

LITERARY REPRESENTATIONS OF DISABILITIES: A CASE STUDY OF INDIAN MYTHOLOGY

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ABSTRACT

Representation of disability in literature has travelled a long way. The feelings are mixed as to whether or not these representations have been just. The matter of representation of disability has been a sensitive one since the group whose representation is being discussed here is, mostly, psychologically, and biologically, very vulnerable. Also, keeping in mind the complexity of human anatomy, and multiplicity of disease that keep evolving in a never-ending manner further complicates the matter. There is always a risk of a partial, or mis-representation of the section of society that is facing medical challenges. There is also the risk inaccuracy, and wholeness, in discussing the pangs of a people suffering a certain disability because the person trying to discuss may not be in possession of a complete, or at least, necessary information. Many a times this lack of awareness on the part of a fit person—saying, or writing, something about a disability—causes tricky situations. Unwillingly, at times, an unaware person makes an observation on a disability that triggers stormy response from the disabled person's end. The problem with such a situation is, both the parties are correct. The victim is correct because his sentiments have been hurt, while the 'so-considered' offender is correct because he/she was only trying to help (maybe by discussing the matter). The situation then becomes tricky. Whatever be the case, over the past few years, disability studies has gained due recognition within the academia. With the intent to understand how the past has perceived disability, this paper discusses the representation of disability in Indian Mythology.

Keywords: Disabilities, Mythology, Psychology, Literary Representations.

Introduction

The intersection of disability and religion concentrates on the manner in which disabled people are treated within religious communities, the religious texts of those religions, or the general input from religious discourse on matters relating to disability. Studies on the relationship between religion and disability is subjectively varied, while some see it as existence of ableism, others consider religion as a primary medium through which attention can be brought on the subject and help the disabled. The connection between disability and religion has created meaningful discourses but there is little knowledge to be acquired when it comes to mental disability and religion. Disability, ironically, is explained, in religious context, as a consequence of some 'bad' actions performed in the previous life—a metaphysical consideration with little grounding in the ways in which Science perceives the matter. Such a consideration is mostly based in religious orthodoxy, and a lack of scientific temperament. Whatever be the case, it is important to reassess the representation of disability in mythology from time to time.

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Another proposition, famous in the popular culture, is that people with healthy body should be thankful to God for He has recognised their 'good' deeds and gifted them with a disease-free *Kaya* (body). And disables should take lesson from their disability (which of course in the religious terms is a result of some wrongdoing in the previous life) and try to be more religious, moreover, they should be accepting toward their fate as divine providence and work accordingly. Again, such considerations are only exemplification of religious orthodoxy and naivete. There is a hint of what was practised by the Puritans in England during the rule of Oliver Cromwell (1649-1659), and in the New England (later called America) in the early part of the seventeenth century. The result of the Puritans' religious orthodoxy, and their lack of reasoning, is no mystery today. If anyone needs to learn something from an attitude purely based in blind adherence to a belief, the ideology and the practises of the Puritans are best to be referred to.

Representations of Disabilities in Hindu Mythology

Representations of disabilities in Indian mythology (especially Hindu mythology) are perfect examples of 'othering.' The narratives are created as to make the disables, mostly, non-existent. And in cases where they are presented, they are presented as either devilish or lacking some necessary virtue. However, there are cases when disabled people are shown to be victims of inferiority complex (as in the case of *Astavakra*). Here is a list of some of the people with disability whose stories are most easily accessible, and most frequently discussed:

- **Ashtavakra: The Great Vedic Sage with 'Eight' Deformities**

There is an interesting legend about Ashtavakra, the sage with eight deformities. When Ashtavakra was only in the womb of his mother, as a foetus, he developed this skill of pronouncing the Vedic Mantras that his grandparents and gurus would teach their parents. One day the father of this yet to be born child was busy with his usual chanting of the mantras during which he committed eight mistakes. It is said that Ashtavakra, still in his mother's womb, pointed out those 'eight' mistakes to his father. Infuriated, on the mistakes being pointed out by a child that too unborn, the father (an 'egotistical sublime') cursed the child to be born with eight deformities. And so it happened, Ashtavakra was born with eight deformities. However, these deformities could not mar the intelligence that this great sage possessed. He later became a Brahmrishi (the highest position of a sage). Credited with such tremendous work as *Ashtavakra Samhita*, wherein is stored the sage's words of wisdom, which is a treasure chest of knowledge, Ashtavakra was Raja Janaka's teacher. The Raja Janaka, lord of Vaideh, father of Sita, the Indian Goddess.

- **Dhritrashtra: The Blind King (Regent) of Kuru Dynasty**

Dhritrashtra, the character that was one of the reasons why Mahabharata happened, if we were to believe it happened, was born blind. The legend of his birth is as mysterious as his role in the Mahabharata. His father Vichitrviya (the name meant 'marvellous heroism) died of sickness, without leaving an heir to his throne. Dhritrashtra was born of Ambika and Vyasa (Vichitrviya's brother). After the death of Vichitrviya, there arose a crisis of leadership in absence of an heir to the throne of Hastinapur. Upon Satyawati's (Vichitrviya's mother) request Vyasa participated in Niyoga (a practise in which a great man would help a childless woman to bear a child without any actual union between the two) thus helping Ambika bear Dhritrashtra. Due to her fear of this great sage, Vyasa, Ambika—the first wife of King Vichitrviya—closed her eyes, which is why it is said, a blind child was born.

Regardless of his blindness, Dhritrashtra became the legendary Kuru King. He had the physical prowess of fighting a hundred elephants all at one time. His role in the Hindu epic Mahabharata is immense. A lot is said of his notorious nature though. Although one is free to like or dislike Dhritrashtra for his part in the epic, one thing is certain that he cannot be ignored.

