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Disability, Myth and History in *Midnight's Children* and *Shiva Trilogy*: A Comparative Study

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Abstract

Disability, Myth and History are concepts fraught with ambivalence and contestations. Still, they are important modes of cultural perception and 're-presentation'. While as an academic discipline Disability Studies is quite new, the use of myth and history in Indian novels in English is quite old. This paper wants to bring out the presentation and interrelation of these concepts in two sets of disparate novels, one, "Midnight's Children", the watershed novel in Indian writing in English and the other, "Shiva Trilogy", the hugely popular novels of Amish Tripathi. My textual analyses concentrate on the ways in which differently-abled characters are rendered 'abnormal' in their involvement with religion, nation and culture and how myth and history are manipulated by these postcolonial writers to present a different view of reality. This enables us to make 'situated readings' of how disability, myth and history may be experienced in particular settings and contexts. This also makes us capable of making a cross-cultural analysis that brings to the fore the aspects of 're-presentation', management and construction of the concepts of disability, myth and history for certain purposes. Within this context, the scope of my study is broadly comparative. It shows that though these two writers are completely different in their style, mode and narrative techniques, they are bound by their common concern with the 'politics of re-presentation' and the post-colonial revisioning of reality through the interrelated concepts of disability, myth and history.

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Key Words- *Disability, History, Myth, Politics, Re-presentation, Reality.*

Disability, Myth and History are all 'constructed' concepts. Yet they seem 'natural' and have become important modes of social and political organization. Disability Studies not only tries to understand the construction of disability but also how the conception of 'normalcy' is constructed to create the 'problem' of disability (Davis 3). Likewise, in common parlance, myth is something against the truth and is contrasted with rational thoughts. But the functionalist approach to myth defines it as a way of understanding and interpreting the world in which we live. Analogously, history is basically a story which is told from the victor's point of view. It is also a mode of interpreting our past with the consciousness of our present and expectations of future. Thus, all of these concepts are closely related with the ideology and politics of the age.

Use of myth and history in Indian Novels in English is not new. Use of history can be traced back to the beginnings of the history of Indian English Novels in 1864 with Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay's "Rajmohan's Wife" which has been referred to by Makarand Paranjape as "national allegory" (Fredric Jameson's term). Similarly, the use of myth in fiction saw its successful manifestation in the hands of Raja Rao and R.K. Narayan. But "disability" as a concept did not entered as a dominant factor in Indian novels in English until the epoch making "Midnight's Children" (1981) which very deftly captures the 'fragmented' history of a nation in the autobiography of a 'disabled/enabled' man. It's ironic, postmodern incorporation of myth as a device in story-telling and suggesting multiple layers of meaning is also something new. On the other hand, Amish Tripathi in his "Shiva Trilogy" which contains three interrelated but separate novels, namely, "The Immortals of Meluha" (Feb, 2010), "The Secret of the Nagas" (21 July, 2011), and "The Oath of the Vayuputras" (27 Feb, 2013) uses myth and history not as a technical device to suggest deeper layers of meaning but as a thematic and an almost all absorbing revising of myth and history which presents the gods as real historical human characters. His concern with disability is also seamlessly

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explored in all three novels of “Shiva Trilogy”. Thus he too is urged by the pressure of contemporary reality. The present study wants to make a comparative analysis of the interrelated concepts of myth, history and disability in Salman Rushdie’s “Midnight’s Children” and Amish Tripathi’s “Shiva Trilogy”.

Let us begin with the use of myth and history in Indian English Fiction. In her well known book, “The Twice Born Fiction: Themes and Techniques of Indian Novel in English”, Meenakshi Mukherjee argues that the use of myth in the novels of 1930s and 1940s “enhance the effect of a contemporary situation”. She comments that “the device myth has been emulated from the West, but it has been naturalized to the Indian soil.” In her opinion “a world- view is required to make literature meaningful in terms of shared human experience, and the Indian epics offer the basis of such a common background which permeates the whole nation.” Furthermore, she asserts that the novelists of this period adopted history as a mode of social reform and as a mode of reality (31). A dominant example of the use of myth and history is Raja Rao’s “Kanthapura” (1935). Rao not only mythicises the characters but also incorporates in its narration the traditional style of ‘hari-katha’. This technique gives myth a political and social function in the realist situation of India. In his novel “The Man-Eater of Malgudi”, R.K. Narayan also makes use of ‘Bhasmasura Myth’ in a symbolic and allegorical manner. K.R.S. Iyengar says: “The Man-Eater of Malguri was itself meant to a modern version of one of the Deva Asura conflicts of very ancient times....” (382).

