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ON

DISABILITY, REPRESENTATION AND LITERATURE

held on 03 October 2019 and Organised by P.G. & Research Department
of English

S. T. HINDU COLLEGE, NAGERCOIL-2, Tamilnadu, India



Decoding the Design of Disability in Namita Waikar's *The Long march*

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Abstract

Disability is a limitation that prevents a full-fledged development. It involves incomplete reasoning, physical trauma and an attitude to doubt one's own identity. A person disabled by birth and a person condemned to live under the banner of disability is two different spheres that undergo conflict. The former is an impairment whereas the latter is a result of a social construct. Namita Waikar's *The Long March* throws light on the farmers who are afflicted psychologically and physiologically through the denial of their rights, famine, poverty and their children born with malnutrition or deformity. The demands of these primary producers are brought out in the voice of a doctor who struggles to set up a better medicinal facility in the affected villages. Mainly the disabling of the mind through the structure of power politics in the subaltern realm engages the farmer to commit suicide. Both disabling the land and mind go hand in hand plundering their support systems. This paper aims to showcase the visible spheres of subjugation, struggle and the revolt of farmers towards disability.

Keywords:

Disability, social construct, subaltern, power politics, suicide.

The art of life bestows shades of abilities and disabilities within a human being. It is visible as internal and external factors, shaping the creation to undergo a state of development,



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defying all the odds and aiming at possibilities. The optimistic strategy in a disabled person or circumstance is not easily framed, instead, it involves the need to trace its origin, effects, and influences. And then the process of support is strategized through redemptive measures. In the same way, disability studies in literature target the part where the person is neglected, questioning its physical nature and the influence of the environment that caused such damage. It is a kind of activist strategy - where they stand for the people, throwing light on their need, not only on grievances but especially on their demands and rights.

Disabled people are counted as stigmatized ones, looked down with a sense of sympathy, mostly humiliated and subjugated. Their lives remain untouched, without any concern for their well-being and their necessities denied. In India, a developing nation, the phase of the struggle for a healthy environment is continuously experienced by proletariats. As the social activist and writer Josy Joseph analyses: "No other economy is growing as fast as India's while simultaneously recording such low progress in the reduction of malnutrition, eradication of poverty, illiteracy and so on"(25). The development in the urban space by neglecting the rural set up is unacceptable. Both the people and the political parties bring forth a different agenda of work in building up the infrastructure of a society . The attention on the rural background brings out the evidence of the aristocrats who have depleted the people for their benefits and also to showcase that the nation is developed.

The ideology of development under the banner of globalization has evacuated people from the rural setup. It is very much evident in the cleansing of ethnic groups. The traditional past has been transformed into an instant present with technologies providing a sophisticated timeline of life. Among them, the case of disabled people is pathetic and demands a lot of care, but the concerned officers of the governmental wings pay less heed to their cry. The pain behind the denied possibilities are left unnoticed as: " All the schemes have grand names, mostly after Indian leaders from the past, but none of them assure a better future for the Indian poor"(Joseph 25). This paper attempts to bring into light the atrocities of power politics that had caused disability in people of the rural community, especially farmers . The shadow behind the scenes of



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development had witnessed a massive disability either physically or mentally undergone by the working class. The chores of depletion and deprivation by power structures had disabled both the land and mind of farmers. But the farmers have started to show their resistance through protests, gathering as one community against the disabling forces.

The Long March was written by Namita Waikar, who is a managing editor of the People's archive of rural India. Being a biochemist, she has attempted this novel to bring awareness to the people regarding the struggle undergone by the farmers in a democratic nation. Her main focus is on the emerging distress regarding the state of Indian farmers. In her writing, she has deeply expressed her views on the condition of the farmers who are subjugated by the structure of power politics representing the need to view the disability of people, not only in the physical realm but in a social context, as a result of influences from various external factors.

The novel centers around the social workers and journalists who try to help the agrarian community providing them with basic necessities. Vikram Sonare, the main protagonist comes in contact with activists from various fields who march together with the aim of uplifting the lives of the farmers. The plot begins with the death of Kailasanath, Vikram Sonare's father, who had committed suicide due to debt and continuous crop failure. And the consequent events take place where the people protest against the state in organized groups questioning the authorities regarding their demands. Their grievances center around their physical affliction and mental stress that they undergo due to unpaid debts, improper sanitization facilities and also the plundering of their own lands by corporate.

The Long March reminds of the emerging Indian agrarian crisis that had resulted in the suicides of farmers. The portrayal of problems faced by the people belonging to the farm background is analyzed on the grounds of subjugation, struggle, and revolt. Mainly, the case of disability is echoed through the character Dr. Sriram Kasbekar, who aims at setting up medical camps in the most afflicted villages of India and to provide counseling to farmers that take up the choice to commit suicide, due to debt - distress and other factors of oppression. As Namita



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Waikar remarks: "Death is an eager bride when you are a farmer in debt"(117). The range of death rate speeds up as the concerned authorities remain silent in fulfilling the needs of farmers.

