REPRESENTATION OF VISUALLY IMPAIRED CHARACTERS IN VED MEHTA'S AUTOBIOGRAPHY FACE TO FACE

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Abstract

This paper tries to discuss and critically analyse the portrayal of disabled characters in society by disabled authors, especially in their relationship with blindness. To analyse the above, Ved Mehta's Face to Face (1957) is the primary source for this paper. Through textual analysis, the condition of visually impaired people in colonial and postcolonial India is discussed in this article. This paper also examines how blind people in a third-world country face cultural difficulties amongst American blind people. The 'sickness narratives' experiences go against any form of essential universalism in an effort to show the particularity and uniqueness of the experience. An intentional act is a disabled autobiography. Such themes and concepts have also been discussed in this research paper.

Key Words: Ved Mehta, Disability, USA, Bombay, Colonial, cultural.

Introduction

Autobiographical literature by the disabled is well known. The present essay deals with Indian writer Ved Mehta's autobiography Face to Face (1957), in which he chronicles his struggles with disability in the form of autobiographical work. His work reflects the contemporary society of his time and depicts the struggle of blind people for social uplift. This section also deals with the differences between India and the United States of America over the issue of blindness and how visually impaired people in a third-world country

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face cultural difficulties abroad. In the end, this paper also evaluates the present condition of differently-abled persons in India.

Mossman (2001), in his essay *Acts of Becoming: Autobiography, Frankenstein, and the Postmodern Body, discusses* the writing of autobiographies by disabled authors. He observes:

"An autobiography by a disabled person is an authentication of lived, performed experience; it is a process of making, of being able to 'translate knowing into telling'. Using the last two decades of criticism and theory as a map, disabled autobiography can be traced as a postmodern, postcolonial endeavour, for when disability writing constructs the particular self-definition it is attempting to narrate, it automatically resists repressive stereotypes at large and attempts to reclaim ownership of the body and the way the body is understood. A disabled autobiography is a conscious act of becoming." (p. 84)

The phrasing of Mossman's generalising definition of disability as "(re)production of disability" is found to be problematic. It gives the impression that writing about disability literally recreates that impairment on the page. On the other hand, various authors transcribe their experiences of being disabled in different ways. For instance, often the author may not be recording the experience of living with a with a disability as much as he is trying to articulate and actualize a project of social uplift for the physically challenged. By speaking about his or her importance and centrality as a disabled person in society, they sometimes portray things as they ought to be. The autobiography I discuss in this section is a case in point. These literary movements for social emancipation are motivated by an acceptance of disability, its limits, and its possibilities. As in the case of colonial, racial, caste, class, or gender exploitation, this consciousness is crucial in the context of disability and a prerequisite for the amelioration of any disadvantaged group. The life writings of Mehta reflect the mature awareness that they cannot change a long, stigma-ridden history, but at the same time, this difficult past becomes a tool in the struggle for better conditions.

In his essay, Mossman raises a number of questions about the textual phenomenon of writing, performing, or communicating disability. He asks:

"At the outset, my question is, 'What happens when a disabled individual writes herself?' What happens when the disabled person explains and articulates, through either writing or bodily practice, their disability? There have been an increasing number of theorists and researchers working in the field of disability studies who have attempted to construct answers to these kinds of questions. In doing so, what critics often discover is a need to expand the emerging field itself." (p. 83)

This paper will attempt to incorporate these questions into my reading of the autobiography. In the context of Ved Mehta's work, the paper will explore parallels and dissimilarities between the conditions of visually challenged people in India and the United States of America, as Mehta is now settled in the US. To some extent, the focus will also be on the views of a diasporic blind author about his motherland. Mehta has described in rich detail his childhood experiences of growing up in a world totally different from the sighted child's world. Even in everyday life, a person imagines or constructs the world according to their individual experience and sensibility. For instance, Mossman analyses Frankenstein in his essay in the context of his own disability. He writes:

