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Challenging Normativity in Malini Chib's *One Little Finger* (2011): A Discourse Analysis of Life Narrative

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Abstract:

This theoretical article functions on discourse analysis of life narrative that challenges the normative discourses in Malini Chib's *One Little Finger* (2011). The normative ideas in language create a discourse of otherness for people with disability, resulting in marginalisation and exclusion. Disability is often addressed as deviant from the normative assumptions and, as a result, leads to objectification and a 'normative gaze' of disabled bodies. In addition, when disability has an intersection with Indian women, the result is threefold marginalisation. With the commencement of postmodernism, a continuous resurgence of discourses came from the margins against the binaries and dualistic dichotomies where the other identities that are supposed to be marginal are impugned. However, certain margins, such as disabled women in India, are less addressed and little represented in literature. Consequently, they have taken an ounce of self-representing in their life—narratives. Malini Chib's life narrative challenges societal stereotypes and comes as a resistance to normative discourses that emphasise able-bodiedness, resulting in ableism. This research paper necessarily operates on critical discourse analysis of life narrative by relying on Davis's disability discourse, Feminist Disability Study theories and Disability Study theories to address ableist and normative power dynamics. This discourse analysis will help to uproot the culture of normative endorsement and will ensure the authentic portrayal of disabled women's experiences. Therefore, this work on disability

discourse in Indian culture underscores the need for acceptance, destigmatisation and inclusion of women with and without disability.

Keywords: Normativity; Disability; Sexuality; Exclusion; Inaccessibility; Ableism; Disabled Women.

Introduction:

Disability as a definition has always worked in comparison to the definition of normativity or normalcy in language. Normalcy in language and discourses has been understood in terms of what disability isn't. Thus, disability signifies a lack or incompleteness of something, which, in actuality, is a construct. Normative discourses disseminate exclusionary vocabularies and semantics for disability that generate negativity, stereotyping, and ableism in language, which, though common in the English language and literature, remain unquestioned.

To understand how disability operates in language, we must know how and when normativity, normalcy, and norm exist. In 1840, the terms "normal," "normalcy," and "normality" began to appear in English language usage. The Latin word "norm" originates and refers to a carpenter's square, a particular measurement, or measuring tool. The term "modern norm" didn't exist until 1855. In addition, "normalcy" and "normality" emerged in 1857 and 1849, respectively. The notion of norm, which has a distinct meaning today, was primarily adopted by statistics as a field of study to establish the concepts of "average" and "normal," with the bell curve serving as a symbol for the "average" or "normal." Karl Marx's hype influenced the idea of average to determine the labour value.

Consequently, the concept of deviation that comes next after the norm or average emerged, along with the idea of the "norm" (Leonard J. Davis 38). The man who contributed most to the notion that the normal is necessary in all circumstances was the French statistician Adolphe Quetelet (1796–1847). Thus, normative discourses with the existence of average and norm that culminated in discourses resulted in the formation of the socially constructed term normalcy, which was just the marker or identifier or quantification of specific human behaviour and performance that was seen from the impartial and one-sided lens of average overlooking the other aspects of whole humanity thereby, creating the category of 'other' in discourses.

In addition to that, the thrust of normative discourse has subjected the category of femininity as a deviant. In normative discourses, since the early intellectuals' thoughts and

speeches, women have also been regarded as of low potential or lower human ability. From Plato and Aristotle, women in themselves have been depicted to be less of a human persona and more of having features of incompleteness and insufficiencies. When disability and womanhood intersect in a particular culture like India, where social constructivism, ableism and normative agencies majorly dictate and govern the quality of life of commoners, the result is the marginalisation of disabled women in multifold ways.

Normative culture subjugates women and women with disability in India, creating the generalisation that stereotypes mainly disabled women as a burden unfit for marriage and sexual relations. It is the normative discourses that create the perception in family and society that disability with femininity could be a total curse on a family where the individualistic potential of disabled women is supposed to be of no space. Social constructivism treats disability as an everlasting liability and attaches stigma to the process of care and attention. Without looking for provisions to incorporate disabled women and their needs in society, they are made to feel unfit for society for life. As a result, many disabled women, being prone to societal exclusion and stigmatisation, reach to the brim of committing suicide to end their suffering and their families from everlasting care.

