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Men and Masculinity in Contemporary Fiction

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Abstract:

The misconception that males are the dominating sex puts pressure on them to live up to the roles and expectations that are placed upon them in order to fit in with society and become the perfect man. A lot of discrimination, marginalisation, and suppression of boys and men occurs as a result of the pressure from society to be the ideal sort. Since different people have distinct ideas about what masculinity entails, there are varying perceptions of what masculinity is. In contrast to masculinity, disability historically has been associated with helplessness, weakness, and dependency. A disabled man is viewed as a deviant and in need of constant assistance and support. Men with disabilities feel excluded from society since it has been assumed that they are not capable of being the dominant male figure. The pressure to work hard, persevere, and establish their value in order to be accepted by the "normal" society grows on disabled men. Every stage of their lives has been marked by marginalisation and discrimination. Men with disabilities face many challenges that receive little attention. It is, therefore, vital that we investigate the social marginalisation and subjugation that men with disabilities experience.

Keywords: Masculinity, Disability, Marginalization, Subjugation.

Introduction

Gender roles, taboos, and stereotypes have been imposed by society, leading to discrimination and the division of people into genders, ultimately favouring one sex over the other and resulting in sexism. Without question, women have suffered from misogyny, been denigrated, and been victims of it throughout history. However, as the feminist movement

gained momentum and time passed, their voices became increasingly heard. In social, literary, historical, and legal contexts, women have been supported and shielded. However, there are few representations, sources of support, or safeguards available for male victims of misandry and gender norms who are abused, raped, oppressed, and mistreated. It is essential to recognise that stigmatisation and other social ills do not simply target people based on their gender; everyone, regardless of gender, can experience them. The reality that boys and men have been subjected to discrimination and oppression will not change if people choose to ignore it. Bell Hooks, in her 2004 book *The Will To Change*, writes,

Many men in our society have no status, no privilege; they receive no freely given compensation, no perks with capitalist patriarchy... These men suffer... They suffer in a society that does not want men to change, that does not want to reconstruct masculinity so that the basis for the social formation of male identity is not rooted in an ethic of domination... Broken emotional bonds... the traumas of emotional neglect and abandonment that so many males have experienced... have damaged and wounded the spirits of men. Many men are unable to speak their suffering (Hooks, 138-139).

Males have traditionally occupied positions of authority; hence, many have long believed that they are not victims of patriarchy or gender norms. It is a widely held notion in society that men are a superior gender that is impervious to all forms of injustice and persecution. In reality, when it comes to gender norms, patriarchy, and societal expectations resulting from male performativity, men are bound by them as well. Throughout history, societies have viewed self-sufficient, physically fit, and dominant men as the epitome of the perfect man. Men who challenge societal norms face significant physical and psychological challenges throughout their lives as a result of being viewed as individuals who fall short of society's ideals. In the gender hierarchy, men who do not embody the ideal of hegemonic masculinity are regarded as inferiors and referred to as subordinate masculinities. Subordinate masculinity has been best exemplified by men who identify as gay or disabled. Men with disabilities face increasing pressure to prove their value in society since they have been perceived as not meeting gender norms and the ideal of perfection.

The conventional definition of a man is someone who is strong and independent, able to carry out the gender duties expected of him. However, when it comes to men who are disabled, society views them as incapable of meeting these expectations, and as such, they do not conform to the norms of society. Men with disabilities have been viewed as monsters because they are perceived as having lost their manhood due to their inability to conform to

gender norms. Analysis of literary depictions of men with disabilities reveals that throughout history, men with disabilities have often been portrayed negatively and in opposition to the male lead, which has been shaped to fit the stereotype of the idle man held by society. In the Mahabharata, we see how Vidur's objection to Dhritarashtra's enthronement on the grounds that he was blind and hence unfit to manage a kingdom forced him to abdicate, despite the fact that he was the legitimate heir and had received extensive training in the art of being a king. Even though he was forced to become king later on, he was always represented as weak, avaricious, and unfair. Despite having the same abilities as his younger sibling, Pandu, he was treated unfairly and with contempt due to his impairment. As he did not conform to society's ideal of a man, he was deemed unqualified to hold the office of king. Though the patriarchy has granted men an unfair advantage in society, it has also fostered discrimination against members of its kind who do not fit the stereotypical male gender roles. Men are expected to support their families independently, be self-sufficient, and be the men in their homes whom other family members can rely on. Men are subject to tremendous social pressure to conform to gender norms, which is why men with disabilities are treated differently by Ableists than women. They experience several traumas because of the way people behave and perceive them, shattering their own perception of who they are. It becomes a never-ending battle for them to be accepted by society and their gender, as well as to demonstrate their value as men. They are marginalised and excluded by society because men with disabilities are perceived as weak and defenceless, which reduces their chances of living regular lives, resulting in their social marginalisation. Due to the belief that they are incapable of exhibiting the dominance that is expected of men, men with disabilities experience social isolation. Men with disabilities are viewed from such a biased and stereotypical perspective by the general public that changing the situation is nearly impossible. Men with disabilities also do not receive the basic human respect that they deserve. Feeling helpless, these guys decide to withdraw from society to come to terms with their circumstances.

