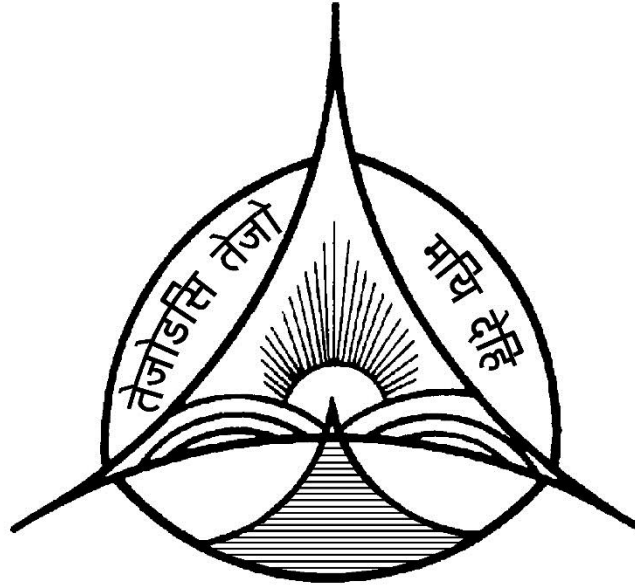# THE JMC REVIEW

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DISABILITY AND POSTCOLONIAL THEORY: 'THIRD SPACE' AND THE POSSIBILITIES OF TRANSGRESSION

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I find myself suddenly in the world and I recognize that I have one right alone: that of demanding human behavior from the other.

Frantz Fanon (1952)

Introduction

Every community throughout the world has disabled people. World estimates suggest that one in ten persons is disabled, that is, about 650 million across the world. The magnitude of disability perhaps came to the forefront with the passage and ratification of the first ever United Nations (UN) convention for protecting the rights of persons with disabilities all over the world. On 13 December 2006, the UN General Assembly adopted the declaration to provide equal rights to disabled people. Globally, too, the socio-economic standard of disabled people has changed; however, the situation is far from ideal. As the world's largest minority, 80 per cent of persons with disabilities live in developing countries, according to the UN Development Program (UNDP).

There is a general failure to recognise that no one is immune to the possibility of becoming disabled. Such denial, thus, leads to a situation where the aged, along with disabled children, women and men, lack access to basic human rights and, instead, are marginalised, excluded and discriminated against. Within the Indian subcontinent, awareness about the issues and concerns of lives touched with disabilities is a fairly recent phenomenon. It was only in the forty-ninth year of independence that the first legislation advocating equal rights for disabled people became a reality.

At this juncture, it might help to put things into historical perspective. It is reported that some educational and rehabilitative services were launched in the 1980s (Chauhan 1998: 46); the year 1981 was declared the International Year of Disabled Persons by the UN, which renewed efforts to rehabilitate disability. The intervening period saw sporadic attempts aimed at rehabilitation, both by disabled people and by NGOs. Though the experience of oppression is an integral and internal part of the psyche of the 'affected' and is seen to be without any social or political ramifications, the primary aim is service delivery. With advances in the 'scientific' understanding of the causes of impairment, the focus shifted from religion, charity and human rights to medical science's ability to rehabilitate and cure the disabled. It is important to note that within India, the first statutory body was the Rehabilitation Council of India (RCI), which started functioning in 1992. The RCI undertakes standardisation, regulation and monitoring of the training of professionals in the field of rehabilitation and special education; promotes research; maintains a register of rehabilitation professionals; and prescribes a code of conduct and ethics for these professionals, among other tasks. It is clear that the RCI continues to replicate the narrow vision of negotiating with disabled people as its mandate recognises disability as a 'disease'. Within the Indian cultural ethos, a disabled person is considered an incomplete entity.

The deterministic framework of destiny/fate allows very few to escape the erosion of agency, thus creating a situation where a person with disability is not accorded authority for   his/her own life, or that of the dominant group. While the medical framing of disability is well known, the cultural understanding of disability has several interesting features. The theoretical understanding is that if a human being has committed misdeeds in previous births, s/he has to inevitably bear the consequences. Suffering the wrath of God, the notion of a just world is firmly ingrained in the Hindu mind and is frequently invoked to explain everything that happens in one's life (Ghai 2015). Disability, therefore, is a punishment for the sins of previous births. The theory is paradoxical as one understanding is that karma (action) has very often led to a ready acceptance of physical disability, with little effort in the direction of improving life conditions. Accepting pain and suffering as a learned helplessness, the internalised oppression can be quite difficult to overcome. Since culture denies access to social, political and economic

opportunities, disabled people and their families cannot help but respond to their life situations in a resigned manner. It is presumed to be a deterrent to collective efforts by persons with disabilities to assert their right of equal access to social opportunities.

The other belief is that the religious doctrine of karma does not allow passive resignation. The potentiality of change is embedded within these religious beliefs. It is possible to repay the debts and work for a better rebirth. This induces an attitude of tacit acceptance (ibid.). Belief in karma, in this sense, helps people understand their own and others' angst. A sense of desolation and hope is thus entwined. Paranjpe (1986) indicates that karma can keep the faith of a 'just world' intact and convince people that good deeds will ultimately result in good outcomes. Another belief is that suffering was inflicted on good people to test their resilience and inner strength. There are instances where disabled people were considered as the children of God. This positioning provided spaces in spheres of religion and knowledge where the ability to transcend the body was, and remains, a distinct possibility. Even though the implicit meaning of such possibilities may be disturbing within our present understanding of disability, it does indicate a dignified negotiation of difference. Thus, the renowned scholar Ashtvakra, who had eight deformities, and the great poet Surdas, who was visually impaired, are illustrations of strength and the ability to fight oppression.