Literary representation of disability has been dealt with negative images, creating the perception of disability as a liability and is met with the attitude of mockery. Apart from that, the individual voices that could be an authentic depiction of disabled women and their experiences of navigating the embodied disability in a society that is mainly patriarchal and ableist in nature are majorly missing because of the constant consumption of normative discourse and power dynamics of body politics. Pertaining to the dearth of articulation of disabled women's voices that have been less addressed by Indian Feminists and Disability Movements in India, the breakthrough is seen coming through the life writing of disabled women. Life writing or life narrative has the potential to mirror the factual authenticity of the experience of womanhood with their disability, and the literature qualifies to be the resistant literature in the perspective of breaking the stereotypes and canonical myths that subjugate the identity of disabled women.

This research article analyses one such autobiography, Malini Chib's *One Little Finger*(2011), which challenges the hierarchy of normative discourses by presenting the counter-narrative in the form of autobiography. The text unsettles the societal belief in normative discourse and presents an alternative spectacle of viewing and rethinking the identity of disabled

people and disabled women. Disability studies have recently emerged in India, especially in literary evaluation. As a result, discourse analyses of disability literature are inadequately available in Indian academic discourses from a societal perspective.

Literature Review

Disability, in general, has been mainly understood from medical lineage, a term that suggests 'lack' and 'impairment', which suggests some cure for fixing it. The treatment of being considered 'atypical' and 'abnormal' drives its history from the constructs of norm, normalcy and normativity. In his work *Discipline and Punish*(1979), Michael Foucault unfolds the mystery of body politics, stating that power operates over certain bodies where their bodies are subjected, regulated and controlled. Foucault's ideas appealed a great deal to disability studies, which was considered to be seminal work from the perspective of disability studies. Foucault's concept of 'biopower' in his famous work *The History of Sexuality*(1976) explores the power of the state-imposed on bodies, which are regulated by institutions and norms set for health, sexuality, and productivity. As a result of normative discourse, disability and gender of women have been regarded as deviant from the norm, resulting in ableism and sexism. In India, disability has been mainly understood from the medical model as well as from the charity model. They believe in the theory of Karma and assign stereotypical labels to disabled and disabled women where their sexuality is assumed to be absent pertaining to the normative opinions regarding sexuality and gender. Judith Butler's theory of 'Gender performativity', on the other hand, challenges societal norms of gender performance, which, according to her, are constructed on normative ideals of society, which could be challenged by non-conforming to societal norms in her work *Gender Trouble*(1990). In addition to that, Rosemary Thomson's *Extraordinary Bodies: Figuring Physical Disability in American Culture and Literature*(1997) came with a feminist disability perspective, suggesting that patriarchy dictates the life of non-disabled women by sexual objectification, whereas ableism turns disabled women into asexual objectification, implying denial of their sexual rights and desires.

On the other hand, the Critical Discourse Analyses as an approach to the study text that examines the role of language not only depicting power relations and social discourses that are akin to social normative sentiments was chiefly propounded by Norman Fairclough in the late 1980s and Fairclough believes that discourse analysis of the same language of a text has the

potential of subverting the normative power centric ideologies of society. Ruth Wodak, Teun A. Van Dijk, and Gunther Kress are the other critical theorists of developing different discourse analysis approaches. However, Leonard J. Davis pioneered the disability discourse analysis in his work *Enforcing Normalcy*(2014), where he challenges the normative social constructions that assert the power imposition of the constructed idea of normalcy in society, art and literature. Anita Ghai has written an article in the journal *Hypatia* titled “Disabled Women: An Excluded Agenda of Indian Feminism” (2002), where she states that Indian disabled women have been neglected by both Indian Feminist Movements and Indian Disability Movements. *Rethinking Disability Identity*(2015) by Anita Ghai is an Indian analysis of disability and feminity where Ghai states that in a particular culture like India, disability intersecting with feminity is supposed to be the utmost liability where women’s life gets doubly marginalised. *Interrogating Disability in India: Theory and Practice*(2016), an edited book by Nandini Ghosh, presents a sociological study to understand the discourses of gender and disability in Indian culture. *Discourses on disability* (2023), an edited book by Anju Sosan George, contains a multidisciplinary approach to understand disability from the Indian point of view. In recent years, some life writing has emerged from the Indian disabled community, articulating voices and exhibiting their experiences. Apart from that, very few theses have been conducted on life narratives of disabled women in India to explore the semantics of disability, such as Savitha A R’s thesis on Shodhganga, “The Resonance of Resurgence: Reflections on the Creative Realms of the Disabled” (2018), where in chapter third-‘Whimpers Beyond the Walls, deals with the life of Malini Chib, stating that technology played a significant role in Chib’s inclusion and the treatment of West helped Malini to get empowered as compared to Indian nation where she would have been still struggling to find her sense of identity. A few scholarly works examine the life story of Malini Chib. Vishal Singh’s 2018 research paper, “One Little Finger: An Outcry for Inclusive Society,” explores how the East and West treat disabilities, while Aswini S. T.’s 2019 research paper, “Technology as a Companion in Overcoming Disability in Malini Chib’s One Little Finger,” focuses on how Malini uses technology to communicate with the outside world.

