DISABILITY AMONG MARGINALS: AN ENQUIRY INTO THE REPRESENTATION OF THE CASE OF MULTIPLE JEOPARDY WITHIN INDIAN INTERTEXTS AND CONTEXTS

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ABSTRACT:

Disability is a nuanced concept which contains a sense of exclusion and marginality within itself. And it becomes all the more intricate when disability intersects with the lives of people already living on the peripherals of the society. This aspect of disability becomes even more complicated in a developing country like India, where half of the population remains out of the central framework of the mainstream society, for either belonging to a minority community or for having a low standard of living. And when these exclusionary entities parallel with disability, they create a condition called multiple jeopardy. Taking these, often ignored but deeply intertwined facets in view, the paper aims to elucidate how intersectionality between disability and marginality has been represented in contemporary Indian intertexts, i.e., texts both conventionally accepted as well as in fluid sense, intertextual for the depiction of the intersection of disability and marginality .

KEYWORDS: Disability, Marginality, Multiple Jeopardy, Intertexts, Intersectionality**.**

INTRODUCTION:

Around the centuries, since human civilization came into existence, disability and the discourse associated with its representation, has engaged thinkers, philosophers and scholars across the world. And today it has been developed into a dynamic and ever-evolving academic discipline, called Disability Studies. It is a field of academic inquiry that is dedicated towards a better understanding of the phenomena with all its varied contours. Like many other conceptualizations pertaining to the human condition, disability as a critical field is also immensely dynamic in nature. It cannot be understood as a seized concept in a particular spatio-temporal context and is still in the process of theorizing.

'Disability', a state of being physically, sensorily, cognitively or mentallyimpaired, is not just a term with singular undertone but a complex phenomenon. It can only be understood congruously, when observed in terms of an interaction between the suffering individual and the socio-cultural conditions in which one lives. Disability, as a living condition, has been thoroughly stereotyped and prejudiced. As people around the globe tend, either to generalize or undermine the nuances associated with a particular disability or disability in general. While in fact, the factors associated with disability, shift according to the shifts in the socio-cultural, spatial, economic, political and personal contexts of the individual experiencing disability. Thus, it is imperative to see disability as a nexus between an individual experience and one's socio-cultural positioning.

Disability is not a concept that can be characterized by homogeniety. As in thecase of most of the theories and concepts, delineation of disability and its impact on people, also suffers the need for a legitimation from the Western canonical interpretation, which is often inclined towards a globalized and homogenized idea of disability. This way of understanding disability is problematic because the lives of people with disability differ around different cultures based on various factors. Therefore, it is important to shift the respective attention and critical perspective

of academia and policy makers, essentially within India, towards a more concentrated study of disability and its associated conditions, keeping the Indian context in mind.

Disability, an equivocal term, conceives its definition from the understanding that it is not something that can be defined objectively as a medical or pathalogical impairment, but a relatively complex phenomena, born out of rigorously interactive processes, informed and affected by the normative principles, stereotypical beliefs and predispositions of a given society. And such preconceived notions create attitudinal barriers in the lives of disabled people which hinder them from a full participation in different walks of their lives as social beings. Taking a cue, *The Preamble to the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities*, rightly defines disability as a composite resultant of negatively informed socio-cultural preconceptions:

> disability is an evolving concept and [it] results from the interaction between persons with impairments and attitudinal and environmental barriers that hinder their full and effective participation in society on an equal basis with others. (qtd. in Flynn 18)

The very state of "being disable", thus evokes a sense of social exclusion in the people living with disability. This marginal position of '*being disable*' often induces a state called individual marginalization, initiating with a distorted self-perception and restricted participation in societal life, which eventually leads to further ostracism in social, economic and political spheres of one's' life. But this state of exclusion, when preconditioned by marginality (social exclusion), adds to the existential intricacies of the already suffering individuals.