"My body is a postmodern text. I have had sixteen major surgeries in thirty years, and I am about to have a kidney transplant. My left leg has been amputated, and I have only four fingers on one hand. I walk with a limp, and with each step, my left shoulder drops down lower than my right, which gives me an awkward, seemingly uncertain gait. My life has been in many ways a narrative typical of postmodern disability, a constant physical tooling and re-tooling, a life marked by long swings into and out of 'health' and 'illness', 'ability' and 'disability'. As I write this, I am in end-stage renal failure, with about 12 percent kidney function. My body is in jeopardy, running a race to transplantation, a race against dialysis, debilitating nausea, and ultimate mortality." (p. 80)

In Indian literature, Ajneya has also discussed multiple disabilities in the character of Khitin Babu through a short story of the same title. Khitin Babu is blind in one eye and does not have one leg or one arm. However, we perceive that the author is not quite successful in portraying the reality of multiple disabilities. At every stage, he has tried to show Khitin Babu happiness even in the worst of conditions, whereas the precarious reality of people with multiple disabilities is often far from pleasant.

In the opening chapter of Mehta's autobiography, he writes that the childhood of a blind person is spent quite differently than that of sighted people. Childhood is one of the most significant, exciting, and important stages of life. In his description of the childhood phase, Mehta mentions that the cause of his blindness was an attack of meningitis. He writes:

"In India, as elsewhere, every girl or boy has fond and warm memories of childhood, from the day he begins to talk to his mother and father in broken syllables. Invariably, a child learns and recognises the faces of his mother and father, of sisters and brothers who play with him constantly, or of the servants who prepare his meal or watch him play in a nursery strewn with knick-knacks and toys. He must also remember the rich colours of the butterflies and birds, which children everywhere always love to watch with open eyes. I must say because when I was three and a half, all those memories were expunged, and with the prolonged sickness (meningitis), I started living in a world of four senses—that is, a world in which colours and faces and light and darkness are unknown." (p. 15)

Meningitis is a common cause of non-congenital blindness and other health problems in India. As a blind child, Mehta also mentions that his blindness deprived him of things that are much valued in the sighted world:

"I started living in a universe where it was not the flood of sunshine streaming through the nursery window or the colours of the rainbow, a sunset, or a full moon that mattered, but the feel of the sun against the skin, the slow drizzling

sound of the spattering rain, the feel of the air just before the coming of the quiet night, the smell of the stubble grass on a warm morning." (p. 15).

The sensations described above are inhered in the intensity of the blind author's personal experience but can be attributed to the sensory perceptions and everyday reality of blind people everywhere. Since childhood, every blind person has become an object of excessive concern for their parents. According to Mehta's parents, blind people could only become beggars. This, in fact, is a reflection of the general perception that visually challenged people are only capable of earning their livelihood by presenting themselves as objects of pity. The character of Rang Bhoomi's protagonist, Soordas, is a fictitious example of this social stereotype. The raison d'être of such beliefs is that people in general imagine there are arbitrary limits to the capabilities of a blind person. Mehta says, *"A state of complete inaction followed my blindness. In part, this was due to the immediate shock of the illness, but more importantly, the impasse was caused by ignorance of the potentialities of a blind child, since the only blind people my parents saw were beggars." (p. 16).*

Renu Addlakha and Osamu Nagase, in the Introduction to Part 3 of Disability and Society: A Reader (2009), write:

"The fundamental assumption of the social model of disability is that impairment per se is not disabling, but it is the limitations imposed by society that give birth to multiple forms of disability. Indeed, given that diversity is the cornerstone of life, it is not individuals who are disabled but society that is disabling. "Disablism" is the term used to describe an ideology that systematically marginalises and isolates persons with disabilities through a range of social barriers: material, cultural, and psychological." (p. 195).