However, with the emergence of Salman Rushdie and V.S. Naipaul Indian English Novels take a new turn. A galaxy of writers of exceptional merit comes to prominence. Among them Amitav Ghosh, Arundhati Roy, Jhumpa Lahiri, Kiran Desai, Vikram Seth, Rohinton Mistry bring into play a postmodern sense of global fluidity in their exploration of Indian History. The publication of “Midnight’s Children” was a defining moment in the history of Indian Novel in English so much so that the term “Post-Rushdie” has come to refer to the decades afterwards. Meenakshi Mukherjee in the book “Rushdie,s Midnight’s Children: A Book of Readings” sees in it “the quintessential fictional embodiment of the

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postmodern celebration of decentring and hybridity.” Mukherjee also extols the novel as “a landmark novel attempting in a dangerously adventurous manner to stretch the possibilities of narrative fiction in the general and of what it could be done with Indian material and with English language in particular “ (10). In her words:

Midnight’s Children demonstrated how epic, fable, national events, family saga, advertisements, films, popular songs, newspaper clippings, parody, pastiche and gossip could all gathered up in one comprehensive sweep that is comic, historic and mythical at the same time. Rushdie’s energy was infectious, and his example seemed to galvanize in the next few years the Indian English literary scene which had been stagnant for a while, unleashing a flood of new novels that has not yet abated. (10)

The use of myth takes a new dimension when coupled with the theme of realist political history. The writers after Rushdie use myth and history to criticize the new postcolonial systems of ‘representation’ in the name of social order and harmony. They are more concerned with subverting and interrogating the ‘official readings’ of myth and history. A historical reality does not only indicate a reference to the past. The past is also embedded in the present. As Bill Ashcroft in his influential book “Post-Colonial Transformations” comments-

If we compare this with the threefold present of Augustine – remembered past, present and anticipated future we see the privilege in memory within historical narrativity is replaced in Aboriginal cosmology with a luminous future to which the past and present do not appear through the *distensio animi*, The stretching of the mind in different directions but are *embedded materially in the present*. The past is not so much an unknowable chaos as a constantly and wholly experienced present (91).

R.K. Dhawan in his article, “History and the Novel: Some Significant Statements in Imaginary Homelands” separates two kinds of representation of history: conscious and sub-

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conscious. He points out that the conscious representation of history refers to the sheer representation of historical past or factual recording of events. Subconscious historical novels, however, represents these factual novels in an imaginary form or locale to highlight a special metaphorical or political point of view. Dhawan has maintained that Rushdie is a major novelist for he has used the imaginary locale of history to highlight the political freedom and individual's independent identity in society. Thus Dhawan has clearly distinguished the polyphonic postmodern historical fiction and the traditional historical novel. According to him the individual who has been excluded and ignored in the traditional historical narrative, comes to the fore as a maker of events and major player of history. Hence, history which had been coherently, officially and legitimately narrated from the point of view of the privileged, now is being subverted and questioned in the modern historical novels.

We may now come to the question of disability which pervades all the four novels of my analysis and acts as a centre of the argument. Since Disability Studies as an academic discipline came into prominence only in the mid-1990s there is very few works available on Indian English Fictions' dealing with disability though there is no denying that as a factor of reality disability is as pervasive as history and myth and what is distinctive in these four novels is the manipulation of these structuring principles (History, Myth and Disability) to project a view of reality that is different from the official/ legitimizing version of it.

In fact, the very first paragraph of "Midnight's Children" strikingly mingles the themes of disability and history. The narrator is "handcuffed to history" in "Doctor Narlikar's Nursing Home on August 15th 1947" and comments, - "I was left entirely without a say in the matter. I, Saleem Sinai, later variously called Spotnose, Stainface, Baldy, Sniffer, Buddha, and even Piece-of-the-Moon, have become heavily embroiled in Fate- at the best of times- a dangerous sort of involvement. And I couldn't even wipe my own nose at the time (Rushdie 1)". The novel thus begins with a parallel between the fragmented history of India and the fragmenting body of its narrator. Saleem's excessive growth soon after birth and his immense

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appetite seem to reflect India's ambitious five year plan and the large number of American aids swallowed by them. Sinai's "map face" (144) represents the map of India. His disfiguring 'birth-marks' alludes to the tragedy of partition and most of all Saleem is impotent. He cannot impregnate Padma, 'the lotus goddess'.

