

# Discerning Deliquescent Determinants of (Dis) Ability

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**Abstract:** The conventionality in the conception of disability relies completely on the obviousness of physical and psychological impairment. The manifestation of bodily anomalies while distinguishing the disabled from the able-bodied also focuses on the resultant lives of disadvantage and advantage accrued to them. Such a perception fails to look beyond congenital disability and fathom the existence of disability induced by impeding social environments. This article is an attempt to explore such incapacitating factors in a social milieu within the framework of disability studies. Select gynocentric narratives by novelists Anita Rau Badami, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni and Toni Morrison constitute the frame of reference for this analysis. By employing the social model of disability. Deleuzian philosophy of minority and the theory of intersectionality, this essay seeks to reveal pervasive disabling elements present beneath the veneer of normal lives lead by the non-disabled. Coveted attributes like beauty, exceptional intellect and intuitive powers like clairvoyance certainly seem to be a privilege for those who are endowed with it. But an analysis of lived experiences in the empirical world indicate that the possession of these enabling traits or the quest for it can have deleterious effects disabling lives. Thus this essay is an endeavour to discern how determinants in life facilitating ascent can deliquesce into a disabling descent.

**Keywords:** Deliquescent, minority, bio-social, discrimination, positionality.

The determination and categorisation of individuals as abled and disabled on the basis of the presence or absence of psychosomatic anomalies is a manoeuvre in discrimination and deception because it not only posits the notion of dichotomous lives of privilege and denial, but also undermines the puissant biosocial dimensions inherent in human lives which make it fraught with fragility. It is this perception which constitutes the interpretative logic of the social model of disability in disability studies. This article is an attempt to fathom disability induced by impeding social environments. When sociological aspects come into play, the multiple dimensions and outcomes of social processes reveal the intersection of categories of difference like gender, race, class and disability, the representation of which is found in literary narratives. Select gynocentric narratives by novelists Anita Rau Badami, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni and Toni Morrison shall constitute the frame of reference for this analysis. The objective of the analysis is to discern deliquescent determinants of (dis)ability. Coveted attributes like beauty, exceptional intellect and intuitive powers like clairvoyance certainly seem to be a privilege for those who are endowed with it. But an analysis of lived experiences in the empirical world indicate that the possession of these enabling traits or the quest for it can have deleterious effects disabling lives. Therefore these desired traits in their interaction with the social milieu turn deliquescent or disappear, melding with the cultural ethos destabilising an ability into a disability.

The distinctness “between disability and ability may be grasped superficially in the idea that disability is essentially a “medical matter”, while ability concerns natural gifts, talents, intelligence, creativity, physical prowess, imagination, dedication, the eagerness to strive, including the capacity and desire to strive – in brief, the essence of human spirit” ( Siebers 7). The understanding that ability gets conferred on an individual with the possession of the aforementioned attributes is fallacious as illustrated by the lived experiences of characters in

the novels *Tamarind Mem* by Anita Rau Badami and *The Mistress of Spices* by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, while the disability that impinges on the lives of the individuals due to dispossession of desired stereotypical traits like beauty finds portrayal in Toni Morrison's narrative *The Bluest Eye*.

A perustration of the trajectory of the beautiful Begum Haseena's life narrated in the novel *Tamarind Mem* reveals how the cherished natural gift of beauty can be disabling. Daughter of a milkman, Begum Haseena "was more beautiful than a thousand jewels" (87). Her captivating beauty enamours the Nawab of Ratnapura when he sees her on the outskirts of his city. She becomes the youngest queen of the Nawab's harem. He called her "his thithali" (89) cherishing the memory when he sighted her for the first time, chasing a butterfly. Her bewitching beauty incited the jealousy of the king's other queens and they tried to hurt her in despicable ways. So the king had a maze built into the palace and the queens lived in separate apartments within the maze. But the Nawab's obsessive possessiveness of his youngest queen and his superstitious belief that she might be affected by evil eye, turned Begum Haseena's life into a living hell.

... so possessive of her was he that she was allowed none of the finery the other queens had.... The Nawab Sahib was afraid that the evil eye might touch her, you see. He also insisted on her wearing heavy black robes, even in the privacy of her apartment, so that nobody would see her beauty but him. Poor butterfly, she languished in the labyrinth, yearning for the bright fields of her childhood, the gay mirrored skirts of a milkmaid, for the colour and light denied her. (89)

Though she is called “thithali”, the uninhibited freedom of mobility and the lustre of vibrant colours that are synonymous with a butterfly are denied to her, and she is constrained to lead a life of confinement. Begum Haseena’s beauty which elevates her from the ranks of a commoner to that of royalty becomes her boon as well as bane. The life of denials is foisted on her because she possessed the natural gift of beauty – a quality acknowledged, appreciated and aspired for, can be explained through Giles Deleuze’s concept of minority and the theory of intersectionality. According to Deleuze minority “...is a substantial position that lacks power; it looks for escape lines (ligne de fuite) from institutions, political order and social structure. Minority is not a static position nor is it a quality or characteristic. It is a process of ever-changing identities, of potentiality of becoming...” (Krebs). The unfortunate queen becoming a minority establishes her position which intersects with her gender, imperial class and the patriarchal culture, divesting her of agency. Thus beauty, an attribute of the abled in the intersection of gender, class and culture functions as an enhancer and diminisher of individual status simultaneously.