- **Shakuni (Popular as Shakuni Mama): The Greatest Villian who Walked with a Limp**

Shakuni Mama is considered the greatest villain of all time. He was the brother-in-law of Dhritrashtra who loved his sister Gandhari very dearly. The principal reason for Shakuni in plotting the battle of Mahabharata was to take revenge upon the family of his brother-in-law, Dhritrashtra. The bone of contention was the marriage of Shakuni's beautiful sister, Gandhari, to a blind man, Dhritrashtra. Shakuni had a minor locomotor disability due to which he walked with a limp. Also, he had a malformed eye, that kept twitching. It is important to note here that his physical disabilities are so portrayed that they create an effect which gives a negative impact on his presence in any scene. As soon as he is seen walking around, limping, the reader/viewer senses chaos walking by. Also, the way one of his eyes twitches while talks makes one scared. Shakuni's is a classic case of portraying disability as a symbol of a devilish character.

- **Kalidasa: A Great Author with Intellectual Disability**

Kalidasa is well-known for his classic Sanskrit poems and dramas. He is often considered the greatest playwright and dramatist of ancient India. But we hear no mention about his disability maybe because Intellectual Disability is a modern concept of very recent origin. Although stories that point towards his intellectual disability are quite famous. It is said that Kalidasa was found by a group of intellectuals as cutting the same branch on which he was sitting. There was a beautiful princess who was highly educated. She was desired by many men. The problem was her condition to marry a man who would defeat her in an intellectual battle: the Shashtrartha. Many men tried their fate but only to be rejected and intellectually humiliated by the princess. This continued for some time after which these rejected men formed a kind of a group. This group decided to avenge upon the princess by tricking her into marrying the dumbest man on earth. They found Kalidasa as the perfect candidate. Somehow, the princess married Kalidasa. On the very first night after the marriage, the princess discovered his foolishness and threw him out of the house, breaking the marriage right away. This humiliation, coupled with a lot of hard work, resulted in the making of Kalidasa as the man we know of him today. He is remembered and revered today as the greatest poet, scholar of the Indian soil.

- **Manthara: The Maid with a Hunchback and Probably Visual Impairment in One Eye**

Who does not know Manthara, the maid who paved the path for Rama's exile? Though Lord Rama never had any ill-thoughts about Manthara, people still see her as a cruel plotter who exiled Rama along with Lakshman and Sita for fourteen years. She was the one who convinced queen Kaikeyi to force the king Dasaratha to give the throne to Bharata and exile Rama who was already announced as the Yuvraj, the king-to-be.

Manthara's physical deformities, again, can be seen in two ways: positive and negative. Positive in the sense that despite the disability, Manthara held a high position among the royal staff. She was queen Kaikeyi's head maid. This shows that the representation of the disabled has been but fair in the Hindu mythology. But at the same time, Manthara's disability is also read as a result of her inherent evilness with which she crafted the plot against Lord Rama. In any case, the analysis is subjective.

- **Shukracharya: The Guru of Asuras who was Blind in One Eye**

Shukra, son of sage Bhrigu, is considered one of the greatest sages of all time. He was a highly learned man and hence considered himself the most deserving candidate to be the Guru of the Devas, the gods. But, Vrihaspati was elected as the Guru of the Devas. Shukra took this as a humiliation done by the Devas and hence, he went to the Asuras, the demons, and became their Acharya to take revenge from the Devas. He taught all great Asuras including king Bali and prince Meghnad, son of Ravana. Shukracharya was not a disabled person from birth but he acquired disability later in his life. It is said that Shukracharya recognized Lord Vishnu even in his Vamana Avtara and wanted to save his disciple king Bali from the Lord. So, he became tiny and entered the pitcher so that he can block water that was being poured for the ritualistic vow to be taken by Bali. Vamana took a twig and poked inside the pitcher thus blinding the daitya guru Shukracharya. Shukra is still worshipped at every Hindu home as a part of nav grahas (nine planets).

- **Vamana: The Incarnation of Lord Vishnu who was a Dwarf**

Vamana is one of the Dashavtara taken by Lord Vishnu to kill demons and spread goodness in the world. This incarnation of the Lord was a dwarf Brahmin who went to one of the sacrifices being held by Bali, the demon king. Bali at that time had acquired the three worlds by defeating Indra who had asked Lord Vishnu for help. Lord Vishnu, in the form of Vamana, asked Bali for land equal to his three steps.

- **Surdas: The Bhakti Poet with Blindness**

Surdas is one of the most revered poets and a devotee of Lord Krishna. No texts clearly mention whether Surdas was blind from birth or acquired the disability later in his life. Different scholars have different views. But, the detailed description of the beauty of Lord Krishna as a child found in his poetry is a rare feat even for those who have perfect vision. It is said that Lord Krishna made himself visible to Surdas and the devotee wanted to see nothing else. So, he remained blind for his entire life.

Conclusion

The Hindu Mythology is replete with such other lesser-known stories about persons with disabilities. For example, Arun/Usha, the charioteer of the Sun God is said to be born without the lower body including legs and genitals; Bop Dev, who is known by several other names, was like Kalidasa, a person with an intellectual disability who later gained knowledge. Then there was rishi Chyavan who was

accidentally blinded by princess Sukanya who later married him as her penance. Lord Krishna, who is the personification of beauty, is also Lord Jagannath in Puri, Odisha, the deformed God with no hands, or legs. Lord Jagannath is the ultimate image of inclusivity. A balanced study of Hindu mythology would result in the conclusion that people with disability have been given due space. However, the representations are ambiguous and thus, remain open to interpretations and analyses.

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