The concept of the deed or belief in 'karma' has been mentioned in Mehta's work. His mother, Mehta tells us, was a false optimist who believed that her son would get his eyesight back. Mehta speaks of various superstitious beliefs and practices related to blindness. Mehta's mother, after he went blind, went to several pandits to perform penance for her past sins so that her son might

regain his eyesight. The pandits duped her by prescribing various rituals and methods of atonement. The author also recounts that his parents' attitudes towards his blindness were a source of domestic conflict. For instance, his mother would try to keep her meetings with the pandits a secret from her sceptical husband. Mehta narrates an incident in which his father comes to know that Mehta's mother is giving him eye drops concocted by some quacks. He gets outraged and criticises her superstitious beliefs, saying that *"her superstitions far exceeded those of any village woman he had ever known"* (p. 17). This is evident in how disability intersects with popular beliefs in the supernatural and spiritual.

Mehta is fortunate to a large extent because his father has a more rational and scientific outlook compared to his mother, and he tries to experiment with the self-dependency of Mehta. In terms of economic status, Mehta is better off than many blind people, and this helps him achieve success with comparatively more ease. He struggles a lot but achieves success because of his high position in the social hierarchy.

Parents try to judge the reality of their fictitious optimism by testing their visually challenged child. Ved Mehta's description of his mother's little tests to gauge his eyesight is very close to reality. He also describes how he always tried to give satisfactory answers to his mother's tests.

"Every evening, she would hold her hand up before my face and ask me to tell her where it was. She used to shake her hand before me so that myriads of pores next to, below, and above my ears could feel her hand even when it was a foot away. The air currents helped me spot it. But she wasn't satisfied with this. She wanted me to tell her whether the light was on or off. When I failed this test, she was unhappy again, but I soon caught on and would listen for the click of the switch and then tell her. Sometimes she would flip the switch very rapidly time and again, and I would always count the clicks and give her the right answer." (p. 18).

Mehta's father attached much importance to education and made every effort to ensure that a good education was available for his son. Through his father's attempts to secure education for Mehta, we come to know about the conditions of blind people in colonial India. Education for blind people was extremely limited, and it was also difficult for such people to mingle with other non-disabled people. They were either a burden for schools or teased by their classmates. Thus, Mehta's father was also concerned about the social difficulties of his son.

Through an extensive study of literature on blindness, Mehta's father came to know that in India, blind people mostly grew up to be beggars or owners of pan/beedi shops. This made him all the more concerned for his son. Mehta finally joins the Dadar School for the Blind in Bombay. In great detail, he describes the educational conditions for the blind in India at that time. In Bombay and a few other cities, efforts were made to educate visually impaired people, but for blind people living in rural areas or smaller towns, attaining education was no less than a miracle. In the Dadar school, Mehta is in an advantageous position because of his father's influential position. The principal, Dr.r instance, he gets a better bed and is known as "the boy with the good bed and soft hands" (p. 25). Halder, treats him differently from other blind students. For instance, he gets a better bed and is known as "the boy with the good bed and soft hands" (p. 25). His father prohibited him from learning how to cane chairs, which is otherwise an important part of the curriculum for any student. In the character of Abdul, a boy in Mehta's dormitory, the resentment against Mehta gettingexists,al treatment is conspicuous. This resentment shows that a very strong socio-economic hierarchy exists even in the blind community.

It is tough for any disabled person to stay outside their own home. Compared to non-disabled people, they usually feel more homesick and ill at ease. Mehta portrays his homesickness thus:

"In the middle of the night, I woke up sobbing, and all the day's happenings came into focus. Pressing my face against the pillow, I cried silently. Then I

felt someone gingerly pull back the mosquito net. It was Doji. I clung to my pillow. I didn't want him to see me crying, but he gathered me up with the pillow. I was frightened; suppose Abdul or Bhaskar were to hear me? But Deoji carried me out of the dormitory and sat down on the steps. Clumsily, he rested me on the steps and asked me if he could do anything. He did not wait for an answer and started telling me about how he had felt when he first arrived there." (p. 25)

The autobiography goes on to tell readers that in colonial India, the Hindi version of Braille did not exist yet. Although Mehta starts learning Braille in English, he later faces problems for not being fluent in either reading or writing. Here, it is necessary to discuss the Braille language. There are only six dots in the Braille script, and all twenty-six letters of the English alphabet are composed using these six dots. Mehta also writes, "I learned that each of the letters in Braille was formed by various combinations of six dots. The Braille typewriter had only six keys." (Mehta 29) Here it is important to mention that, apart from English, the alphabets of Hindi and other languages are also made up of these dots in the Braille script.