In correspondence with disability, marginality is also a term which contains multiple layers of codification in itself, which are often informed by spatio-temporal contexts of an individual in question. To define, marginality is:

> an involuntary position and condition of an individual or group at the margins of social, political, economic, ecological or biophysical systems, preventing them from access to

resources, assets, services, restraining freedom of choice, preventing the development of capabilities, and eventually causing (extreme) poverty. (qtd. in Braun and Gatzweiler 30)

Today social exclusion or marginalization has been evolved into a major domain of critical inquiry, across various disciplines. It has recently emerged as a prominent field of study, especially among cultural theorists and scholars involved in the anthropocentric study of various ethnic groups and their interaction within their community and with the outside world. This aspect helps intellectuals to develop a more comprehensive understanding of how marginality works within a given society and how it is detrimental to the individuals living with it. Marginality is both ascribed as well as an acquired condition. Considering the fact, an individual can have a marginal existence by birth (ascribed status), i.e., the social exclusion assigned at birth, an involuntary condition that is neither chosen nor earned. The ascribed marginality purely exists in conformity with the caste, gender or community one is born in and remains fixed throughout one's lifetime. This state affects the individuals with all its associated nuances, both positive as well as negative. Then there is another form of marginal existence, i.e., acquired marginality, the social exclusion acquired by an individual during one's lifetime, and it is governed by factors like, poverty, illiteracy, unemployment, accident, distorted bio-physical self-image, disability etc.

And the point where these sociological paradigms, that represent the overall social structuring of a given society, intersects and within which oppressions that are sustained by the intersection of multiple disadvantaging factors, originate and develop, it becomes a case of what Deborah K. King terms "multiple jeopardy". To put further this concept, in a more comprehensive way, Deborah K.King in her 1988 article entitled, 'Multiple Jeopardy, Multiple Consciousness: The Context of a Black Feminist Ideology" notes:

The modifier 'multiple' refers not only to several, simultaneous oppressions but to the multiplicative relationships among them as well. In other words, the equivalent formulation is racism multiplied by sexism multiplied by classism. (King 7)

This idea of 'multiple jeopardy' gives birth to the notion called 'matrix of domination'. It is a theoretical concept introduced by Patricia Hill Collins in her work entitled *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*, who defines the term as an hostile engagement where certain groups of people experience a disadvantageous existence due to multiple factors like, gender, class, race, sex, religion and other socio-cultural aspects. And this very aspect characterizes one's jeopardized existence when disability intersections with different forms of marginalization, leading the individual into an unpropitious entanglement of domination.

Both Deborah K. King and Patricia Hill Collins have used theoretical concepts like, 'multiple jeopardy', 'intersectionality' and 'matrix of domination', in terms of black feminist discourse but these concepts can also be applied within various interdisciplinary fields. Thus, the present study will analyse how this intersection between two disadvantageous factors, disability and marginality, has been rendered in contemporary Indian intertexts. But before moving towards the critical analysis of the already mentioned case, it is vitally important to understand the historical contexts that have played a crucial role in the present understanding of the disability-marginality nexus among masses.

DELINEATION OF THE NEXUS OF DISABILITY AND MARGINALITY IN THE MYTHOLOGICAL TEXTS

The present understanding of disability and marginality has largely been conditioned by their delineation in the religious and mythological narratives of the country. Across the world religion and spiritualism has an influential bearing upon the masses, and India is no exception in this regard. Almost all the religious sects found here, have their own sacred books and scriptures,

which shape the beliefs and practices of the respective sect towards various aspects of life. In case of Disability as well, its associated significations are impacted to a larger extent by such relational socio-cultural articulations within these highly revered narratives.