Psychologically, there is evidence that people with disabilities are pragmatic in their causal attributions. When they see the possibility of medical intervention they approach it while keeping their faith in traditional healing methodologies. The patients intuitively learn to keep these two aspects of the disease separate. Kleinman (1988), in his extensive work in the South Asian context, found that traditional healing and biomedical treatment coexist and are not perceived as contradictory. However, within the dominant Indian cultural ethos, labels such as 'disability', 'handicap', 'crippled', 'blind', and 'deaf' are used synonymously. The assumption of the label's naturalness is unquestioned. As I have written elsewhere (Ghai 2002b: 6), in the popular media, disability is often portrayed as a 'lack' or 'deficit'. These assumptions are rooted in the dominant Hindu mythology where the two most popular epics, *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana,*

carry the negative images associated with disability. In the former, King Dhrit*Rashtra* is deprived of the throne because of his visual impairment. Another set of images associates disability with evil, as something to fear, and with an expectation to be submissive. Within the stories of both epics, the turn comes with the interventions of the orthopaedically impaired Shakuni and the dwarf woman Manthra, both presented as evil. The popular images in mythology attest to extreme negativity associated with disability in India (Ghai 2002a). In a culture in which there is widespread female infanticide, killing imperfect children will not even count as a crime. Historically, treatment of those who survived was sought mostly from shamans and mystics. The general response of the non-disabled world ranges from pity and charity, to hostility, anger, banter and ridicule. Very rarely has public response been positive. Carrying a sense of shame, 'the disabled' find that their voices are silenced as they are always looked upon as the 'Other'.   The dominant ideologies in Indian culture have continued to operate paradoxically in characterising the binaries that define social realities. While in principle they might be postulated as complementary, their actual meaning/working is oppositional. Thus there is a strong cultural belief that while the female is opposed to male, she is at the same time encompassed in the male. This is symbolised in the figure of lord Shiva as *Ardh Nareshewar*, where the left side is depicted as the feminine or *Shakti,* and the right side as male. Similarly, *purusha* (man)/*prakriti* (nature), touchable/untouchable, represent the same paradox. In contrast, the binary of disability/ability is understood more as a medical issue. To my mind, the idea that there are commonalities in all disabled lives raises significant questions in a country like India. In the fight for rights, whose ideology and whose agenda it is are more important questions. Just as who will determine the dominant cultural ethos, and what kind of social systems will be sanctioned. The meaning attributed to disability is different for those who speak the language of rights when compared to the language of those who look at disability as a curse. From my vantage point, the categories of disabled and able-bodied as fixed, permanent, internally homogenous and as oppositional are difficult. At this juncture, within the Indian milieu, I would not want to argue that 'a specific' theory of disability would comprehensively explain disability. Though these are complex questions, I am attracted to postcolonial theory for a way out, with

full awareness of its limitations.

Postcolonial theory, to my mind, looks at literature and culture from two perspectives. The postcolonial writings reflect a colonial past, and etch out a new way of creating and understanding the world. I look at the theory in the hope that oppressed identities and representation of disability can be understood in the domain of postcolonial theory. To me, postcolonial theory has a number of connotations, but the one which is close to my heart is the understanding of the Other, historically and symbolically. For Robert Young, postcolonialism is a dislocating discourse that raises uncomfortable questions about how overbearing and sweeping theories "have themselves been implicated in the long history of European colonialism—and, above all, the extent to which [they] continue to determine both the institutional conditions of knowledge as well as the terms of contemporary institutional practices—practices which extend beyond the limits of the academic institution" (Young 1990: viii). From a vantage point of a disability scholar, I have always been uncertain about the merging or separation of the 'disabled' and 'able-bodied binary in society (read disabled 'us') and able-bodied (read 'them'). In many instances, disability theorists have addressed political issues through the construction of binary oppositions that   have a tendency to simply problematise the binary of oppressed vs. oppressor. Bill Hughes argues that ableism is projected by the "civilising process" in such a manner that it renders disability as disgusting.

Disability in India has not been studied in terms of power and suppression, or in terms of the possibilities of resistance. Taking note of Arthur Frank, we could read all narratives of illness as postcolonial since they contest and revise the master narratives of medicine and culture that define 'the ill/disabled subject' (1995:10). Thus 'the Other' or 'them' is always colonised, dominated and violated. Going by scholars such as Lyotard (1984) and Corker (1998: 232), an 'incredulity towards grand narratives' is problematic. I am concerned about the realness or materiality of the impaired body within postcolonial theory. Notwithstanding the danger of discursive essentialism, postcolonialism can be instrumental in setting the tone for engaging in the idea of disability as 'difference' rather than as an oppositional lack or inability. Despite the

impressions created, especially in the aftermath of colonial rule, about the multicultural nature of Indian society, in reality it is hegemony and hierarchy that prevail in the construction of social reality.

I try to understand disability in postcolonial literature of Frantz Fanon's work. Frantz Fanon, in my understanding, powerfully describes the experience of being always constrained by the white gaze (read able gaze) as a Black man [*sic*] (read persons with disabilities). He says, "I already knew that there were legends, stories, history, and above all historicity . . . .I was responsible at the same time for my body, my race, for my ancestors" (1986:112). Conversely, members of dominant groups are privileged—systematically advantaged by the deprivations imposed on the oppressed.

Reading Fanon from a disability perspective, he is superior when it comes to disability, not so much race. He puts it as "The *crippled* veteran of the Pacific war says to my brother", and says, "'Resign yourself to your color the way I got used to my stump; we're both victims. Nevertheless with all my strength I refuse to accept that amputation. I feel in myself a soul as immense as the world, truly a soul as deep as the deepest of rivers, my chest has the power to expand without limit. I am a master and I am advised to adopt the humility of the *cripple*. Yesterday, awakening to the world, I saw the sky turn upon itself utterly and wholly. I wanted to rise, but the disemboweled silence fell back upon me, its wings paralyzed. Without responsibility, straddling Nothingness and Infinity, I began to weep'" (1952: 140) (emphasis mine).