Research Gap

There is a significant lack of disability literature in India that authentically represents disabled women and articulates their voices against societal normative constructions and

ableism. The available scholarship in India from the perspective of literary discourse analysis of disability life narratives is insufficient. Most of the understanding and research to explore the domain of disability has been done primarily from a medical perspective, followed by sociological studies. However, literary research to explore the domain of disability is significantly lacking in comparison to other areas of research, and there is a dearth of research challenging normativity.

Discourse Analysis of Malini Chib's *One Little Finger*(2011)

Critical discourse analysis as a method of Disability studies states how language and cultural connotations penetrate disability as a constructed identity. According to Davis, the idea attached to a normalised body that has been represented in art, literature, and language for a long time has invited several theories to be formulated to rethink the body. However, the body has been rethought in terms of gender, race, and sexuality as queer but hardly rethought for disability (142). *One Little Finger*(2011), the autobiography about Malini Chib, a cerebral palsy patient and an Indian disability rights activist, has written the book by one little finger, which took her two years of consistent typing. This act could be least imagined in normative discourse, that a cerebral palsy patient's body could be capable of writing and finding a space to articulate and is mentally sound enough to process things around and express a counterargument against societal construct. In the text, one witnesses Chib's strong arguments and challenges to the societal concept of normalcy that continuously excludes people with disability when compared to them. Chib advocates for the free development and acceptance of the real identity of each disabled person, where she believes society needs to look at them beyond their body. As Rosemary Thomson states, disability as a factor and as the determiner terminates the individual sense of identity of a person who has any form of impairment of disability (12). The ability in normative discourses becomes the critical determiner of any human existence, "Ability is the ideological baseline by which humanness is determined. The lesser the ability, the lesser the human being" (Tobin Seibers 10).

The autobiography begins with the first chapter, "Proving the Doctors Wrong." The title suggests that whatever condition and position Chib has achieved was contrary to the medical definition of her impairment. The writing book asserts and endorses the view that a cerebral palsy patient has a sense of individuality, merit, potential, emotions and desires. The life

narrative articulates the attitude of Indian doctors towards disability, stating that she would remain a ‘vegetable’ all her life. The non-appreciative and disappointing attitude towards any improvement and growth in Chib’s life gets amplified in the autobiography, where she states the doctor’s reluctance to engage in her medical intervention, “I would be a vegetable and nothing could be done for me. The doctors confidently told them that the damage to my brain was irreversible” (Chib 5). Disability in terms of medical connotations works from the ‘doctor gaze’ level, where the body becomes subjected to medical labelling. As a result of it, the individual identity of the disabled body becomes subjugated and oppressed. Chib’s experience with the medical team was a nightmare as, in her life narrative, she expressed her apprehensions about encountering the medical team in India, which, according to her, was very restrictive in thought and procedure to deal with a person with a disability. She expresses their insensitive approach in dealing with her as if she were a non-living being, having no thought process and emotions:

“We were home to Bombay from England filled with thoughts of how getting back home was going to be, but were in for a rude shock...to begin with...they poked and examined me as if I did not feel any pain...The paramedical staff treated me as if I did not have ears or could not understand. To them, I was a non-thinking person who needed fixing and fitting into the mould of being normal. I hated whole experience” (16).

In the normative discourses, disabled persons, and especially disabled girls, are supposed to remain dependent on care and are treated as a liability. In contrast, inner worth and potential are supposed to be least explored in a normative-centric society. Chib becomes conscious of such a normative atmosphere, and throughout the text, she is seen as self-introspecting about her sense of identity. She is consistently musing and calling for her sense of identity to resurrect, which otherwise has been considered dead by society.

“I began questioning myself. Did I have my own personality? Was I just another disabled girl who needed things done for her? I knew that I was different and trapped in a dysfunctional body, but did others realise I had a spirit and a mind separate from this body?... Did they consider thinking that my desires were just the same as theirs?... I eventually realised that I must be determined to fight. I would show them that, except for my body, I was just like them. I was not going to give up” (54-55).