In India, especially in the Hindu sect, the understanding of disability and thecauses behind a particular form of disability is generally shaped by the beliefs of the masses in the grand mythological narratives from the Vedic period, two of the most influential among them are the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*. These two epics have a great influence on the masses, so much so that the verses written in the narratives are considered as divine revelations. Both, the *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*, portray many characters experiencing disability. The *Ramayana*, that is set in the Treta Yuga, narrates the story of the life and adventures of Lord Rama, the seventh incarnation of Lord Vishnu. The epic has some of the characters who are disabled, one of which is Manthara, the hunchback lady who was a confidente and favourite maid of queen Kaikeyi and then, there is a brief episode of the blind parents of Shravan Kumar. Likewise another great epic, the *Mahabharata*, that is set in the Dvapara Yuga, and recounts the life and adventures of Lord Krishna, the eighth incarnation of Lord Vishnu, also has the characters of Dhritarashtra, the blind king of Kuru kingdom; Shakuni, the limp prince of the kingdom of Gandhara; and the sage, Ashtavakra, who had, as his name suggests, eight types of physical deformities. All these characters are presented with all sorts of negative attributes. They are either described as being manipulative, cunning and antagonistic; or stereotyped as physically ugly and deformed. And this very form of representation in such influential narratives empowers the stereotypical attitude of masses towards disabled people, which in itself is problematic.

Most of the aforementioned characters from the grand epics are of less relevance, in particular to the present paper's area of study, i.e., the intersection of disability with marginality. Therefore in this regard, the characters like Mantharaand Ashtavakra are of special significance. Manthara, is a hunchback maid servant. Her being a woman and also being disabled makes her condition more aggravated, as a marginal subject. Her cunningness has been antagonised through ages by

the masses but it could also be interpreted as a deliberate adaptation in order to survive in the human world where she was entangled into a matrix of jeopardizing situations, being a woman, a deformed and a servant. Likewise, sage Ashtavakra has also suffered the multifaceted consequences of being a disabled and marginal. As per a version of the legends surrounding the sage Ashtavakra, while he was in his mother, Sujata's womb, his father sage Kahoda, was once reciting the Vedas, but he erred in correct intonation of the Vedic chants. Therefore Ashtavakra, who was still in his foetal form, corrected his father. But his father got angry and cursed him. The curse caused him to be born crooked, with eight bends, which is what his name "Ashtavakra" means. Though the sage Ashtavakra was a man, hence privileged in Indian patriarchal system, he had to face the curse of his father for no apparent folly on his part. He was cursed for being a child, as children in human society are also seen as marginals because they are dependent on their parents and not allowed to have an independent will. But he was in a better position as compared to Manthara, as he had knowledge which gave him the power and acceptance, in the face of the social exclusion he experienced being disabled.

But now the question arises why do these epic narratives portray disabledindividuals, either male or female, in a more stereotypical way rather than presenting them in an empathetic way? The answer to this question lies in the context in which these narratives were shaped. The main aim behind these portrayals is either to fulfill the didactic aim of the narratives or to confirm to the standardized and institutionalized ideologies.

PLACING DISABILITY AND MARGINALITY WITHIN THE DOCTRINE OF KARMA: A PROBLEMATIC RENDERING

The evaluation of human condition and human suffering, which includes factors like marginality (especially of caste and class), disability, contraction of diseases etc., has been influenced largely by the notions imparted by the religious texts. And one of such influential theories from the Vedic period is the 'Karma Theory'. Exploring the debated roots of the Karma theory, Herman

W.Tull, in his book called *The Vedic Origins of Karma: Cosmos as Man in Ancient Indian Myth and Ritual* notes that:

> Scholars have generally agreed that the earliest formulation of the karma doctrine occurs in the Brihadaranyaka Upanishad, and considered to be the earliest of the Upanishads. The doctrine occurs here in the context of a discussion of the fate of the individual after death. (28)

The present Indian cultural framework has also been derived from the ancient Vedic system. The concept of social exclusion or marginality, also comes from the same vedic creed of ancient state craft, which was responsible for dividing human labour into four categories. As in the Vedic Period, that roughly spanned from c.1500-1000 BCE, had a system of social stratification in which the citizens were classified as per their *Varna* or castes, rather than other socio-economic indicators. The whole society was divided into four main categories: *Brahimins*, highest in social order and were concerned with acquisition and impartation of knowledge; *Kshatriyas*, the second group, the warrior class, responsible for the safety of the citizens of their kingdom. The third group in the system, was the *Vaishyas*, concerned with different professions, and the last category in this socially constructed hierarchy was the *Shudras*, who were there mainly to serve the other three classes and were generally perceived as 'unskilled' and hence were compelled to do 'menial' tasks, which were considered improper for the other three castes.