For me, just as Fanon considered the amputation as inferior, the impaired body in the ablest discourse becomes disabled. Nancy Mairs writes, 'most non-disabled people I know are so driven by their own fears of damage and death that they dread contact, let alone interaction, with anyone touched by affliction of any kind (1996: 100). Fear, then, creates a chasm of perceived difference, a firm Othering of the disabled person. Mairs writes that 'the people who seem most hostile to my presence are those most fearful of my fate. And since their fear keeps them emotionally distant from me, they are the ones least likely to learn that my life isn't half so

dismal as they assume (ibid.: 102). As a person with disability, I am often an inspiration and attribute acceptance and bravery to a disabled person, but   conclusively   disability is a special condition, different from the able person.

Fanon therefore does the same, as disability   can be a concern, but the epistemology is linked to race. It cannot find a space in the discourse of oppression from the oppressor. Caught in the white gaze of the Other, Fanon describes his corporeal form being rent asunder: "sealed into that crushing objecthood, I turned beseechingly to others. Their attention was a liberation, running over my body suddenly abraded into nonbeing….I burst apart" (Fanon 1952:109). Fixed by the coloniser's gaze, Fanon consequently internalises his own objectification: "I took myself far off from my own presence, far indeed, and made myself an object. What else could it be for me but an amputation, an excision, a hemorrhage that spattered my whole body with black blood" (ibid.: 112). The connection of race and disability finds its articulation as 'unfortunate' in the crippled veteran's account. The question I believe Fanon poses implicitly is that even he describes amputation as inferior to black skin. However, my submission on a reading of Fanon's understanding   is that his primary issue remains race. He does not attribute resistance to a disabled person. For Fanon, disability will always be secondary to race. Thus, the racialised exigency of amputation must be understood by the fact that the white veteran became physically impaired through his participation in an imperialist war, the black philosopher was ontologically disabled by the colony, but he himself remains a coloniser as he is an able body .

Further, disability is central to Fanon's understanding: one of the main features of colonialism which he identifies is the creation of specific mental 'pathologies' and 'disorders' as a result of the colonial relationship. As a psychiatrist, his medical rendering finds resonance in an understanding of disability. In the medical model, the experts are doctors and allied health professionals, and the diagnostic process is often assumed to be a fairly unproblematic process of simply recognising 'objective' symptoms of a 'disorder' and labelling it accordingly. Thus, the response has been read as the medical interpretation of disability, thereby creating what is now known as the individual/medical model of disability. The medical model makes two fundamental

assumptions. First, it locates the problem of disability within the individual. Second, it sees the causes of the problem as stemming from the functional psychological limitations that arise from the individual disability. The scientific, objective and humane exterior of the medical model has not been able to hide the fact that, within its practices, there lurks considerable ambivalence towards the people it professes to aid. Overcoming the disability thus becomes the overarching theme of the medical perspective. Since the pathology is located in the individual, the responsibility of procuring the cure lies with the person who is afflicted with the disability. While Mark Sherry (2007) understands Fanon's implicit medical model of disability, it leads him to largely ignore the role of social factors other than colonialism in the creation of disability and impairment. At no point does Fanon think of disability as created by society. As has become apparent, disability is seen as a pathology, defect, abnormality or dysfunction. Such assumptions for Fanon have historically been associated with stereotypes which depict disabled people as somehow inferior, lacking or 'not quite whole'. Also, by distinguishing between the 'able' and the 'crippled', the medical model discounts the lived experiences and knowledge of disabled people, and gives them little opportunity to contribute to the analysis of their own situation. In many ways, they are pressured to submit to 'medical expertise' and adopt a passive and dependent role.

However, Fanon's understanding of the black man's [*sic*] skin is similar to the trappings of the disabled person's existence; for instance his/her braces, crutches, white cane, hearing aids and other assistive devices. While the disabled person is aware of her/his own helplessness, s/he cannot help but acknowledge the fact that his or her citizenship rights are not critical. Rather, a charitable model gives whatever a disabled person   has been offered by society's generosity. As such, society can see little reason to recognise his/her reality at all. So the critical question is, why should I be apologetic to society? My wheelchair is as visible as a black man's skin, and the wheelchair   is a significant element, in the way in which I measure myself against the demands of a society which has not understood the sociocultural aspects.

There is definitely an affinity with issues of disability as a discursive category produced by politics. Speaking of the social construction of amputation, Schriempf writes: "I pun seriously on the term 'amputated' to refer to both the impaired body as well as the body which is removed (cut-off) from richly interwoven social, cultural, psychological, physical, and biological environments" (2001: 58). Just as Fanon views 'neurosis' among the Antilleans as a social condition of being colonised rather than an individual, innate pathology, Schriempf warns against theoretically "amputating the body from those social and cultural contexts that play a central role in shaping how disability and impairment occur" (ibid.).

I have tried to show how this particular reading of Fanon's theory can open up new interpretations of his postcolonial thought and its relevance for me. Though he challenges the idea of an original ontological belonging to a (white) social world from which the disabled body is then cut off, Fanon could not have conceived that there is a 'whole' sovereign subject whose disembodiment can be reclaimed colonial (read societal) abjection.

Similarly, the work of Albert Memmi (1965) serves as a useful benchmark in understanding the process of Othering. My reading of Memmi tells me that those of us who have been marginalised by our respective disabilities, enter the life space of the more complete 'Other' from the position corresponding to that which the colonised holds in relation to the coloniser. More fundamentally, my contention is that the creation of a devalued 'Other' is a necessary precondition for the creation of the able-bodied rational subject who is the all-pervasive agency that sets the terms of the dialogue. Taking over from the portrait that he draws of the 'Other' as it means to the coloniser, the colonised emerges as the image of everything that the coloniser is not. Every negative quality is projected onto her/him. However, even in Memmi it is almost Othering of the Other, as the postcolonial theories have no space for a disability as an existential reality.