Literature Survey

Men with disabilities are more likely to experience violence and injustice since others tend to take advantage of and exploit them due to their conditions, abused by both men and women. People take advantage of men who are disabled; especially those who are physically disabled, because they think that these men are defenceless against attackers due to their vulnerable situation. Men with disabilities face threats, verbal and physical abuse, and rude and haughty remarks from others who are aware of their limitations when it comes to their ability

to defend themselves physically. Even though every person has some weak points, those who cannot defend themselves experience the most discrimination. Men with disabilities are often the focus of crimes such as theft, rape, and other crimes since they are seen as easy targets. A pivotal scene in John Irving's best-selling 1978 book, *The World According to Garp*, depicts a disabled male character named Technical Sergeant Garp raped by his nurse, Jenny Fields. Jenny raped Garp because she felt the need to have a kid and be an independent mother without being attached to or controlled by any man in her life. Despite having brain damage and being mortally wounded, Garp was able to sustain an erection for extended periods. Jenny is presented to be one of the few stable, morally upright individuals in the book, despite having committed a horrible crime like rape, because she has been portrayed as asexual and has only ever had sex with Garp. Representing her as a much-admired feminist figure, the novelist and critics have attempted to defend her actions. Fields defends rape in her autobiography, *A Sexual Suspect*, as, "That the rest of the world finds this an immoral act only shows me that the rest of the world doesn't respect the rights of an individual" (Irving, 21). Had the characters' genders been swapped, the identical scenario would have been very contentious and fiercely criticised by people, especially feminists. As we read above, many disabled men with conditions that prevent them from fighting back end up being mistreated and even sexually assaulted because people think that men, especially those with disabilities, are always ready for sex and that their consent is irrelevant. These false beliefs and ways of thinking are the reasons behind all that is wrong with society. Moreover, there are no laws protecting men, and things are far worse for those men with disabilities. The feminists contend that women are exclusively vulnerable to abuse, rape, and assault. Most of them find it repulsive that men would go through all of that, which contributes to the perpetuation of these stereotypes in our society and creates the conditions for an even more unfair and unequal society.

The temptation to fit into the stereotypically idle male body type and performative role breeds discrimination and inequality. Despite the fact that every human body is unique and some are designed to execute specific tasks while others are not, this does not render the latter group of people less competent or useless. Men also differ from one another in terms of their bodies. What distinguishes men from one another is the masculine standards that force them to compare their bodies. Men with disabilities do make comparisons to other men, and others also give them the impression that because they do not have the stereotypically macho body type, they are not worthy of the title of man. Additionally, their performativity is compromised, which results in their subjugation. Many believe that having a disability could make a man's sexuality irrelevant, leading others who are close to him to view him as non-sexual or incapable

of engaging in romantic or sexual relationships. Men with disabilities are viewed as sexually repulsive by women in particular because their bodies do not conform to the stereotype of idle men. Though they have been chastised for their decisions, some men and women do fall in love and form relationships with men who have disabilities. People inquire about them and speculate that they may be with their partners who have disabilities either out of compassion or for their advantage. Some people shun sexual relationships with persons who have disabilities out of concern that they would pass the condition on to their children. While some disorders are heritable, this is not always the case. Before passing judgement, people ought to learn more and become less naive. Men with disabilities have historically been perceived as having a physique devoid of masculinity and serving only as a burden. Men with disabilities suffer when they have a physical impairment because the body is considered the primary indicator of manhood. Regardless of one's multifaceted abilities, a physical condition might alter one's status and make one appear burdensome to others. Intimacy comes from emotional bonds, not from the body. It is blatantly ignorant to assume that a disability equates to vulnerability and, hence, impotence.