But disability is not always inability. All the midnight's children possess special gifts and special abilities. Two of them, Saleem and Shiva (and here is a mythic reference), have complimentary gifts. The destructive Shiva is endowed with powerful knees. He has "the gifts of war" while Saleem has "the greatest talent of all- the ability to look into the hearts and minds of men" (239). His long beaked nose reflects his ability to discern reality. Saleem's wife Parvati gives birth to a son in the exact hour of the declaration of Emergency. He has large ears but is dumb and does not even whimper (501). His face is as serious as the grave (527). His body reflects the mood of Emergency. So we find that the whole novel can be read through the lens of disability because throughout the novel Rushdie makes extensive references to the body and biopolitics. But it must go along with his concern with the postcolonial history of India as a nation and his ironic manipulation of the myths. The mythical and religious allusions made throughout the novel is deftly intermingled with the fragmented history of postcolonial India. References to Mohammed, Buddha, Moses and Ganesh are made in such a way as to imply the religious diversity of India. Saleem also compares his narrative to religious texts. Thus, the pathos and pains of disability is mixed with and subverts the history of postcolonial India and the various religious myths. Thus, it is quite obvious that Rushdie's representation of Indian history takes a poignant turn when coupled with the theme of disability and though the focus of the 're-presentation' is India's pre and postcolonial history, the pains and marginalization associated with disabled persons also comes to the fore.

However, in "Shiva Trilogy", Amish Tripathi's engagement with myth and history is coloured by his seamless exploration of the idea of disability. In the name of the very first book of the Trilogy, "The Immortals of Meluha", the author invites us to read the novel as an

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imaginative history of a civilization where mythical gods like Shiva, Parvati, Nandi, Daksha etc. are ordinary human beings with imperfections, failings and commonplace human emotions. History mingled with myth projects contemporary reality. Shiva comes as a saviour of the Meluhan civilization to destroy the evil that is eating into its vital river Saraswati which is the source of 'Somras'. But what is evil? Where is evil? In that quest of evil Shiva comes to fall in love with Sati, daughter of Daksha, the King of Meluha. But Sati is a 'Vikarma' woman because in her first marriage she gave birth to a still-born child. In the Meluhan society, Vikarmas are people who suffer with incurable diseases and distresses and their sufferings are explained away as the result of the sins of the previous birth. Shiva destroys the Vikarma law by declaring himself 'Neelkanth' and marries Parvati. In the course of the novel we also come to know about the 'Maika system' and the Nagas who are abhorred by the Meluhans and associates of the Chandravanshis, the main opponent of the Meluhan society and their world view. This first part ends with the defeat of Chandravanshis who also adore Shiva as their savior. Thus, the very first novel of the "Shiva Trilogy" dominantly establishes the theme of disability in Indian myth and history. We come to experience the contemporary problems of cultural xenophobia, war, terrorism, marginalization and criminalization of the disabled persons in the imaginative history and alternative readings of Indian myth. We come to realize that the Meluhan apprehension and xenophobia against a different world view and culture, as represented by the Chandravanshis, is completely baseless. Their own craving for perfection and cultural superiority may give rise to the intolerance in their behaviour. We become curious of the Nagas? Why they are so hated? What are their reality? Are they really evil?

The second part of the 'trilogy' deals with the secret of the Nagas. They are 'cursed' people, born with hideous deformities because of the sins of their previous birth. Deformities like extra hands or horribly misshapen faces. Their presence alone strikes terror of evil. They are not even allowed to live in the "Sapt Sindhu". Ganesha is seen as a prince of the "nagas" and Kali as the sister of Sati, who has been rejected in her birth by her parents because of her

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hideous look. In the course of the action of the novel Shiva comes to realize that the ‘cursed Nagas’ who are hinted at as the root of all ‘evil’ are nothing but deformed peoples long oppressed and hated by the discriminating practices of society. Indeed, the excruciating pain and humiliation faced by the disabled peoples who are denied access to various facilities, resources and rights of the states is a lived reality. As in her influential book, “Extraordinary Bodies: Figuring Physical Disability in American Culture and Literature”, Rosemarie Garland Thomson observes that the centuries old custom of making disabled bodies based on whatever ideals or values one’s culture holds is still in effect in our modern world. Though we do not explain the disabled bodies in terms of God’s judgment or moral value, we explain disability in terms of disease or pathology. In Daksha’s relationship with Kali and Sati’s relationship with Ganesha we come to experience two different ways of dealing with disabled children and their relationship with their parents. We also realize for sure that the hatred towards the Nagas and their exclusion from the Meluhan society is the result of the Meluhans’ fear of the ‘Other’.