In fact, to understand disability, many significant aspects need to be noted in Memmi's description. First, the Other is always seen as 'not', as 'lack', as 'void', as someone lacking in the valued qualities of society, whatever those qualities may be. Second, the humanity of the

other becomes 'indistinguishable' from a society that underscores ability. Third, the Others are not seen as belonging to the human community, but rather, as part of a muddled, confused and nameless collectivity. This resonates with the disabled self as, Memmi explains, "A sign of the colonized's depersonalization is what one might call the mark of the plural. The colonized is never characterized in an individual manner; he is entitled only to drown in an anonymous collectivity" (1965: 85). Persons with disabilities are not understood as a mark of the plural. Rather, it is indicative of the cultural hegemony that strives to posit an autonomous, rational and competent able-bodied subject as representative of a 'normal existence'.

In my understanding, I create an assumption that the disabled, as Memmi's colonised others, have heard on more than one occasion that they are 'lacking'. This internalised oppression is affirmed by society, which continues to acknowledge them as wanting and deficient. Further, the message of non-comprehension of their feelings and thoughts gets communicated. Whether the Other thinks or not is doubtful. It is quite strange that the colonised (in this case the disabled) must indeed be very odd if she/he remains mysterious and opaque after years of living with the coloniser/able-bodied society. In the world of the coloniser/non-disabled, the ultimate desire is that she/he should exist only as a function of the needs of the coloniser; that is, to be transformed into a pure colonised. The colonised loses its entity as a subject in its own right and remains only what the coloniser is not. It is thus an erasure both out of history and all significant aspects of development. Though Memmi's work has not been frequently used in understanding the disabled identity, and should be problematised, in my view it can contribute substantially in understanding how there is always a question whether the distance between the coloniser and the colonised— and by extrapolation, the disabled and the non-disabled— is understood by postcolonial theory. While I do see some advantages and Memmi might help us in highlighting the far-reaching understanding of disability and repression, there is a need to look beyond the hierarchies to the negotiation of power dynamics. However, what is important is to take up   a discursive position in which we can think of the nuances of a spoilt identity in a disabled subject.

Another postcolonial scholar, Edward Said, recognises this process of alterity in his examination of the account of the European construction of the Orient. In emphasising the political dimensions of this ideological move, Said understands the construction of the Orient as an outcome of a yearning for power.

Said says:

> Thus the status of colonized people has been fixed in zones of dependency and peripherality, stigmatized in the designation of underdeveloped, less-developed, developing states, ruled by a superior, developed, or metropolitan colonizer who was theoretically posited as a categorically antithetical overlord. In other words, the world was still divided into betters and lesser, and if the category of lesser beings had widened to include a lot of new people as well as a new era, then so much the worse for them. (1989: 207)

I think the description is pertinent for the disabled. Said argued that "European culture gained in strength and identity by setting itself off against the Orient as a sort of surrogate and even underground self" (1978: 3). Thus the disabled are framed as an opposition to the category of the able-bodied. The way Orientalism is part of the European identity that defines 'us' versus the 'them' (non-Europeans), the normal hegemony defines the disabled as the Other within the Indian context.

A significant aspect for me is that though binaries reflect the opposition against normative hegemony, I do believe that binary constructions served a political purpose. The lived reality of the disabled offers a far more complex picture. I do understand that a binary and essentialist approach to identity is conceptually flawed, inconsistent, and has undesirable moral and political consequences (see Sherry 2007; Ghai 2002b 2015). In one sense, the disabled/non-disabled divide is also extremely knotty and theoretically limited. For instance, the division between black/white is ineffective for conceptualising disability, ethnicity or caste. As Sherry (2007: 19) says, 'people often position themselves somewhere in-between or outside these binary

categories, and this positioning is fluid and contextually dependent.' My submission is that it is important to read disability not in terms of a monolithic 'third world woman', at once 'homogenized' and 'systematized' under oppression, but instead with attention to the contradictions and conflicts that can arise from their distinct historical and material relationships to class, religion, culture, and patriarchy (Mohanty 1991: 214).

Against this background, it will not be out of context to ask 'whether, through the matrix of Subaltern, can the disable speak?' Historically, this infamous question was a result of the subaltern studies group, a project led by Ranajit Guha (see Guha 1988). Having borrowed Gramsci's term 'subaltern', the objective was to locate and reinstate the marginalised by giving them a 'voice' or shared locus of agency in postcolonial India. What is significant is that Spivak recognises the 'epistemic violence' done upon Indian subalterns (1988a). She writes: "Subalternity is the name I borrow for the space out of any serious touch with the logic of capitalism or socialism. Please do not confuse it with unorganised labour, women as such, the proletarian, the colonized, […] migrant labour, political refugees etc. Nothing useful comes out of this confusion" (Spivak 1995: 115). Thus, for Spivak, the very definition of the subaltern entails 'stillness', whereby the cultural space of subalternity is cut off from the lines of mobility producing the class and gender-differentiated colonial subject. However, the quandary is whether the subaltern has no agency or is fated to silence. Spivak's argument is that elite or hegemonic discourses are 'deaf' to the subaltern, even when s/he does speak or resist (1996: 289; 1999: 308). To me it seems that if the subaltern, i.e., the disabled, could speak in a way that really counted for us, that we would feel obligated to listen to, it would not be subaltern. As Moore-Gilbert puts it, "While Spivak is excellent on 'the itinerary of silencing' endured by the subaltern, particularly historically, there is little attention to the process by which the subaltern's 'coming to voice' might be achieved" (1997: 106). Spivak, however, believes that she 'question[s] the authority of the investigating subject without paralyzing [sic] him' and that deconstruction can lead 'to much better practice' (1988b: 201; 1990: 122). However, these discussions have to be problematised as the silencing of the disabled has been clearly evident.