There have been two World Wars and numerous other significant conflicts in the history. The people who were directly or indirectly involved in the battles lost a great deal in the process. Men of all ages fought in the wars, and when it was over, the majority of those men had suffered severe physical and psychological injuries that would follow them for the rest of their lives. Wars come to an end, but their effects last a lifetime. Due to their physical or mental injuries sustained on the battlefield, many soldiers who engage in wars struggle to adjust to society's perception of them following the conflict. They experience challenges with body image, low self-esteem, sadness, anxiety, and insecurities, in addition to, disconnection from society and family. Popular war poets penned multiple poems addressing the dilemma faced by returning veterans of battle who suffer from disabilities and the challenges they face in accepting their new identities. "Disabled", a poem by Wilfred Owen from 1917, explores the thoughts and feelings of a soldier returning from war with a physical impairment and how that impacts his self-perception and the way society views him. The poem also illustrates how, after his return with a disability, people's attitudes towards him changed. Before becoming disabled by war, the speaker recalls how wonderful his life was before the war, and how the society did not view him as suffering from some weird illness. He is also finding it difficult to comprehend and assimilate how other people view and treat him in the wake of his condition. The speaker feels that because of his condition, he has lost his sense of manhood and that society is only empathising with him because he no longer meets their image of a man, which makes him

discriminated against and abandoned. Men who have disabilities often struggle to accept who they are because they feel socially unacceptable and experience identity crises. Due to their perceived inferiority over "normal men", disabled men are frequently feminised. As they do not fit the mould of the ideal male, they are, therefore, viewed as individuals undeserving of respect, affection, or attention. These men with disabilities choose diverse strategies to manage the demand to demonstrate their worth. Men from patriarchal societies discriminate against differently abled men because they think there is no purpose to a man's existence if he cannot fulfil the role of an alpha male. When a guy has been labelled as dependent, the patriarchy questions every aspect of his identity. The patriarchal culture holds that a man can only truly embody manhood if he can dominate others who are considered lesser than him. Men with disabilities frequently make every effort to assume roles that demonstrate their dominance. They could attempt to exert control over their partners by making all of the decisions about the home or even their romantic relationship. In an attempt to conform to the patriarchal system and gain acceptance in society, men, especially those with disabilities, foolishly persist in opposing their wishes. Men will constantly be subjected to fears and self-doubt by other males, even if some of them are attempting to break free from the oppressive culture and pressures they face. Support from others is necessary for men with disabilities so that their abilities are not suppressed by the pressure to be idle man. Stereotypes that imply men should be the primary breadwinners for their families, emotionally aloof, and physically fit are limiting and sometimes damaging. A person's perception of what is "normal" prevents them from seeing past the psychological or physical limitations that differently abled men face.

An individual's personality and feeling of self-worth are greatly influenced by their family. The way a family views a member's impairment is essential since it has a significant impact on the child's psychological growth. Sadly, there are not many families that do not view their disabled children as a burden and instead give them their undivided love and support. Male disabled people are under constant pressure from their parents to behave appropriately, particularly in front of family, in order to uphold the family's reputation. They are made to act normal to fit in with the sons of friends and family. The expectation from society that the father and mother will respond to their disabled family member differently presents another problem. While it is understandable if the child's father flees the family and abdicates his responsibilities to his disabled child, the mother is expected to remain since she has the duty of bearing the child into the world. A father's emotional burden is worse when his son is born disabled because he knows his child will never grow up to be the dominant man that all fathers want their son to be and feels that it is a reflection of his manhood. Terry Trueman's novel, *Stuck in*