Mehta's father was enthusiastic about the West and its promised educational opportunities. The book informs readers that conditions for the education of the blind were better in the West compared to India. Ved Mehta is justified in wanting to go abroad since education is important for disabled people to gain equal status in society. But one may also say that his changed attitude towards India and its educational conditions for the blind has been overtly influenced by Western culture. He never came back from the USA to make many contributions to the state of blind education in India. He once thought about the reformation of blind education in India but did not strive enough to make it a reality.

Mehta displays his superiority and undermines other blind students in the school. He is privileged to be the first blind Indian to go to America after being encouraged by Pandit Jawahar Lal Nehru. Unlike in India, the circumstances in America are different. Once abroad, he feels inferior among Americans. An

unwavering faith in the friendliness of the Americans makes him remark, *"America is the friendliest country in the world. Even the taxi driver will become your friend"* (p. 166).

In America, progressive education for blind people was reserved only for Americans. Students from third-world countries also have access to this but face discrimination. Despite facing these problems, Mehta succeeds because he assimilates into American culture. According to him, the United States of America is the *"centre of the universe"* (p. 173).

Patrick J. Devlieger (1999) writes, *"Cultural sensitivity for the differences in language use is important for the correct understanding of a phenomenon. In working with people of different cultural backgrounds, a different cultural context of the phenomenon of 'disability' might be communicated. Such cultural content has an impact on the way messages are communicated and their understanding"* (p. 46).

Through the Braille news magazine sent by the Arkansas school, we learned about the facilities for blind students in America. As Mehta comes to know of *"a social adjustment programme that made blind people independent, able to go about the streets themselves, and read something about their curriculum,"* (p. 164).

In his autobiography, Mehta portrayed the college campus, home, people, and environment. Mehta uses his facial vision to describe his surroundings. Images that come to the mind of a visually impaired person are not necessarily right or wrong; they could be anything. In this book, he describes the condition of American roads and compares it with Indian roads:

"The streets I remembered in India were the streets of unmistakable life, with colourful sounds and profane language, with bends and turns. But the street that I was now riding on seemed to stretch before me, wide and straight, and it

was quiet. The taxi driver had not yet used his horn and carried on no conversations with his fellow drivers." (p. 171)

Travelling alone is also problematic for blind people. The same happens with Mehta too, as he faces troubles while going to America. In the airport, his baggage gets stolen, an incident that raises questions about the safety of outsiders in America. Mehta finds that in America, life is too fast-paced to show concern. Relationships are purely professional. *"Being in America seemed like being on a swift train, and life was full, indeed bursting, with incidents, like your bag being broken into"* (p. 173). Mrs. DeFranco, an American passenger travelling with him on the plane, expresses regret about the condition of Mehta, but he does not fully adjust to her. He faces a cultural disparity. For instance, when she laughs, he thinks about the differences between American and Indian women. *"There was something that seemed open and unrestrained about her laugh. I had heard women laugh in India, but never quite that way"* (p. 172).

The way one eats also reflect their culture, and Mehta is aware of this difference. Mehta does not want to use his hands, but he also does not know how to use a knife and fork and ends up feeling culturally inferior. Mehta also informs us that, unlike in India, blind students learn how to swim in America. Mehta is not able to swim, and his American friends encourage him to learn to swim. When he hesitates, John says, *"You can feel the wall of a pool approaching with your facial vision as easily as you can sense any other object"* (p. 184). Mehta's autobiography shows that blind people in America are more active and self-dependent compared to those in India. The reason for such a difference is that in India, there is a lack of awareness about the potential of blind people.