Perhaps it would help to understand Homi Bhabha, who has highlighted the notion of ambivalence and irony to move away from what often appear to be overly simple binary oppositions. Bhabha's influential 1994 work is helpful in extending the models of unilateral 'oppression' located in many disability studies texts. Bhabha sees the binary relationship as slippery and illusory, such that the fixed identities of the parts in the binary division cannot hold during the process of colonial discourse. Notwithstanding the significance of evident signs of protest and conflict around issues of 'oppression', Bhabha's understanding of understated forms of resistance, such as the displacement, distortion, dislocation and ambivalence generated by the process of colonial domination, is far more complex. Says Bhabha: "The move away from the singularities of 'class' or 'gender' as primary conceptual and organizational categories, has resulted in an awareness of the subject positions—of race, gender, generation, institutional location, geopolitical locale, sexual orientation—that inhabit any claim to identity in the modern world. What is theoretically innovative, and politically crucial, is the need to think beyond narratives of originary and initial subjectivities and to focus on those moments or processes that are produced in the articulation of cultural differences. While these 'in-between' spaces provide the terrain for elaborating strategies of selfhood—singular or communal—that initiate new signs of identity, and innovative sites of collaboration and contestation in the act of defining the idea of society itself" (1994: 1–2), I wonder if disability can be understood without any qualifiers. Have the cultures really widened, and do they have the capacity to take every marginalised group in the discourse?

The understanding is that within the process of cultural discourse, two ostensibly trouble-free, opposing groups collide and express their differences with each other. The periphery, where the two groups clash, the 'in-between spaces', where and when 'new signs of identity', i.e., culture or societal meaning, is created, a culture which is a hybrid of the two opposing cultures. Though Bhabha did not directly write on disability, what is intriguing is that the postcolonial subject, whether disabled or able, fits into neither of the 'traditions in the discourse of identity'. In fact, postcolonial identity lies between the frames of these mirrors of identity. Consequently, Bhabha sees the postcolonial subject as 'displaced', 'dislocated', 'hybrid' (in the sense of combining

several different cultural traces into a new formation): the postcolonial subject is 'an incalculable object, quite literally difficult to place' and 'the demands of authority cannot unify its message nor simply identify its subjects' (Bhabha 1986 : xxi).

Bhabha's understanding makes it clear that any national culture can never be holistic and uncorrupted, the coloniser's (read abled's) culture, far from being the simple, oppressive force upon the colonised (disabled's) culture, is ambivalent. Elaborates Bhabha: "the reason a cultural text or system of meaning cannot be sufficient unto itself is that the act of cultural *enunciation*— the place of utterance—is crossed by the 'difference' of writing. …. It is this difference in the process of language that is crucial to the production of meaning and ensures, at the same time, that meaning is never simply mimetic and transparent" (1994: 36).

Further, Bhabha uses the concept of 'hybridity' as a new lens of reading world literature in general. He maintains that 'If cultural diversity is a category of comparative ethics, aesthetics or ethnology, cultural difference is a process of signification through which statements of culture or on culture differentiate, discriminate and authorize the production of fields of force, reference, applicability and capacity' (ibid.: 50). In the introduction itself, Bhabha describes the liminal space: "The stairwell as liminal space, in-between the designations of identity, becomes the process of symbolic interaction, the connective tissue that constructs the difference between upper and lower, black and white. The hither and thither of the stairwell, the temporal movement and passage that it allows, prevents identities at either end of it from settling into primordial polarities. This *interstitial* passage between fixed identifications opens up the possibility of a cultural hybridity that entertains difference without an assumed or imposed hierarchy" (ibid.: 5).

This powerful way of depicting resistance resonates in my mind. My anxiety, however, is about the choice of stairway as a metaphor for political mobility and rebellion. In a literal sense, this would keep out disabled subjects. Notwithstanding the inopportune choice of the stairwell, Bhabha clearly indicates that in the moment of recognition, Self cannot be wholly contained within a Self/Other binary, a binary dependent upon fixed and static boundaries. In other words, as soon as we recognise that the rift which divides 'us' from 'them' is artificial and reductionist,

we move into a place where identity is ambivalent and mutable. However, I am not sure whether disability is articulated in this understanding, so when I assume US, I am not sure whether the disabled subject is inclusive. As Bhabha notes, the very struggle to maintain that Self/Other binary articulates the possibility of slippage between the two categories and reminds us that "identity is never an a priori, nor a finished product; it is only ever the problematic process of access to an image of totality" (ibid.: 51). For me, there is a complete erasure of disability as it does seem to be redundant in the writings .The hopelessness of totality usually describes a disabled body in terms of lack. Maybe the 'evil eye' might remind us of the absence of disability.

My submission is that disability is not really a fixed category most clearly signified by the white cane user or a crutch user. Rather, it denotes a fluid and shifting set of conditions' (2003: 32) As Mairian Corker points out, "Disability, like most dimensions of experience is polysemic—that is ambiguous and unstable in meaning— as well as a mixture of truth and fiction that depends on *who says what, to whom, when and where*" (1999: 3) (emphasis mine). The process of creating the hybrid culture does not destroy the disabled and the able-bodied for any unified narrative resulting in some grand amalgamation. What the hybrid does is to make both the disabled and the able aware that culture is never static or, as in T.S. Elliot, 'mummified'. Culture is alive, as seen in the hybrid, with the result that no essential and a-historical conceptions of disabled identity are possible. As Bhabha argues,

> The intervention of the third Space, which makes the structure of meaning and reference an ambivalent process, destroys this mirror of representation in which cultural knowledge is continuously revealed as an integrated, open expanding code. However this third space has scope for comprehending disability. Such an intervention quite properly challenges our sense of historical identity of culture as a homogenising unifying force, authenticated by the originary past kept alive in the national tradition of the past. (Bhabha 1995: 208)

 However, my concern is that while power can be understood as 'discursive' formation, it is devoid of its material underpinnings. In reflecting moments of impending slippage between identity categories, Bhahba brings in the notion of the 'evil eye', that figure which reminds us of

what is absent or invisible in a text, those figures whose gaze 'alienates both the narratiorial I of the slave and the surveillant eye of the master' (ibid.: 53). The evil eye is the exterior, the margin, that 'structure of difference' which blurs the gap between slave and master by making both objects of observation and judgement. The evil eye therefore has power, as it unnerves the schisms of Self/Other or, in my understanding, the disabled and the able.