As time passed, these divisions were established so rigidly, that even the birth of a person, also began to be considered an emblem of one's karma.The belief of people, in the doctrine of karma, was so potent that they started assuming that a person was born into the Brahmin family, was considered someone with meritorious deeds in previous birth and the person born a Shudra, a miscreant. On the same note, the doctrine of karma, has a profound effect upon how most of the Indian population perceive disability and the nuances associated with it. The Hindu doctrine of karma connects individual differences, either physical or psychological, to the actions performed in previous births. Mental and physical suffering, as Whitman notes:

> "is thought to be part of the unfolding of karma and is the consequence of past inappropriate action (mental, verbal or physical) that occurred in either one's current life or in a past life." (Whitman, 2007)

Thus 'Disability' is seen as a kind of divine retribution for the sins one has committed in previous birth. Associating disability with the karma of the previous birth, keeps people from the true understanding of the situation and fills them with a bitterness towards the already suffering individuals. Because these sometimes overt, while at others, elusive ideas manifested within the grand narratives, have become concrete being an integral part of Indian culture, but their misinterpretation can lead to misconceptions, hence such misreadings, must be deconstructed. In order to understand disability and its impact on the individuals suffering, one needs to change this mythical lens of observation because the context surrounding the representation of disability as a result of a person's deeds in the previous birth, has now been challenged through empirical research. And Medical Science has proved that disability is fundamentally a medical condition, as:

> Disability is a medical problem that resides in the individual – a defect in or a failure of a bodily system that is inherently abnormal and pathological (qtd. in Goodley 7).

Thus, disability must be addressed in a more comprehensive manner that would significantly decrease the intricacies of an already problematic situation.

REPRESENTATION OF THE INTERSECTION BETWEEN DISABILITY AND MARGINALITY IN CONTEMPORARY INTERTEXTS:

The term 'Intertexts has been derived from Julia Kristeva's theory of intertextuality, but it also has its roots in the theory of Text. Thus, before moving towards the idea of 'intertext', it is vital to have a brief occupation with; what a text is and how the concept of a text has been transformed with the changing critical paradigms? In a traditional sense, a text is understood to be a piece of written or spoken material in its primary form. It is any stretch of language that can be understood in a given context. But the concept of the text is a dynamic one, as with the shift in time and the literary nomenclature, the concept of what a text is, has also been transformed to a new level. According to linguists David Barton and Carmen Lee:

> Texts can no longer be thought of as relatively fixed and stable. They are more fluid with the changing affordances of new media. In addition, they are becoming increasingly multimodal and interactive. (qtd. in Nordquist 3 July, 2019)

Following the note, now any encodation, either an image, musical beats, set of signs and symbols like emojis and emoticons in a text message, even ellipses, that can be interpreted or decoded in a certain way, qualifies to be called a text, in its fluid sense. Likewise, the term 'Intertext' has also got a new shape with shifts in critical perspectives. The notion of 'Intertext' originally stems from the literary term "intertextuality", a term coined by the French philosopher and literary theorist, Julia Kristeva. As per her formulation, any text is an "intertext", because it is "the site of an intersection of numberless texts and existing only through its relation with other texts" (Abrams and Harpham 398). But her definition of an intertext primarily has a preoccupation with the shared themes and elements exclusively within literary texts, thereby conventional in nature. While the idea of Intertext or Intertexts, that the paper aims to discuss here, comes from the 'Editorial Statement' of the journal of comparative and theoretical reflection entitled, *INTERTEXTS*, as it reads:

