only one who is treated differently in the movie because of his disability. As the movie proceeds, we see another major character, Lieutenant Dan, to have lost his limbs in the Vietnam war. Dan's pride, glory, and *destiny*, for that matter, are totally changed in the movie when he survives the Vietnam war, but at the cost of losing both his legs.

What stereotypes are present in the text?

TARA: The text, beyond doubt, depicts the patriarchy prevalent in Indian society, which leads to the decision-making in the lives of the protagonists. One of the examples, as we have already considered earlier, was that of giving the third limb to Chandan, instead of Tara, even after knowing that the chances of survival of the limb in the body of Chandan are much less than that of it surviving in the body of Tara. The patriarchal stereotyping, however, does not happen merely at the revelation of the plot. But we also see how the education of Chandan is considered much more important than the education of Tara. In an argument with his wife Bharati, Patel brings in the future of Chandan's education that he has been looking forward to:

Patel: Chandan is going to study further and he will go abroad for his higher studies.

Bharati: And Tara?

Patel: When have you ever allowed me to make any plans for her?

The argument between the husband and wife goes on and on, blaming each other for not giving each other authority enough to provide the female protagonist with enough care. (Dattani, 76)

FORREST GUMP: Kristen Lopez, a Forbes writer, who writes about entertainment, focussing on disabled representation, writes in one of her articles about the movie, 'It was obvious no one was actually disabled on the writing team, but for a child who'd only been using a wheelchair for a few years, something was better than nothing.' As someone who herself has gone through the same problem, Kristen was beyond doubt keen to observe this

slight mistake in the movie, however, the fact that she still appreciates the idea of bringing disability into the cinema, shows how crucial it is in the west to resemble the common lives on the big screen, and in major writings. (Lopez, 2019)

Lieutenant Dan's family had been a family of martyrs. Forrest describes in his narration:

'Lt. Dan sure knew his stuff. I felt real lucky he was my lieutenant. He was from a long, great military tradition. Somebody in his family had fought and died in every single American war.'

This was the reason why Dan, for a long time, cursed the point in his life when Forrest saved his life in the Vietnam war, where he thought, he was destined to breathe his last. Dan, being saved by Forrest, however, lost both his legs, and that is how, his life ever after serving as a lieutenant in the Vietnam war, became of little significance, possibly because of the social construct that those who *died* in the war were much more heroic than those who survived it, doesn't matter if they have become disabled ever after. That is what disability, according to the social view, does to a person. The stereotype is, it makes them much less worthy than they *were* or could be if they were able.

Conclusion

The representations of disability in various works of literature have multiple angles of looking at the idea. Multiple cultural dilemmas are associated with literary disability studies. No text can represent what exactly a society thinks about disability. Various models of studying disability also resemble numerous possible ways of looking at a culture from the literary eye. It is nearly impossible to reach a settled and universally acceptable procedure for studying disability literature. With the example of the two texts, *Tara* and *Forrest Gump*, it is observed that numerous cultures around the world can have numerous ideas associated with disability. One cannot deny the fact that many things revolving around disability can be similar within different cultures. At the same time, within a single culture too, there comes the role of individuality in terms of thinking.

How one text of one culture deals with the idea of disability may be much different from how another text from the same culture depicts the idea. Let's take ancient Indian texts for instance. The character of *Ashtavakra* (reference found in *Ramayana*, *Mahabharata*, and the *Puranas*) so-called because he was born with eight deformities in his body, is looked at in a

heroic light, while on the other hand, *Manthara* (also a disabled character who had a hunchback from *Ramayana*) was considered one of the evillest characters of *Ramayana*.

To understand the cross-cultural problems that the disabled go through, one should be eager to get acquainted with the different representations of the disabled characters in multiple texts with prior knowledge of the various models of looking at disability. Such a study would make the learner understand the perspectives of the disabled (in liberal arts) in a much broader, and more objective sense.

Works cited

- Anand, Shilpaa. "Historicizing Disability in India: Questions of Subject and Method." *Disability Studies in India: Global Discourses, Local Realities* (Ed. RenuAddlakha). New Delhi: Routledge, 2015.
- Dattani, Mahesh. *Tara*. New Delhi: Ravi Dayal Publishers, 2000.
- Groom, Winston. *Forrest Gump*. Vintage Books, 1986 (2012).
- Linton, Simi. *Claiming Disability: Knowledge and Identity*. New York: New York University Press, 1998.
- Lopez, Kristen. "'Forrest Gump' At 25: Disability Representation (For Better And Worse)". *Forbes*, 2019, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/kristenlopez/2019/07/05/forrest-gump-at-25-disability-representation-for-better-and-worse/?sh=78c29a3a664d>
- Preston, Daniel L. "Finding Difference: Nemo and Friends Opening the Door to Disability Theory." *The English Journal*, vol. 100, no. 2, National Council of Teachers of English, 2010, pp. 56–60, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25790036>.

Author's bio-note :Sahil Batham is an undergraduate student of BA (Hons) English at Dyal Singh College, University of Delhi