The implications for India to engage with its multiple realities seem pertinent. I am reminded of Corker who argued that, "real differences are based on the socially constructed categories of disability, gender, race, sexuality and class which precisely because they are constructed, embrace a fluidity that cannot mark a collective identity" (1999: 635) resonates with me. The assumption that people with impairments would view the experience of impairment and oppression as identical and subscribe to a general category of disability does not hold water. In India, cross impairment distinctions are still commonplace. A presumed logic or unity of impairment requires a stable oppositional category of normality. This institutionalised 'normality' both requires and produces the communality of each 'voice' of impairment that represents the limits of possibilities within an oppositional binary of disabled/nondisabled (ibid: 635). In the Indian context, individual aspects of disability matter, and they are being clubbed together as one creates tensions. For instance, though mental illness is one of the categories included in the 1995 legislation, not much work has been done in order to alleviate the problems of mentally ill people. Similarly, after a lot of effort a national trust has been set up, where   four disabilities—autism, cerebral palsy, mental retardation and multiple disabilities—have been given consideration. It is in this context that homogenising experiences prevent the recognition of cross-disability distinctions, and their specific realities and necessary responses to them. In effect, legitimisation of certain differences has been instrumental in increasing the vicious cycles of marginalisation. This is what we need to do, what Susan Suleiman recommends for contemporary feminism, which should attempt "to get beyond, not only the number one—the number that determines unity of body or of self—but also to get beyond the number two, which determines difference, antagonism, and exchange …" (1986: 24). 'The number one' clearly represents for Suleiman the fictions of unity, stability and identity characteristic of a

phallocentric worldview. 'The number two' represents the grid of gender, which exposes the hierarchical, oppositional structure of the worldview. Beyond the number two is nothing but endless complication and a dizzying accumulation of narratives. Suleiman refers to Derrida, where he speaks of a dream of the innumerable … a desire to escape the combinatory … to invent incalculable choreographies' (ibid.: 76). Suleiman presents Derrida's idea as offering an epistemological or narrative ideal for theory, practice   and its politics.

Bollywood and Disability in India

Being disabled in India does have a context and a certain meaning. In our attempts to change the meaning, we must recognise the multiple political, social, economic and cultural realities. For instance, the depiction of disability in Bollywood cinema captures the postcolonial discourse by weaving a tapestry of threads of many different hues rather than one that is woven in a single colour.   In order to acquire a social front of disability advocacy, Bollywood has been keen to include marginal identities. However, images in films and television rarely, if ever, inform the viewer about the everyday lived experience of being disabled. Cinema relies on invoking emotional reactions such as pity, horror, or a sense of tragedy. A fleeting moment where a 'crippled' beggar is shown extending his/her begging bowl into the window of a car, or the good-hearted protagonist who is shown helping a visually impaired person cross the busy street, and receiving heartfelt blessings for the able-bodied's assistance. To contextualise the multiple nuances of 'disabled' identity in post-colonial cinema, I discuss the movie *Black*.

Black

Bollywood projects itself as a fantasy of a homogeneous culture that masks the hierarchy of subject positions and belonging divided along the lines of gender, class, rural/urban divide, caste and, to my mind, 'disability'.

Disability in most Indian films is used as a meta-narrative, thus allowing the viewer to create meaning within the larger, scattered, melodramatic filmic space. I explore the ambivalent role of characters with disabilities in this movie, both as sites of transgression and as repositories for

cultural tensions in a postcolonial world. Based on the life of Helen Keller, the film traces the tensions of a Christian family, where the protagonist, Michelle McNally (Rani Mukerji), a blind and deaf woman reflects on her life. She is in search of her lost teacher Debraj Sahai (Amitabh Bachhan), who was the 'perfect' teacher. Her quest to find him takes twenty years. The story reveals how, over the years, the teacher has lost his memory. Her quest is rewarded when she discovers   her tutor seated at the fountain near her house; his back turned towards the camera. Interestingly, this is the exact place where Debraj, though in an unorthodox manner, led Michelle to her first tryst with the joy of a spoken word, when she discovers the word for 'water'!

Similarly, we first see the baby Michelle, with her back towards us, being cajoled by her mother Catherine. Thus, in turning away from life, they face each other. Michelle as a little girl is totally confused and angry because of her disabilities. Her parents don't know how to deal with her as she becomes more and more destructive and wild—she topples a candle and creates a fire at home and hurts her little baby sister. The father (Dhritiman Chatterjee) decides to put her in an institution. Her mother (Shernaz Patel) fights to find solutions to prevent her from being institutionalised. She manages to find her a teacher, Debraj, from a deaf and blind school. Though eccentric, the teacher is dedicated to his profession. Although the teacher's meeting with his ward is not pleasant, he slowly reaches a truce with her. He gradually changes the wild persona into a presentable young lady. The father was at first against his rough handling of the girl, but he later accepts him when he sees the positive progress in Michelle. Debraj slowly introduces Michelle to the world of light and sound. With his help she tries to make sense of the pitch dark world around her—hence the title of the film '*Black*'. She learns her first words. The teacher becomes her constant companion and he has great ambitions for her. He helps her to get into a regular college and sits with her during class, interpreting the lessons for her through hand contact to fulfil their dream for her to graduate.