This book informs readers that in mid-twentieth century America was facing the polio epidemic. Polio was a major cause, among others, that led to physical disability. Muriel's friend informs Mehta, *"Polio is quite a common disease in America, especially in the summer. The muscles of your body get paralysed, and sometimes you can never walk again, and sometimes you die"* (p. 185).

How visually challenged people dream is also something to understand. There is a concept that blind men can neither see a dream nor interpret it. But visually challenged people can also dream with the other four senses. It is important to mention that facial vision also plays an important role in dreaming. Mehta's dreams are based on facial vision to a large extent. He must have imagined the incident of the 'fence and sheep', and in the dream, he would have seen this fictitious incident through facial vision. He describes the dream in this way:

"There was a fence, a very high fence, higher than anything one could imagine. There were sheep and sheep and more sheep, and they were lined up in an endless line. One sheep jumped the fence, and there went another and yet another and another still. The fence was getting higher, but the sheep were jumping higher." (p. 185)

In this autobiography, we come across a female character, Jane, who has low vision. People afflicted with low vision cannot write or read anything without the help of powerful optical glasses. The condition of Jane reminds us of the autobiography of Benode Behari Mukherjee's Chitrakar: The Artist, published in 2006. In this book, Mukherjee describes his struggle in life as a person with low vision. Towards the end of his life, he becomes completely blind. It is unfortunate that people in his family know that one day he will become blind, but they cannot protect his remaining eyesight until the end. He talks about how his parents are aware of the fact that one day he will lose all his eyesight.

Everyone is stalked by certain shadows; shadows of death, illness, grief, insult, or injury dog our steps like boon companions all the time. As for me, I had, from the time I was born, a shadow of uncertainty staring me in the face. This clouded the minds of the whole family for a long time; they were all worried: What will happen to this boy? Only my mother always declared, 'Don't you bother; he will earn his bread and butter.' But what can the future of a boy be—a boy whom the doctor says will go blind and who does not find a seat in a school despite wearing thick glasses?

Compared to Mehta, Mukherjee struggles a lot since he is not as educated. He does not get an opportunity to go abroad. He establishes himself in the field of art. The former becomes blind in his childhood, while for the latter, complete blindness comes at age 53. Both Mehta and Mukherjee undergo different struggles on their path to success. As per Mehta's narrative, when it comes to the well-being of visually challenged people and their status in society, the conditions in America in the mid-twentieth century were similar to present-day India. During Mehta's college education, he had to depend on sighted people as his readers. Every day, he used to get nine readers and pay for all of them. Many of those readers only liked to talk to him instead of reading. He had to face severe problems during his examinations. Undoubtedly, Mehta has emerged successful after facing so many difficulties in life. Ved Mehta was a journalist and had taken many interviews with the likes of R.K. Narayan and Noam Chomsky. He has written about his interviews in detail in John is Easy to Please (1971). In this work, he has described the physique, colour, and gestures of the people he interviewed. It is interesting that, despite being blind, he has noted such details. It is tough for visually challenged people to describe colours and gestures. Many visually challenged people use their facial vision, but on the basis of this vision, it is difficult to provide such a clear picture of these details. It is possible that Mehta has tried to ignore the existence of his disability.

A neither too stout nor too lean figure, he strolled in rather boyishly. One shoulder appeared to be lower than the other, and his lilting walk recalled the end of the Bharat Natyam. Narayan, who was fifty-five, had a sharp face with full lips, a slightly hooked nose, and a very impressive forehead, capped with thinning grey hair. The most noticeable thing about his face, however, was his impish and mischievous eyes, peering out from behind thick, black-rimmed glasses. His body was loosely, carelessly clothed in nondescript grey trousers, a tweed jacket, and a white shirt, which was oddly finished off with an improvised tie pin and a piece of red thread wound around one shirt button. If it were not that he had the wheat-coloured complexion of a Brahman, he might pass unnoticed in India. Only a constant expression of innocence and a certain elusiveness about him saved him from seeming bland. (p. 136)