...(To) employ innovative approaches to explore the relations between literary and other texts, be they literary, historical, theoretical, philosophical, or social...work which engages issues on a sufficiently theoretical or comparative level to interest people in a variety of disciplines. Hybrid methodologies that combine elements from a range of disciplines....Methodological reflections and argumentation...when combined with detailed textual analysis. INTERTEXTS is particularly interested in the use of theoretical perspectives to analyze texts other than those to which they are generally applied. In... (a) hope to provide not only new understandings of familiar texts but also to use those texts to examine the virtues and limitations of contemporary literary theory. (qtd. in Blevins)

Keeping this unconventional and inherently extensive formulation of intertext in mind, an Intertext can be defined as; *texts from multiple fields or from an interdisciplinary arena, that are kept together through a common and shared element or link between them. Therefore when multiple texts either literary, social, cinematic, legal or psychological, for example a film, a story, a social media post, real life experiences, a law statement, scars on the body of a person suffering from mental illness and the behaviour of an individual experiencing disability etc., be kept together through a common thread among them, they can be called Intertexts*. As in this case the representation of 'disability and its intersection with marginality', acts as a common thread between the selected texts, which delineate disability in its different manifestations, hence are inter-connected, and this aspect of keeping the texts together makes them Intertexts in the Post- Modern sense.

To understand how disability intersects with marginality as represented in the contemporary Indian intertexts, the paper analyses the 2019 film, *Judgmental HaiKya*. As a cinematic text, the film deals with mental illness, one of the most stigmatized forms of disabilities. The film depicts how a woman suffering from acute psychosis, ultimately wins over the antagonism of the villain and the society as a whole. Dealing with this aspect the film significantly challenges the notion of normalcy, which is a social construct, for how one should behave to fit himself/herself, best

in the socio-cultural framework. The female protagonist Bobby (KangnaRanaut), who is being frequently addressed as mental in the film, seen by the other characters in the film as the 'black sheep'. Therefore, whatever wrong happens, no matter what the reality is, Bobby becomes the target. On the other hand, the character of Keshav a.k.a. Shravan, who in the end appears to be the real antagonist of the film, tends to safeguard himself, as he was capable of camouflaging his darker side, in the mask of accepted notions of normalcy. Keshav (RajkumarRao), was a Psychopath, who from the beginning of the plot, tricks Bobby, in one or the other way. In the course of the story he molests her and when she comes up with the issue, nobody believes her, as everybody has prejudices concerning her. Almost all the characters in her life assume that she has a habit of being obsessed with things and people she comes across. But irrespective of all barriers she wins, as she exposes Keshev in the end as the main culprit. In the film Bobby suffers because she is mentally ill and her situation becomes all the more aggravated for having another disadvantageous status of being the 'Other' in the patriarchal system. The societal stereotypes and stigmas around her existence make her yet more prone to oppression.

The another text is a socio-psychological study of a real-life incident, i.e., the Burari mass-suicide case, that represents the intersection of disability with marginality. The mass suicides in the Burari region of New Delhi, which took place on July 1, 2018, was one of the greatest mysteries in the history of India. The case remains unresolved, but if one is to believe in the psychological autopsy conducted on the victims, it was a case of shared psychotic disorder. It is an unusual mental disorder characterized by sharing a delusion among two or more people who are in a close relationship. In this particular case, it was the 45 years old Lalit Bhatia, the younger son of the Chundawat family, who was suffering from a delusional state from more than a period of six years, as per the diary found at the Burari household, whose mental condition wrapped up the whole family and lead them to an unnatural and unexpected death. In this case, the lack of awareness towards the mental health issues, on the part of the other family members, their loss of freedom of the will and total submission to Lalit's delusional state, made them victims. As per the notes found in the house, Lalit Bhatia used to give orders in the voice of his

dead father, who was the patriarch of the family, hence other members followed him, which over time became a blind following. Here disability stemming from Lalit's delusional state, and marginality, on part of the other members' unawareness and submission, made this instance, a case of multiple jeopardy as disability intersections with marginality, in a very bleaker manifestation.

