

REPRESENTATION OF DISABLED WOMEN IN THE WORKS OF BANKIMCHANDRA CHATTERJEE AND RABINDRANATH TAGORE

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An argument often presented in literary works is that in a traditional society any type of disability, be it physical, mental or visual, would make it difficult for the disabled person to survive in the world. In a patriarchal set-up, for example, being female is in itself a disability. This has been shown by Bankimchandra Chatterjee (1838-1894) in his novel *Rajani* (1877) and by Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1941) in his short story *Subha* (1918). In this essay, I shall try to explore the struggle of the visually impaired protagonist of *Rajani* in a male-dominated society. I will attempt to draw parallels and show contrasts between Rajani and other characters in the novel. In this process I will also discuss Chatterjee's view about disabled people. By juxtaposing their (Chatterjee's and Tagore's) representations of disability in *Rajani* and *Subha*, it is interesting to focus on the individual formulations of the disabled subject in their works.

Chatterjee's novel was published in book form in 1877, although it had been serialized in *Bangadarshan* four years previously (1873-74). The protagonist of *Rajani* narrates her visually challenged life in the first person. Hence, the text directly explores the subjectivity of an impaired woman, in addition to and as opposed to the construction of the same in narrations of other characters like Sachindrababu, Amarnath and Lavangalata. Sisir Kumar Das in his book *The Artist in Chains: The Life of Bankimchandra Chatterjee* observes, "The character of Rajani was suggested by the blind girl Nidia of the *Last Days of Pompeii* by Lord Lytton" (Das 92). Chatterjee gives voice to the disabled characters from the very beginning, when in the opening chapter Rajani asks the reader whether she or he can understand her misery. Thus, she raises the voice of disabled people. In this way, it could be argued, that 'normal' people can only sympathize, they cannot really 'empathize' with the sufferings of the disabled. Chatterjee makes it a universally acknowledged fact that no person

can experience the pain of another in its entirety when his central protagonist Rajani says, “Our happiness and misery cannot be compared to your happiness and misery. We and you belong to a different order of reality. You cannot understand our happiness or our miseries.” (Chatterjee, 119)¹

Like other female protagonists of Chatterjee’s novels, Rajani is portrayed as being very beautiful but her visual impairment undermines her beauty, as conventionally, it is the eyes that are praised by poets and writers to describe the beauty of a woman. Similarly, emotions (love among them) are also believed to be expressed and communicated primarily through the eyes. The logical conclusion of such thinking would be that visually challenged people are therefore ‘handicapped’ when it comes to expressing and feeling emotions. The idea is that disabled people are passive receivers rather than givers in emotional exchanges. However, as Bhabatosh Datta in his essay “Rajani: A Novel by Bankimchandra” argues:

The awakening of a young girl blind from birth and the transformation of her feelings into love and gratitude may naturally suggest that Bankim wanted to examine to what extent love was dependent on a sense of beauty . . . To what extent was Rajani’s attraction towards Sachindra shaped by beauty? Bankim was certain of one thing; Desire for love is a natural human inclination. But does that love germinate from what eyes see? Rajani’s feelings for Sachindra were not shaped by what she saw, but from her touch. Attraction could take shape through physical beauty but equally it could be born of touch. Love is sensual. Rajani’s young heart, eager to love came alive at Sachindra’s touch. (Datta 7-8)²

In this novel, the writer portrays a blind girl’s feelings of love and beauty in a vivid manner. This portrayal, to some extent, subverts social conceptions about blind people. We witness Rajani trying to conceptualize and define beauty according to her own notions. She tries to understand the world at her own terms, by comparing for instance, the senses of hearing and sight. She says, “You feel happiness by looking at faces while I experience pleasure by hearing words” (Chatterjee, 119). In the same essay, Datta discusses Rajani’s perception to judge beauty in this way:

The girl who was blind from birth created a world of her own. As she couldn’t see herself, the world of her creation was not of visual perception. Her happiness, her sorrow, her love were articulated through her sense of touch and sound. She loved the child Bamacharan as she loved the monument in her imagination. Her love for these could not be compared with an intellectual attraction. But she made a religion of her desire to love. The English poet had said, ‘love is their whole existence’

and Bankim begins Rajani's story with a description of this unusual love. (Datta, 7-8)