Women in Indian countries are generally marked in ancient history as unequal to men and are supposed to be controlled and regulated in specific ways. The roles fixed for women are

nurturing, caring, and mothering. Paradoxically, women with disability are believed to be liabilities that cannot become nurturers but instead need nurturing. Analysing the ancient textual role of women in Indian culture, it explicitly states:

“Brahmanism to deal with this apparent dilemma was the classification of women according to their reproductive abilities, a classification which served to distinguish the normative from the ‘deviant’ woman. In this scheme, the mother was the procreatrix and as such was accorded the highest status. Woman as the mother thus became the primary normative category” (Ujjayini Ray 2).

Women in India are directed by cultural semiotics of behaviour. However, they are marginal when compared to men. Still, when they have to retain their femininity in terms of normativity, they yet need to toe in line with the cultural ableism and patriarchal dictations that would qualify them as normal.

“Women are forced to be aware of the form and appearance of their bodies in terms of size, shape, weight, skin colour and associated characteristics. As the ideal embodied femininity is linked with social acceptability, to have a feminine body – a body socially constructed through the appropriate practices—is most crucial to a woman’s sense of herself as a female sexually desiring and desirable subject”(qtd.inGhosh130).

Sexuality as a topic in India is still taboo, and to realise one’s sexuality in a heteronormative space like India is only possible by following the cultural norm of marriage, where one person gets a partner, and it is where the person realises their sexuality through a life partner. Owing to the normative discourse, the role of marriage and simultaneously the need to have sexuality or romantic intimacy is only possible for non-disabled women that too through marriage, whereas disabled women can’t even dream of sexuality as they are considered to be asexual in ableist connotations. Malini Chib has thwarted this assumption through her life narrative, where she boldly puts her point that as a disabled woman, one also has sexual desires, and disability cannot exclude oneself from realising one’s sexuality. In an article, Malini wrote:

“The word sex and disability don’t go together, can disabled people have sex? *Tauba tauba!* A topic best not mentioned. Even though I have been brought up in a westernised, liberated family and social strata-the topic has rarely been brought up with me. Most people think that if they start the conversation, they will hurt my feelings. Why does the topic sex frighten everyone when it comes to disabled people?” (qtd. in Tarshi41).

When a woman is disabled, her condition is doubly marginalised, and she is further distanced from the ‘other’ position of ‘other’ women. Therefore, disability with intersection to women neglects the sexual needs of women. However, women with disability are at high risk of getting sexually assaulted and are vulnerable to violence.

“All over the world, women and girls with disability face a heightened risk of sexual violence. In India they face additional barriers in accessing justice at every level from reporting and interacting with police, to getting medical care and navigating the judicial process, to finally obtaining the compensation” (Namita Bhandare).

In terms of discourse on sexuality and disability, the non-acceptance of the sexuality of disabled persons might draw its inputs from the very notion of normativity where eugenics and normative assumptions, according to Davis, have common interests and both propagated the same ableist notions. Davis, in his work, *The End of Normal*(2018), discusses the normative discourse of sexuality and states that:

“Galton devised ogive or the notion of quintiles because in actuality he was not promoting normality in the sense of being average—since that could also be another name for mediocrity. Rather, he was promoting eugenic betterment of the human race by encouraging the mating of people who had a kind of enhanced normality—which I have called “hypernormality”(2).

Therefore, the idea behind not mating disabled people was to put an end to the genetically inherited disability in the fetus. Though Feminist movements clamoured against the abortion of babies on the grounds of sex determination when the same fetus gets aborted in terms of clinically detected disability, no question gets raised. Similarly, if the Feminist movement raises its voice against the sexual objectification of non-disabled women, it fails to look at the sexual needs of disabled women. Ironically, the very movement that fights for women’s rights lags behind in addressing the needs of all women. If Feminists believe that women with no disability can be subject to the ‘male gaze’ but simultaneously, they fail to understand that women with a disability can become prey to the ‘male gaze’, ‘doctor gaze’ and the ‘normative gaze’ of society.