During the interview with Noam Chomsky, Mehta described his physical appearance:

"One morning, I went to call Chomsky at his office at M.I.T. It is a run-down, sooty temporary structure put up during the Second World War. The office itself is a small, cramped room furnished with a couple of tables, a typewriter, and a few dilapidated chairs, and cluttered with papers and books. It could be an office in a factory. Chomsky sits in a chair of imitation leather (which is torn), typing furiously. He stands up to greet me and smiles tentatively. He looks younger than his age, which is forty-two; indeed, he could easily pass for a graduate student. He is tall, with a long, thin nose and a long, thin face, and he has brown hair and brown eyes. He wears eyeglasses whose rims are dark at the top and clear at the bottom, and he is dressed in an old sweater and slacks." (p. 186)

Either he must have heard from someone about the interviewee's physique and other details, or it might be on the basis of his imagination.

In present-day India, the condition of the blind is similar to that of America in the 1950s. In India, too, visually challenged students are dependent on their readers. They cannot perform properly in exams despite being capable because there is a paucity of qualified writers and readers. In metropolitan cities or central universities, the scenario is slightly different. With the help of computers and new software, many visually challenged people have benefited and have become competent to do their work. They are playing an active role in both the public and private fields. But these facilities are available only to those disabled students whose medium of education is the English language. Those who study in Hindi-medium educational institutions do not benefit from such software. A lot of secondary material in English can be gathered from the Internet, but students studying in Hindi have to rely on readers or tape-recorded versions of their books. Those students who can access computers also have to rely on multiple resources in the form of readers and other technological devices.

Recently, some amendments to the National Trust Act 1999 have been passed. As Amita Dhanda and Gobor Gombos write in their paper, *Harmonising National Laws with UNCRPD: Suggested Amendments to the National Trust Act 1999:*

The 1999 Act acknowledged that a guardian to manage the affairs of a person with a disability could not be appointed merely by looking at the nature of the disability; instead, the statute required that the needs of the individual person with a disability should be examined and a guardian appointed only if desired. This recognition of limited guardianship in the National Trust Act 1999 was one of the forward-looking examples that the Ad Hoc Committee for the Drafting of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities was apprised of while it deliberated on the legal capacity of persons with disabilities. (p. 1)

It is unfortunate that to create awareness among common people about the capabilities of disabled people, the government has to make reservations in various fields. The concept of reservation is problematic because it puts a question mark on the true ability of a physically challenged person. After 1995, reservations were implemented for disabled persons in the field of academics. But a controversial debate is going on between the government and the Supreme Court over the capability of persons with disabilities. Compared to urban areas, in rural areas, the condition of the disabled is almost similar to what it was in the nineteenth or early twentieth century. Even today, many blind or other disabled people have no option but to beg for their livelihood. Many parents still neglect the aspirations of their disabled children compared to their 'normal' siblings.

Undoubtedly, Ved Mehta's struggle is a landmark in the sphere of disability studies. But it is also conspicuous that he belongs to an influential family. Overcoming disability is class-specific. There were many disabled people who were equally capable, but owing to their economic conditions and lack of privileges, they could not do anything remarkable.

Through their socially relevant works, writers like Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay, Munshi Premchand, and Shri Lal Shukla have portrayed disabled characters in the form of Rajni, Surdas, and Langar Prasad in the novels Rajni, Rangbhoomi, and Raag Darbari, respectively. These characters give a peek into how disability and poverty restrict access. All these authors—Chatterjee, Tagore, and Premchand—have not gone into the details of the childhoods of their physically impaired protagonists. Their accounts of physically challenged lives do not extend from childhood to youth. On the other hand, the character of Dhritarashtra in Andha Yug by Dharam Veer Bharati and Mahasamar by Narendra Kohli remains an example of a visually impaired, powerful, and yet passive man who could not do much with his privileges.

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