In the essay, Datta informs about what Chatterjee says in the Preface to the novel, "Rajani's character has been based upon those intellectual and moral theories that the novel purports, to represent, as it was felt that the character of a visually challenged young girl would help enhance them. Chatterjee did not make clear those intellectual and moral theories" (Datta 7), In the Preface to the novel, Chatterjee seems to challenge the social norms as we see that Rajani, instead of being dependent on others is self-dependent and it is her family which is dependent on her economically. She makes flower garlands that her father sells them door to door.

Rajani demonstrates that visually challenged people have a different way of experiencing reality. She describes that she feels pleasure by touching and smelling the flowers. When she falls in love with Sachindra, she longs to hear his voice each day. She longs for just a word from him, lovelorn and unable to understand the nature of her blossoming love, her sense of hearing is integral to a sensuous experience of the world for her. Detailed descriptions by other characters are the other means of experiencing the world for her which ignite her imagination. After listening to her father's description of the Victoria Monument, Rajani says, "I got married to the monument in my imagination" (Chatterjee, 120). One can see in her imagination of the Monument the qualities that she desires in her husband. She describes the Monument as "high, determined and stable" (Chatterjee, 119). Rajani further exclaims, "Who is stronger than my husband?" (Chatterjee, 120) After her first meeting with Sachindra, she desires the experience of sight. This reflects Rajani's desire to compare and judge her sense of hearing against her sense of sight. From Nature she demands her right to see. She addresses Mother Earth and says, "What do you look like? The infinite power you have beyond our thought, strange, unique living beings, what does all this look like? That which people describe as beautiful, what does it look like? Countless natural beings roam on you, tell me mother, what are they like? Show me, mother!" (Chatterjee 123)

The nineteenth-century Indian society bears a close resemblance to the Victorian society. As was in nineteenth-century England, marriage was the ultimate destiny of an Indian woman too. Beauty and property were necessary qualifications for women to establish themselves in the matrimonial market. Rajani possesses no property and her beauty is rendered useless owing to her blindness. In the initial part of the novel, Lavanglata's and Rajani's relationship is

determined by the former's charity towards the latter. When Rajani sells her flower-garland to Lavanglata, Rajani is over-paid for her labour. Though Rajani dissuades Lavanglata repeatedly from doing this, her protestations are playfully dismissed time and again.

Lavanglata often ordered flowers from me. She always gave me two rupees for flowers worth twenty-five paise because I was blind. Taking the garland, Lavang would abusively say, 'Why do you give me such a bad garland?' But while paying she would give me a rupee instead of a pice. When I would return the rupee to her, she would say 'This is not mine!' When I would insist she would curse and shoo me away. If I would mention charity she would try to hit me (Chatterjee, 121).

In this novel, the visually challenged protagonist-narrator uses a sensory metaphor in the sense of touch. For instance, when Sachindra touches Rajani's chin to examine her eyes, she compares the touch of his hand to that of the flowers. "This touch was like that of a flower....It seemed as if flowers were all around me, flowers on my forehead, flowers on my feet, flowers in my soul..." (Chatterjee, 123). This metaphor is also significant due to the erotic desire it connotatively awakens in Rajani. It points out that such desire is not only a pertinent state for those with eyesight but also one which animates the differently abled.³

Lavanglata and Sachindra initially try to arrange Rajani's marriage as a social necessity and out of a moral compulsion to bring stability to her life. However, by the very fact that this is revealed to be the case by the writer, it is necessarily brought in ironic view of the reader. This irony is further enhanced by the narrative's revelation that the real owner of the house, Ram Sadaiv, inhabits with his family. Not only is it accentuated, but it is given a murky twist by the end. When Sadaiv learns that Rajani is the rightful owner of the house, Lavanglata plots a matrimonial alliance between Rajani and Sachindra. Not only as a lower class woman but also as a visually disabled one, Rajani is dehumanized and objectified, viewed either as a victim or as a means to acquire property. Not once do others view her as an assertive, independent woman who works to make ends meet. Her disability is noted as akin to poverty and vulnerability even requiring poetic intervention to aid her towards self-realization.