In the last part of the Trilogy, Shiva destroys the real evil which, however, is at the root of the perfection of the Meluhan society, the ‘Somras’. The author shows how the ‘perfect’ society of Meluha in its aspiration to be god-like makes use of ‘Somras’ so much that it becomes the cause of the pestilence of Branga and the birth of the Nagas. Similarly, Shiva’s being a ‘Neelkanth’, which is the main reason of attributing the notion of a saviour on his character, is demonstrated by the author as a kind of disability. The author also remarks that the name of Shiva is said to come from the word ‘shava’, meaning a still-born baby.

Here I want to refer to the insight of the great Disability theorist Lennard Davis who in his book, “Enforcing Normalcy: Disability, Deafness and the Body” claims that he likes to focus not so much on the construction of disability as on the construction of normalcy. His argument is that we build our ideas of the ‘normal’ in order to construct a sense of ourselves, as a society and as individual that is predictable and standard. It makes us feel safe and gives

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us a feeling of belonging because our bodies are “like” most others. But this idea of ‘norm’ is itself not natural. It is something society creates to develop their identities and in the process they exclude the ‘abnormal’ as anything that doesn’t fall under the limit of ‘norm’. Thus, it is arguable that the extremely well ordered and perfect society of Meluha created the problem of the Nagas or the Vikarmas or the other exclusionary rules in order to solidify their own sense of perfection and norm.

In the light of above discussion, we may well discern that as a social fact of marginalization and exclusion, disability plays an important role and creates a new ambiance in the ‘re-presentation’ of reality through myth and history. The term ‘disability’ is not easy to define as the term relates not to the physically or cognitively ‘impaired’ bodies but rather to the social and cultural marginalization that accompany non-normative embodiments of the body. The texts that I present and the social, cultural and religious contexts they represent demonstrate that the ‘difference’ between normal and abnormal/deviant is constructed at various times in terms of stigma, criminality, ability and inability, ugliness and wonder. Throughout my study the emphasis is on the fact that the concept of ‘normalcy’ is culturally contingent rather than universal. The various stigmas associated with disabilities of various kinds are dependent on the ideology of the time. Disabling may become enabling with the passage of time and change of ideology in society. So the exclusion and discrimination in terms of disability is always open to contestation and transformation.

However, in connecting myth, history, and the theme of disability Tripathi is very much in the line of Rushdie. In their hands the concepts of ‘normalcy’, Truth (with capital ‘T’), Myth, and History are shaped by the consciousness of the present and hope of the future. History can be seen as linear or cyclical, like a wheel that keeps turning the patterns of development, growth and decay. There cannot be just one version of history. In the coherence theory truth is seen as a relation, not between statement and fact but between one statement and another. “A statement, it is maintained is true if it is shown to cohere, or fit in with all other statements we are prepared to accept” (Walsh 76). No statement or belief is held in

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isolation. It is part of a system that comprises a whole. If we look at the period of history dealt with in our selected novels, we can easily see that it is within the realm of well-documented and recorded history. We are, therefore, not concerned with questions of authenticity but questions of how statements are made to cohere. The texts themselves can, therefore, be construed as statements that seek to alter the configured whole. Here it is not a question of the authenticity of fact but of truth of a higher, more general kind. To use the words of T.S. Eliot, "It is simply a way of controlling, of ordering, of giving a shape and significance to the immense panorama of futility and anarchy which is contemporary history" (177), and though there is much difference between the techniques of representation and narration these two writers are bound by their similar concern of interrogating and subverting the hegemonising "Truth" of Myth, History and Disability.

At the same time, it should also be mentioned that in terms of technique of narration Rushdie and Amish Tripathi are poles apart from each other. While Rushdie's narration is dominated by the postmodernist techniques of magical realism, fantasy, satire, irony and non-linearity, Amish Tripathi's approach is linear and realistic, along with maintaining the narrative suspense like a detective novel. Another aspect of difference is that Tripathi's treatment of myth and history is not completely 'anti-foundationalist'. It subverts the 'official narrative' but keeps the reverence of the hegemonising form of myth and history intact because it is a story told from the point of view of the privileged, of gods and goddesses and kings and queens. But in Rushdie's treatment of myth and history we find that the ordinary individual comes to the fore as a maker of events and major player of history. As Saleem, the narrator protagonist of "Midnight's Children" remarks: "... so that the story I am going to tell, (...) is as likely to be true as anything; as anything, that is to say, except what we were officially told (Rushdie 335).

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