Through the discourse analysis of the text, the difference in attitude and acceptance towards disability in cultural variations of East and West gets amplified in Chib’s voice. In a Western nation, the response is appreciative and welcoming of disability. “I was judged to be above

average, showing initiative and imagination. My IQ was 120... A graphic description commonly used to describe children like me in England was apparently 'an intelligent mind with a disobedient body' (Chib 9). The author has witnessed the two cultures that defined her experience of her disability. Malini, as a disabled woman, has confronted the lack of sensitisation in India and has boldly exposed the ableism present in the cultural discourses of India, which impacts and affects the emotional state of being of a disabled person. Simultaneously, Chib speaks of inaccessibility in India for disabled people who were not even counted in any social policy-making and were absent in all developmental projects. The text repeatedly stresses the consistent emphasis on imposed normalcy and the consistent comparison with framed normalcy: "She often argued with my father and wondered why her beautiful baby was considered not normal..." (4)

"I was not mentally handicapped. In fact, I was normal and above average"...(9)

"They all treated me normally and spent quality time..." (12)

"This to me is a shame because a second child brings normality to everyone's lives"...(14)

"Nikhil was normal.."(14)

"I was above normal"..(15)

"I was a non-thinking person who needed fixing and fitting into the mould of being normal..." (16).

"The chance to chatter like normal children"...(23).

"if I was in a normal school, I would have seen my normal peers interact...this worldwide debate about whether children with severe disability should be exposed to the normal world?"...(25).

The life narrative, roughly estimated to be mentioned over twenty times, compares and constructs Malini's life with the normative world, suggesting that the imposed hegemony of normative power dynamics frames most of the understanding and discourses related to the quality of life, identity and gender in society. "The mythos of the normal body has created the conditions for the emergence and subjection of the disabled body, the raced body, the gendered body, the classed body, the geriatric body—and so on" (Davis 2). The dissemination of normalcy as a construct through English literature and language contributes to the ongoing ableism, patriarchy, sexism, racism, and chauvinistic ideologies causing exclusion and marginalisation. "Beth E. Ferri in her paper titled 'Disability Life Writing and the Politics of Knowing', talks about contemporary disability life writings, which have the potential of

critiquing oppressive ideologies and shaking the foundation of the normative or the ‘fixed center’” (qtd.in Reshma 34).

In the text, Chib also advocates her desire and need to be included in mainstream schools. At the same time, the segregation of disabled students is another act of marginalising them from free growth and development. Therefore, Chib’s autobiography reflects the need for accessibility and inclusion. The writer discloses one incident in which she was invited to a party for her friend’s birthday. Embarrassingly, she was made to sit alone at a table for lunch while the rest of her friends joined the crowd at another place, consuming food on their plates while chitchatting. Malini was just invited for courtesy’s sake, and no concern was given to what she could feel by speaking the language before her that didn’t bother her. The ableist expressions are embedded in the text, with significant priority given to normalcy, ability, and able-bodies that reflect the zeitgeist of normative society. Chib went on a prom night with her friends. “We began dancing in a group. I danced with my crutches. After a little while one of the organisers came up and said rather patronisingly: ‘Why don’t you sit down, you are bound to fall. You can’t dance with crutches’...Human beings are averse to and not used to crutch dancing” (65). Chib also shows her concern against the undue and unjust charity attitude of society towards disabled persons, the continuous emphasis on normality and continuous surfing back to normalcy for the sustenance of identity in cultural dialogues is counter-dialogued by Malini :

“I do not want to be normal! I feel just like everyone else, yet that does not seem to be the case in the eyes of this society. Previously, I would have liked to have got married. That was a period of ‘normalisation’. I had to be normal. Foucault argues ‘*who is normal*’ and, ‘*who is disabled?*’ ‘*who decides normal and abnormal?*’. Are we conditioned by society in the definition of what is normal? Do we only see it from society’s in the definition of what is normal? Do we only see it from society’s perspective of normalisation? Or can the definitions evolve as time goes by to include everyone? Is everyone perfect?... ‘normal’ which I can never be or may not want to be, because I do not know what your ‘normal’ is. I know only *me*” (197-198).

Conclusion

Throughout the discourses of the text, normative dialogues and the imposition of normative ideology are found to be latent and embedded in the narrative. However, it becomes explicit that normativity as an ideology of hegemonic power imposition on certain bodies is a constructed

synthesis rather than an essential condition. Disability studies scholarship and the remarkable comeback in the form of life narratives from disabled women could provide a reality test that comes as a discourse of resistance. The life narrative of Malini qualifies as a discourse of resistance literature challenging normativity. It is hoped more academic research and life narratives will flourish in the future for building robust disability studies in India, leading to the inclusion and accessibility of Indian people with disability, especially women with any form of disability.

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