Amarnath, another narrative voice in *Rajani*, constructs himself as a victim of society. His parents are no more and he has been unlucky in love. To fill the vacuum in his life, he resorts to charity work. In Kashi, he hears of Rajani and her family. He begins to search for the girl, in order to rescue her from a cruel fate. Rajani eventually

inherits the property she is entitled to, because of Amarnath's efforts. Amarnath also wishes to marry Rajani, although this compulsion arises from compassion rather than love. Rajani reciprocates his feeling insofar as she wishes to repay his kindness by accepting his offer of marriage. It is Lavanglata who severs this relationship and its possibilities, for her own selfish interests. Lavanglata accuses Amarnath of being compassionate to Rajani only because of Rajani's property. Lavanglata also reminds Amarnath of his efforts to gain her love against her wish. Lavanglata also manages to arrange a matrimonial alliance between Rajani and Sachindra. Rajani is seen as incapable of taking her own decisions. Her decisions have been influenced by Lavanglata's advice.

Sachindra's attitude towards Rajani is based on compassion. In the novel, he tries to arrange a bridegroom for Rajani. But it is obvious that he wants to keep himself away from Rajani. For Sachindra, trying to bring stability to Rajani's life is an act born out of charity but when circumstances compel him to marry Rajani, he hesitates because of her blindness. On the other hand, Rajani is deeply in love with Sachindra. She tries to recreate him in her imagination but she cannot express her feelings to Sachindra for two reasons – first, because she is a woman and it is presumed that a woman can hardly express her feelings in front of a man; second, because her visual disability becomes an obstacle for her to express her feelings. It is the psychology of disabled people that they always hesitate to express their feelings in front of those whom they like. They always think about the result of this expression. Throughout the novel, Rajani is in a psychological dilemma – she wonders why Sachindra should marry a poor and disabled girl like her. If the hermit had not cured Rajani's eyesight, Sachindra would not have married her. In reality, although people help each other, their reasons or motives may be different. It is not necessary that someone helps a person because he or she loves him or her. For Lavanglata, property is a very important and therefore she ignores Rajani's blindness. Towards the end of the novel, Lavanglata shows her concern for Rajani's eyesight because Rajani is about to become a member of Lavanglata's family. In the initial chapters of the novel, only Sachindra tries to explore whether Rajani's blindness is curable or not, but does not show any outward concern.

In nineteenth-century India, women's dependence on their male counter parts was in itself a disability. Therefore, it can be argued that Rajani's victimization is threefold. Meenu Bhambani, in her essay "Societal Responses to Women with Disabilities in India" in the

book *Disability and Society: A Reader* (2009), edited by Renu Addlakha,⁴ reflects on the condition of those women who are triply inferior:

It would be a cliché to state that women form the ‘marginal component’ of society. We suggest that, within this component, there is a subgroup of disabled women which is even more marginalized. What is ironical in the case of this group is that it is virtually ignored, not only by their able-bodied gender but also by disabled men. Despite their significant numbers, women and girls with disabilities, especially in the developed countries of the ESCAP region, remain hidden and silent, their concerns unknown and their rights overlooked. Throughout the region, in urban and rural communities alike, they have to face triple discrimination because of their disability, gender and economic status. Prejudice prevails even within each of the three categories. Among women, disabled women are seen as inferior, resulting in isolation and marginalization. They become the poorest of the poor. (Addlakha et al, 233)

In other words, Rajani is ‘disabled’ in terms of womanhood, blindness and poverty. Men in a patriarchal society try to seduce women and succeed too. And blind women are more vulnerable. The story of Rajani and Hiralal is an acute example for this argument. At the advice of his sister Champa, Hiralal tries to seduce Rajani. Rajani is against the matrimonial alliance arranged for her by Sachindra and Lavanglata. In order to avoid this alliance, her only option is to run away with Hiralal. On the boat, Hiralal tries to compel Rajani to marry him, a proposal which she firmly rejects. Hiralal abandons her in an unknown place where a stranger from a lower caste tries to rape her but Amarnath rescues her. From this incident, it can be said that it is very difficult for women to find security in unknown places. And this task becomes far more difficult for a visually challenged woman like Rajani as she cannot even walk a few steps without asking for directions. Rajani feels helpless and tries to commit suicide.