I am not sure whether the director has been able to capture the pain of her sibling who is frustrated with her parents for not giving her adequate attention. Consequently, the sister (Sara), is ambivalent, and it is very long before Michelle learns of this antagonism when Sara confesses

her dislike for her older sibling. She is portrayed as hostile, drawing the audience's fury. As Bhabha suggests, 'the work of hegemony is itself the process of iteration and differentiation [which] depends on the production of alternative or antagonistic images that are always produced side by side and in competition with each other,' then we can understand 'a politics of struggle as the struggle of identifications and the war of positions' (1994: 29). After attending Sara's wedding, Michelle begins to wonder about love. An inexperienced and curious Michelle wants to kiss Debraj. He reluctantly does so but decides to leave Michelle because of the position she has put him in. Twenty years after enrollment, Michelle does manage to gain her Bachelor's degree, and with her proud parents looking on, she even gives a speech to the graduating class. Without a black graduation robe, she thanks her parents and her teacher and announces that she will only wear the robe when she sees her teacher, Debraj. Within the Indian scenario, overcoming is the thesis that is played in innumerable movies. Consequently Michelle's failure was refreshing by not emphasising overcompensation. What is problematic is the pedagogy that the teacher deals with Michelle; Debraj realises that the only way to tackle her is to shock her, be aggressive with her. Michelle is not like the other students, so ordinary methods do not apply to her. His incessant shouting through the entire first half of the film at a child whom he knows cannot hear and see is so loud, noisy and extreme that it kills a sensitivity that comes from being subtle in the narration of taming a troubled and disabled child. Any educator would be able to tell the director that a child whose only support is her mother would not get along with the teacher immediately. Even though this teacher, unlike others, does not assume that the child is cognitively impaired, his reactions are problematic. It is almost as if Michelle's silence places her outside the normative and ultimately, she serves as an Other, an abject outside.

The movie touchingly creates a fusion between the vulnerabilities of both the teacher and the student. It is through the encounter with these that they become aware of both their disabling and their ablest parts. For instance, Michelle and Debraj's first meeting is complemented by the rattling sounds of tin cans tied to Michelle's waist so that her whereabouts are known. Years later, Michelle finds Debraj tied   to chains after he is afflicted with Alzheimer's disease. Water is symbolic for both of them: Michelle is introduced to the touch of water and her first

articulation is the word 'water'. Similarly, an adult and mature Michelle creates a new world for Debraj, and he touches water to learn the same word.

In one sense, *Black* and other films on disability break the pattern of fantasy. Cinema has moved away from escapism and allows the viewers to understand other people's realities. Many disabled people in India loved the movie as they identified with the characters, perhaps coping with similar problems, anxieties and relationships. The cathartic aspect of Bombay cinema can be understood as a resolution in some way. Real problems in life, such as disability, are more complicated and difficult to resolve. The critical question is whether the reality allows the viewers to overcome feelings of alienation and marginality. The film endorses patriarchal structures, specifically those of family, 'expectations' from mothers, gender roles in society, etc. Debraj's masculinity stands out as he takes over Michelle's life; he is translator, instructor, organiser and support. I think the director contributes to the notion of disability being firmly rendered as pathological and asexual. I wonder why Black chose to reverse the gender of the teacher from the original *Miracle Worker* (1962), in which the teacher was a woman named Anne Sullivan. Intuitively, if I pre-supposed Michelle as a boy, and the teacher an aging woman, I wonder whether the same masculinity issues would pan out. Is it because the director knows for sure that hetero-normative rendering is part and parcel of Bollywood? With an older man as protagonist, the plot is then set to construct sexual tension. Had the director been genuinely addressing disability in the context of sexuality, there would have been discursive spaces where a dialogic possibility could be created. However, here there is no space for the narrative to develop further. Notwithstanding the morality issues of the teacher and his deep investment in her, the abandonment of the student who is becoming sexually aware seems distinctly ablest. There is the issue of subjugation for those who have been disabled (read) colonised, and how the fantasies of inferiority and subordination have been internalised and have become a part of the self. Her sexual desires, however, have to be sublimated and possibly displaced. In this sense, images of masculinity in the movie reflect the silence of the disabled woman, thus perpetuating dominant social ideas about sexuality in the context of disability. The image of a disabled woman thus dialectically read reveals that it is not simply the able male who is always already the oppressor,

as is the common assumption, but rather, that a woman as an abject signifier can be merchandised even by enlightened, able women. Even the feminist voices have implicitly, and sometimes explicitly, undermined disabled women's rights to sexuality, motherhood and intimate personal relationships. Such an unwelcoming image of women remains, therefore, a fixed trope in the hands of Bollywood, negotiating colonialism and postcoloniality, and crossing over abling parts to disabling parts, with little chance of emancipation. A disabled woman could be read as abject figure, in Julia Kristeva's terms. The abject is not defined by its 'lack of cleanliness or health', but by its capacity for 'disturb[ing] identity, system, order.' It is that which 'does not respect borders, positions, and rules the in-between, the ambiguous, the composite' (1980: 4).

Although Kristeva has not disconnected the abject from ill health, my understanding is that   ill health and the 'in-between' that troubles order inform one another. The disabled body (or mind) exists in a realm of ambiguity, lingering somewhere between life and death—a constant remind*er* of the other side of normative life. If the abject is what one must 'thrust aside in order to live' (ibid.: 3), then the ill or disabled subject, especially she who resists cure and containment, is by   definition abject. One strategy to grant women full agency requires the contemporary, feminist viewer to take responsibility. Though Bollywood cinema has increasingly begun to include 'queer representations', disability seems to be complex and a fleeting exploration of sexuality reifies the ablest discourse. What is critical is that Bollywood continues to glorify disability in underscoring dependency and vulnerability. In its attempt the film problematises the 'naturalness' of disability and normalcy, while allowing audiences a false defensive ideology of ability. Such a rendering allows viewers to perpetuate their wish to pass for normal and able-bodied. The 'desire' remains out of the ambit of the film.