Neutral(2000), is about Shawn McDaniel, a 14-year-old boy, suffering from cerebral palsy. Due to his son's impairment, Shawn's father, Mr. Sydney McDaniel, leaves the family, however he subsequently goes on to receive recognition and prizes for his poetry and interviews regarding his son's disabilities. Not only did people feel sorry for Shawn but also for his father, who, in all honesty, desired to kill his fourteen-year-old son in order to escape his predicament. Shawn's father never had the authority to make decisions for his son as he did not participate in his upbringing and instead left the family when Shawn needed him, however for some reason, he still views himself as Shawn's father, the man of the house, and has the authority to determine the direction and conclusion of his son's life. He filed for divorce—not only from his wife but from his entire family—because he was so sad that his son would never be "ideal and complete" in the eyes of society. After coming to this realisation, Shawn starts to blame his birth circumstances for the family's disintegration. Shawn was disturbed by his perception that his siblings were upset with him for their parents' split. Regarding their son's condition, Shawn's parents agree, yet only one of them chose to remain while the other left. Neglect in such circumstances has a significant impact on the child than the family. Even though Shawn was unable to express it verbally, it was evident that he did not want his life to end. However, it was his father, who had abandoned the family, who ultimately decided to murder his son out of compassion and love. The killing of disabled men out of love and sympathy aptly illustrates the direction in which our society is moving. Due to their inability to meet the expectations of traditional masculinity, disabled men are murdered. Patriarchal fathers are frequently the ones who do these horrible acts. Families decide to stop the embarrassment for the sake of honour and love when their disabled sons are perceived as disgrace to masculinity and the family. It is a misconception that men with disabilities are worthless liabilities to their families and communities, which is not what is required of a man. Even more regrettable are those who support and condone such heinous acts of murder and violence. In such circumstances, rather than being horrified and outraged at the vicious, inhumane crime, people are more shocked by the degree of the murderers' love to have slain their loved ones in order to rescue them from their awful life.

In addition to being marginalised due to their condition, men with disabilities have also been excluded from the standards of masculinity. They have to deal with the stigmas, preconceptions, and biases associated not only with weak masculinity but also with disabilities. In addition to battling the patriarchy for not living up to its standards of a man, they must deal with the stigmas associated with being disabled. A significant challenge to many disabled men's

feeling of masculinity and rights could come from losing their jobs, their income, or their status. Maintaining the stereotype that men should be emotionally aloof, physically strong, and the breadwinners of their families are restricting and may even be damaging. There are no laws protecting men against abuse, rape, or violence of any type. Disability laws do, however, contain particular provisions protecting disabled women and children, but not male disabled persons. Without question, disabled women and children are more likely to experience violence, however it is also important to recognise that males with disabilities are more likely to experience violence based on their impairment as well as on their gender. Our perspective of people and their circumstances should not be shaped by gender standards and stereotypes. Men with disabilities are deserving of our attention just as much as women and kids with disabilities.

Methods/Approach

The present article employs the qualitative research approach of textual analysis to comprehend the issues mentioned. A textual analysis of various texts like *The World According to Garp* (1978) by John Irving, *Stuck in Neutral* (2000) by Terry Trueman, war poems, etc. has been carried out in context to the representations of men with disabilities. In a society where the fight for equality for all is an ongoing one, this study has attempted to evaluate the different issues that men with disabilities confront.

Results/Discussion

After the analysis, it was found that although dominance, strength, and power have been associated with masculinity since the dawn of time, men with impairments continue to be viewed as powerless and an embarrassment to the masculine. Men's superiority over other inferior genders is justified by the presence of hegemonic masculinity; men who defy gender conventions are considered subordinate masculine. Men with disabilities are constantly reminded that they are less of a man and more of a burden. Many believe that they are imperfect people who ought to be mistreated and punished. Due to social conventions and constrictive notions of what makes a "real man," these men face exclusion. Redefining our perspective on men with disabilities is necessary if we are to build a society that is accessible and inclusive.

Conclusion

There are countless examples of successful men with disabilities, like Stephen Hawking, Albert Einstein, Nicholas James Vujicic, Walt Disney, Ludwig Van Beethoven, Franklin D. Roosevelt, and others, who defied expectations and demonstrated their value and abilities, have shown the world that it is not necessary to fit society's standard of normalcy in order to become an ideal man. It is critical that people educate themselves, or at the very least, provide differently-abled guys a platform to discuss their relationships and sex experiences freely. It is imperative that we must listen to them and give them self-confidence rather than ruining their lives with stigmas and gender norms. Additionally, it is critical that men with disabilities must grow in confidence and self-worth and refrain from pressuring their partners to validate their bodies and sexual prowess.

Future Scope

Many studies on women and children with disabilities have been conducted, however the concerns of men with disabilities have not received much attention from researchers in the fields of disability studies and masculinity studies. Though much research have been done on women's subordination, the issues of men with disabilities also has to be looked into. There is undoubtedly room for more research on the representation of men with disabilities in popular culture, classical and modern literature, comics, cartoons, anime, and digital platforms, as well as how crucial it is that these representations be made in order to give men with disabilities a more equal and inclusive platform in all facets of society.

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