The following media reports can be taken as the third text here. As the press report reads:

In January 2016, for example, a deaf-mute Dalit woman was gang-raped and thrown from a train in Uttar Pradesh, and at the beginning of February 2016 when a man was arrested for raping a deaf-mute Dalit girl in Berhampur, Odisha (qtd. in Case Study n.d.)

In this case, the girl as well as the woman, who were both marginals as well as disabled. Their weak position in the society made them suffer the consequences of people's insensitivity and animosity towards the marginal subjects, especially the marginal women.

All of the aforementioned analyses were derived from various texts, in their broadest sense, that were taken up as intertexts because all of them project the gruesome and often unaddressed sides of disability and its overlapping with sometimes visible or at others invisible forms of marginality.

DISABILITY: A STIGMATIZED RHETORIC

In India most of the masses irrespective of their educational and socio-economic status, believe in the concept of afterlife and previous birth. They either consider disability in each of its manifestations, as a product of the sufferers' sinful deeds, or perceive the disabled person as somebody impotent, in terms of their contribution towards life.

(…)people with disabilities face attitudinal barriers including prejudice, stereotypes, and low expectations'....These negative attitudes and inaccurate beliefs about disability can result in stigma (an attribute possessed by a person or group that is regarded as undesirable or discrediting). (Rohwerder 4)

The general idea of disability is a stigmatized conception accepted by society due to their lack of comprehensiveness regarding a particular disability. And this very idea of analysing disability in terms of cultural and religious misconceptions, blurs the reality concerning disability, hence making it a rhetoric. To define, rhetoric, in simpler sense is, language designed to have a persuasive or impressive effect, but which is often regarded as lacking in sincerity or meaningful content. As per Jay Timothy Dolmage, who in his book *Disability Rhetoric*, explains 'rhetoric' as:

> (...) it is the study of all of communication. But more specifically, rhetoricians foreground the persuasive potential of all texts and artifacts, questioning the sedimentation of meanings, recognizing the constant negotiations between authors and audiences, and linking language to power….Rhetoric can be seen as an operational, discursive means of shaping identity, community, cultural processes and institutions, and everyday being-in-the-world. (Dolmage 3)

Hence the different narratives, either cultural or social, conceive disability in its far-fetched form. The names, or terms like, "Divyangjan" or "differently-abled", or "abled", which are used to call individuals with disability and the term "harijans" a term used for untouchables, are mere euphemisms, hence rhetorical in their essence. Whereas in the core of the subject, there lies an immensely stigmatized conception. The stigma surrounding disabled marginals evokes negative responses such as pity, anxiety, avoidance, hostility, and even hatred and disgust, all of which in turn lead the individuals to entangle into a never ending matrix of oppression. The reality of what it is like to be disabled is completely different from the way it is represented rhetorically, throughout all forms of ephemeral representations.

CONCLUSION:

Therefore, in order to sensitize people towards disability and its relationship with other disadvantageous socio-cultural aspects, like marginality, it is imperative to dismantle the stigma and create awareness through different platforms, and through more realistic representations. Another important step could include teaching self-advocacy skills to people with disabilities; providing medical and psycho-social counselling to people with disabilities to increase their self-help skills. And the biggest tool to overcome every marginal situation, lies in 'education', hence, educating them to inculcate self-advocacy skills, would bring them into the mainstream of the society. The policy makers and the government are an important part of this move, towards the inclusion of such individuals into mainstream society. Rather than concentrating on the discursive model of disability, an honest emphasis on the praxis towards how these discursive discourses can be implemented in their material form and brought into the lives of individuals with disabilities, is consensus.

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Bio

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