The physical disability is very much evident in the children of farmers who are born with deformity and others with malnutrition. It is shocking to note that the children of farmers, the primary producers of our nation are undergoing such a critical phase of mental agony and stress. In *The Long March* an old farmer says, " I am a farmer and I have no food to eat"(117). Their struggle with hunger, despite the manual labor that they undertake in the farm, which is not profitable, as they are supposed to repay debts by toiling hard and they end up eating nothing. Moreover, rural infrastructure does not offer proper sanitation and health facilities. So the children become easy victims of water-borne diseases and become disabled ones without healthy food and irregular treatment. In one such instance, a girl named Sarita was ill and when her grandmother was enquired. She left a comment on the facility unavailable at the village, "Which dispensary are you talking about? There is no doctor in the village and no dispensary"(179). This states the conditions in which the villagers are left desperate to rotten with sickness and the government remains unmoved. And these records of imbalanced medicinal treatment is noted by Swathi, who plays the role of a journalist in *The Long March*, as followed:

The only option they have is to wait and heal on their own or else succumb to their maladies. There is simply no access to doctors and hospitals. These children are meant to be a part of the generation that will make our country a superpower.

Can they do that by living this way? Will children like Sarita be able to compete with children from well- off families in urban India? How would they even begin to compete with children from other developed countries? The questions are baffling and we are left speechless.(180)

The oppression faced by the weaker part of society results in a high rate of death. Although the genre of globalization has influenced India, the steps taken to showcase India as a developed nation is heartless, as it shows negligence toward villages. As Palagummi Sainath states in *Everybody Loves a Good Drought*: " the present system exploits the peasant in much



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the same ways as men exploit animals and corpses do not lie. India has broken empirical records by being home to the World's largest wave of farmer suicides"(17). It is a battle cry of the subjugated.

Farmer suicides are evidence of the uninterrupted stream of power politics that is trying to confiscate the land from the primary producers of our society and in turn to win the hearts of corporate who are ready to plunder it. Also, their suicide is a cry of desperation rather than a form of social protest because it includes the concept of disabling the mind, engulfed in stress, anticipation, and failure. It is a vicious cycle consisting of the events- to receive a loan from a bank, crop failure, debt-ridden, again to borrow money from a private money lender, face irregular rainfall, and that leads a farmer to take up his own life. Apart from these factors, the government acts crucial - not providing proper attention to their plights in the various stages of struggle. The death rate can never be hidden for a long period as it is an emerging issue, as the novelist remarks: "For the people in the village, every minute of the day seemed to be about survival. Words like comfort, well-being and solace were missing from their lives"(128). It requires attention from people of the urban and rural stock.

Meanwhile, the land of the farmers is under the big business magnets of society. This happens intentionally and in some cases, the land of the debt-ridden farmer goes straight into the hands of the moneylender and then to the corporate, who assures him money in advance. Also, the government takes up land for benefitting the infrastructure of the urban areas. In every way, the farmers were exploited and designated to live under the shades of minority, even though they were the producers of food for the whole nation. The shades of disability is visible in the lives of the people and children who live near or work in the mine ores that extract highly radioactive minerals and toxic components in high quantity are being released in the nearby ponds and into the air, which in turn affects the life of farmers causing disability in the body.

The people of the farming community were enslaved and disabled by the rough targets of the corporate, hindered and humiliated to a greater extent. But not all the villages were the same, there are villages where people are fighting against the government and the powerful



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industrialists. The novelist points out the mindset of the farmer and their revolt as: "We will not give up the land that our ancestors nurtured for years, that we are nurturing now"(192). It is a brave fight of the subaltern people to control the corporate as they destroy lands in the name of development. By envisioning a larger strike or march, the farmers can safeguard their generations from disability. If they are made to live in a peaceful landscape without any artificial or compelling atmosphere of industrial sectors that pollute the nature of farming and their physical balance than there is a chance of definite development and prosperity within the nation.

Jonathan Bate, in his book *Romantic Ecology* provides an illustration found in Wordsworth's *The Excursion* that states, " Everything is linked to everything else, and most importantly, the human mind must be linked to the natural environment"(66). Similarly, the process of disabling the human mind and the natural land go hand in hand. Both require attention, to build up a stable atmosphere for living. The degradation of the environment and the exploitation of human beings can only be terminated with certain preventive measures, with "the abolition of oppressive hierarchies in human society"(Waugh 536) as stated by Richard Kerridge in *Environmentalism and Ecocriticism*. The solutions to the sufferings of the subaltern community remains in the order of oppression, which must be cut down with revolutionary steps.

Thus the ideology behind disability is viewed with an ecological perception enabling possibilities to redeem the society. Both the physical impairment and socially constructed disability need care with measures that are helpful to the rural stock. It is important to remember that the partial care on rural stock, to uplift the urban infrastructure will never make a nation to be deemed developed.

Every minor change in the system of government policies in shaping the life of the farmers can bring about a visible realm of development, eradicating disability with utmost care. It is a necessity to construct networks to render help to the afflicted. So that each one would be a focal point and no one can be hidden from the agenda of social development. In the current scenario, the farmers undertake long marches to tell the world that they are fighting back with



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determination towards the fulfillment of their demands to cast out disabilities and Namita Waikar's *The Long March* is a record of this revolutionary output.

In every angle of the novel, there is a call to participate in the protest of farmers, as they are the producers and we are the consumers, who need them for a better living. On the whole, *The Long March* is an eye-opener to the society that is flattered by the schemes of corporate sectors. And it is our role to promote the primary sector of our nation- farming and our farmers. Namita Waikar's exact representation of reality in capturing the present state of struggle among the disabled farmers, who wait with hope: to have freedom from the clutches of capitalism and globalization is the need of the hour.

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