Taking a cue from Gayatri Spivak, the figure of the woman disappears, not into a pristine nothingness, but into a violent shuttling that is the displaced figuration of the 'third-world' woman caught between tradition and modernisation, culturalism and development (1999: 304) As Amrita Chhachhi puts it, "the symbols and repositories of communal/ group/national identity . . . so that threats to or the loss of control over their women ... are seen as direct threats to

manhood/community/family. It therefore becomes essential to ensure patriarchal controls over the labour, fertility, and sexuality of women" (1991: 163–65). *Black* therefore does not seem to articulate the transformative potential of disability, as the physical and gender-based representations resonate with cultural and political implications. It returns repeatedly to Michelle, but does not go further to accept the figure of the sexualised woman. Though it does create space for disability and values Michelle's personhood, the difficulty is to prompt the audience to read Michelle's disability as a political message. If it happens, then cinema itself becomes an alternative form of political participation.

Conclusion

The movie *Black* creates and maintains a status quo where the 'disabled' body incorporates with the existing social patterns, while arbitrating the normative hegemony. Scrutinising the movie from both a postcolonial and disability studies perspective provides a way to re-read this relationship as a product of the colonial situation (Titchkosky and Aubrecht 2009). As Fanon writes:

> Today the great systems have died or are living in a state of crisis. And it is no longer the age of little vanguards. The whole of humanity has erupted violently, tumultuously onto the stage of history, taking its own destiny into its hands. Capitalism is under siege, surrounded by a global tide of revolution. And this revolution, still without a centre, without a precise form, has its own laws, its own life and a depth of unity—accorded to it by the same masses who create it, who live it, who inspire each other from across boundaries, give each other spirit and encouragement, and learn from collective experiences. (1965: 1)

In this sense, representation of disability is trapped in a subordinate relationship to able-bodied-ness and patriarchy. One wishes that the disabled character would move away from a binary. Postcolonial theorists have problematised the issues of disability, though in a metaphorical understanding. Metaphors for disability have affected ways of thinking about and inter-relating

with disabled people who have had little say in the choice of metaphors that writers have used to describe disabled bodies. The impact of these metaphors has led   to the disabled being treated as Other. As I state elsewhere, it is true that analogy is a theoretical device that is meant to enable the move from more familiar to relatively unknown terrain in order to understand how a set of relations evident in one sphere might illuminate the other (2015: 295).

However, if a comparison is made, or if drawing a parallel pits one set of relations against the other, the strategic advantage of the analogy is lost. Without devaluing the metaphorical moves, we need to focus on what gets 'valorised' and 'suppressed' in the process. Such analogising results in a suppression of the harsh reality of disabled people's lives, which are limited by conditions that are much more difficult than ordinary to transcend. A shift from the theoretical/metaphorical to the material is essential to render visible the constructions that have supported the currently flawed conceptualisations of disability. Caution therefore   needs to be exercised when we use disability and postcolonial as reciprocal metaphors. As a feminist I do feel that postcolonial becomes alive to the issues of embodiment.

My fantasy is that both disability theory as well as postcolonial theory should adopt a contrapuntal reading, which means reading a text

> with an understanding of what is involved when an author shows, for instance, that a colonial sugar plantation is seen as important to the process of maintaining a particular style of life in England…the point is that contrapuntal reading must take account of both processes, that of imperialism and that of resistance to it, which can be done by extending our reading of the texts to include what was once forcibly excluded (Said 1994: 66–67).

> Thus the understanding is that a colonial sugar plantation is seen as important to the process of maintaining a particular style of life in England. Extrapolating from Said, my submission is that disability should not be concerned about what to read but *how* to read it. Thus, 'contrapuntal' reading is critical not only for their aesthetic merit, but also with an awareness of their historical, cultural and political associations, which he calls

structures of attitude and reference. Thus, the desire is to evolve a meaningful conversation between disability studies and postcolonial theory.

Such a reading suggests that more is at stake than a problematising discourse For instance we need to be engaged in 'the unlearning of one's own privilege. So that, not only does one become able to listen to that other constituency, but one learns to speak in such a way that one will be taken seriously by that other constituency' (Spivak, 1990: 42). The hope is also that both the discourses of postcolonialism and disability studies rewrite the relationship between the margin and the centre by deconstructing the colonialist and imperialist ideologies   as well as ablest hegemony. The attempt is to make obvious how disability would be deeply implicated in ablelism. It is not enough that disability and Otherness relate not as binarisms in postcolonial discourse, but in ways in which both are complicit and resistant, victim and collaborator, and oppressed and oppressor. As Bell hooks (1995) reminds us, achievement of colonialism does not require the assumption of power in someone else's country. Rather, colonialism can be accomplished by dominant and normative hegemonies through   social apartheid. The postcolonial discourse reminds us that apartheid is always subjected to constant revision.

We learn from Fanon that discussions are   not enough: '... once we have taken note of the situation, once we have understood it, we consider the job done. How can we possibly not hear that voice again tumbling down the steps of History: "It's no longer a question of knowing the world, but of transforming it"?' (Fanon 1952: 1).

Perhaps the greatest challenge is to comprehend that we have consciously or unconsciously oppressed each other. It is only when we create intersections that we   attack social apartheid, which places limits on human beings, both disabled and non-disabled.

Notes

1. http://www.disabled-world.com/disability/ statistics/ (accessed 10 Dec 2015).

2. Dan Goodley et al. (2012). *Disability and Social Theory: New Developments and Directions*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, pp. 348.

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