Chatterjee’s novel featuring a blind protagonist is comparable to Rabindranath Tagore’s representation of a speech-impaired girl in *Subha*. Chatterjee’s Rajani’s condition is parallel to Tagore’s Subhashini. But a close reading of the short story enables the readers to realize that Subhashini’s condition is more precarious than Rajani’s. Subha is mute and it is ironical that her situation is exactly the opposite of her name’s meaning. “When the girl was named Subhashini, ‘she who speaks sweetly,’ who could have known that she would be dumb?” (Tagore, 104)⁵ It could be argued that mute people face many more problems compared to the visually challenged. Visually challenged people can express their feelings unlike the mute. This statement is applicable in the context of Subha,

“Many people do not realize that one who does not speak might nevertheless feel, and so they would express their anxiety regarding the girl’s future to her face” (Tagore, 104). However, Subha expresses her feelings through facial gestures. “The language of her eyes who has had no other language since birth than the expression of her face, is limitless, generous, of unplumbed depths” (Tagore, 105). Tagore’s ideology is critical of the society which he inhabits. The writer appreciates the depth of Subha’s gestures by allotting her gestures a place superior to language. “What we express in language has largely to be constructed by our own efforts, somewhat like a translation; it is not always adequate, and though lack of skill may often be wrong. But dark eyes do not have to translate anything” (Tagore, 104). Here, it is worth mentioning that literary representations of the differently abled often champion the sensory experience of one disability at the expense of another — as the emphasis on the eloquence of Subha’s dark eyes here suggests.

Disability impacts Subha’s psyche by depleting her sense of her worth and thus, discouraging her from social interaction. Her peers too, are largely afraid of attempting to communicate with her. Despite her parents’ regard for Subha, even they see her as a dead weight on their minds and hearts. She comes to understand, “from childhood that she had been born in her father’s house as a curse sent by God” (Tagore, 104). Subha’s mother comes to view this disability as some personal shortcoming on her own part. Here, Tagore gives a vivid picture of the modern Bengali society. Although they appear to be modern but certainly they are conservative. In my view, not only disabled people but the society in which they live, also thinks that they are a curse on the society.

As everyone knows, social status and beauty are the qualifications required of a woman in the matrimonial market. However, even beauty and good social standing are not enough in the case of Subha. As the initial part of this short story informs, Subha’s elder sisters are married but she remains single because of her disability of speechlessness. Tagore notes, “The youngest now remained like a silent weight on her parents’ hearts” (Tagore, 104). After much tribulation, when her parents are finally able to find a match for her, they must do so by deceiving the prospective groom. Once Subha’s muteness is found out about in her marital home, the beauty for which she was earlier recognized is no longer valued. This physical disability then goes on to disqualify her in every arena of social life.

The trouble as Tagore tries to suggest is not with Subha but with the societal modes of understanding her condition. While this is merely

suggested at the outset of the story, it is made increasingly blatant as *Subha* progresses. Of the rest, her parents represent the kindest members in the society for *Subha*. Somehow, they manage to find a groom for *Subha* but it is only possible by duping him about *Subha*'s condition. As a daughter, *Subha* is a burden on her parents, and as a mute daughter, especially so. The manner in which her wedding takes place, where even *Subha* is not told about the upcoming nuptials by her parents, suggests that they wish to fulfill their duty sooner rather than later. She is not treated with respect nor does the story suggest any sadness that the parents feel at the prospect of her marriage. Rather, "Her mother scolded her repeatedly lest the girl's weeping leave her eyes swollen and spoils her looks" (Tagore, 109).

Subha's closeness to nature is similar to that of *Rajani*'s. Her situation is likened to that of the mute cows that are her closest friends. The relationships she forges with nature are selflessly generous when compared to the exploitative and demanding relations she has with her family. She is unable to share a satisfying relationship with anyone else, especially in her marriage. The story suggests that after her wedding, she is overlooked much more than she has been so far in her parental home. While the nature and society in which she grew up could understand her mute language, after marriage she is alienated from any source of communicative comfort. This is not only suggested by the narrative voice, but it is also revealed by the actual closure of *Subha*'s communication with people around her in her husband's home. This becomes clear when the narrator comments, "In the young girl's ever-silent heart, an endless inexpressible weeping reverberated, but no one except God could hear it" (Tagore, 109).

After a close study of both Chatterjee's and Tagore's texts, it could be argued that compared to the former, Tagore's portrayal of *Subha* is closer to reality. In Chatterjee's novel, the female protagonist acquires a place in society only when her eyesight is miraculously restored. Chatterjee also portrays societal reality in the context of disabled people but this portrayal to some extent is dominated by its near 'happily ever after' fairy-tale ending. Most probably, unlike Tagore, Chatterjee would have explored the probability that unlike western countries, in India, many disabilities are curable through the use of indigenous herbal remedies. However, in present-day India there are many visually disabled people whose eyesight is irrevocably lost. In the context of *Rajani*, this probability is rendered problematic by Chatterjee's own sense of poetic justice. Such a strategy on the part of the author, in addition, blunts social critique—reconciling

the readers to the status quo. In my opinion, Chatterjee would not have given space to the issue of disability. According to him, marriage, property and the woman's role in marriage are the major issues which he has portrayed in most of his works. Therefore, the disability of Rajani is not the only issue that has been discussed in detail. Tagore, however, by concluding his story in a realistic manner, authenticates the edge of his critical apparatus. The readers of Tagore's short story are made to confront their prejudices head-on instead of being reconciled to unpleasant social realities by the use of improbable turns of the plot.

However, on the other hand, Rajani as a character is stronger than Subha who is more vulnerable. Unlike Subha, in the initial chapters of the novel, Rajani is poor and blind. Her status is very close to the social norms. In present times, society assumes that any disability—either mental or physical—is a part of poverty. According to society, only money is the source which can overcome a disability. But this stereotypical conception is arbitrary. In this world, there are many disabled people who belong to rich families and still have to face discrimination in society. Therefore, it would be unfair to judge or to draw a connection between disability and poverty. But many authors have described disabled characters from poor families. In addition to Chatterjee and Tagore, one can see these examples in Munsii Premchand's *Rangbhoomi* (1924), Srilal Shukla's *Raag Darbari* (1968) and Phanishwar Nath Renu's *Maila Anchal* (1954). But in my view, there are many visually challenged people whose economic status is high. For instance, Ved Mehta was the first visually challenged Indian who went to USA with the support of Pt. Nehru, the first Prime Minister of India. Mehta has described his journey in his autobiography, *Face to Face* (1957). Dharmvir Bharati's character Dhritrashtra from *Andha Yug* (1954) also belongs to a high social status.

Through a close study of *Rajani* and *Subha* one can deduce that, although, Rajani is the protagonist of Chatterjee's novel and through her the novelist brings to light the difficulties faced by women with visual disabilities. It is obvious that Chatterjee's main concern in the novel was to address the gender inequality that was prevalent in nineteenth-century India. Tagore's *Subha* possesses many a poetic quality but at the same time it runs closer to reality. Subha gets married with her disability and she continues to suffer even after her marriage.

Notes

1. All the textual quotations of *Rajani* have been translated by me from the Hindi translation of the novel done by S. N. Mukherjee originally written in Bengali.
2. All the quotations from this essay have been translated by Saswati Sengupta from Bengali to English. This translation remains unpublished.
3. I have used the terms 'visually challenged or disabled' in order to highlight the specific nature of individual characters' disability. In addition, the term also connotes the disability these characters face in social relations due to their physical impairment.
4. *Disability and Society: A Reader*, edited by Renu Addlakha, Stuart Blume, Patrick Devlieger, Osamu Nagase and Myriam Winance, Orient BlackSwan, 2009.
5. All the textual quotes from *Subha* have been translated by Supriya Chaudhuri.

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