While being bestowed with beauty cannot with certitude entail privileged ability, being deprived of beauty and the quest for it jeopardises the prospect of a normal life inducing disability. Pecola Breedlove, the protagonist in Toni Morrison’s novel *The Bluest Eye* is an eleven-year-old black girl whose life becomes disabled and dysfunctional inspite of being free from physio-psychological impairments. Pecola’s gender and her race intersect to place her at a disadvantageous position. Impinging on her gender, race and class is the dominant White culture which acknowledges and privileges the “master aesthetic” – the stereotypical yardstick of feminine beauty in White culture – “fair skinned, yellow haired and blue-eyed” (14). Her racial identity

defines and devalues her as ugly. Pecola is ignored at home and school because of her “ugliness”. “Long hours she sat looking in the mirror, trying to discover the secret of the ugliness, the ugliness that made her ignored or despised at school, by teachers and classmates alike. She was the only member of her class who sat alone at a double desk” (34). Companionless, unloved and cast aside, Pecola’s lack of beauty becomes her socially-induced and internalised disability, which leaves her with dysfunctional familial and social ties. Elaborating on disability Tobin Siebers rightly points out that “disability is not a mental or physical defect but a cultural and minority identity. To call disability an identity is to recognise that it is not a biological or natural property but an elastic social category, both subject to social control and capable of effecting class and race.” Pecola’s “stigmatised social position” ( Mitchell, Synder) constituted by her gender, class and race shatters the assumption of ability and disability centred on being able-bodied and impaired. Her rejection and exclusion at home and in social spaces compels her to fervently pray for “blue-eyes” which she believed would make her look different and beautiful and in turn bring about a difference in the deliberate disdain with which she was treated. But unfortunately Pecola’s quest for “blue-eyes” turns out to be a debilitating obsession destroying her sanity and disabling her with insanity.

In addition to the presence or absence of cherished traits, stifling social environs too impose disability. The causal factors are integral components like structural and systemic inequality constituting the social structure. The entrenchment of such disparity is the outcome of societal predilection for patriarchy and in an atmosphere infused with gender hierarchy, women are denied the right to realise their ambitions in life. Such demeaning denials disable them even if they are able-bodied, by restraining

them from exercising their superior intellect or any other talent they possess. Such discriminatory social mores become the *raison d'être* to acknowledge disability as a social construct. Therefore as Siebers asserts:

Disability studies does not treat disease or disability, hoping to cure or avoid them; it studies the social meanings, symbols, and stigmas attached to disability and identity and asks how they relate to enforced systems of exclusion and oppression, attacking the widespread belief that having an able body and mind determines whether one is a quality human being. (3,4)

An instance of an able-bodied girl's remarkable intellectual competence in Chemistry becoming redundant finds portraiture in the novel *Tamarind Mem* by Anita Rau Badami. Alamelu was academically inclined, loved the university and had planned to pursue her post-graduation and doctoral studies in her favourite subject Chemistry.

“Alamelu wanted to spend a life time with sulphides, oxides, carbides, powders, ores and solutions, all those substances frothing and fuming in bell-jars and test-tubes which was why she was reluctant to tell her parents about the three loafers from Dominic's college across the road... . One evening they followed her into the colony and one of them pulled out a knife. With a single stroke he sliced open the back of Alamelu's *kameez* and a little of her back as well. (140,141)

Trapped in her intersectional labyrinth constituted by her gender, class and culture, Alamelu's conditioned response to her plight is silence, lest her parents put an end to

her education and get her married, to save their family honour from being besmirched. She suffers the ignominy in silence until it spirals into a violent outrage of her modesty in public. The incident relegates the aspiring young girl to the domestic sphere from the social sphere annulling her chances of continuing her education and realising her dreams. Alamelu's story is a case in point which proves that for women, the intersection of gender, class and a misogynistic patriarchal culture abrogating their agency, obliterates their space in the social sphere, denying them access to opportunities and disabling their adroitness. The disempowered status which a prejudiced social environment compels women to be in, finds an apt affirmation in Young's expression that "women in sexist society are physically handicapped... insofar as we learn to live out our existence in accordance with the definition that patriarchal culture assigns to us we are physically inhibited, confined, positioned, and objectified" (171).

In *The Mistress of Spices*, by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni the protagonist Tilo is endowed with psychic powers. Her prowess in clairvoyance enables her to gain access to the powerful "First Mother" (34) who trains her to be the mistress of spices – the knowledge of the power of spices to look into troubled hearts and their future and alleviate their misery. But to become a mistress conferred with enviable power, and to exercise it she must abide by conditions which are inviolable. Tilo must give herself to selfless service, giving up her right to bodily integrity, sacrificing her youth and embracing senescence. Relinquishing her desires she must swear allegiance and unflinching fidelity to the superlative power of the spices. She must lead her life within the boundaries defined for her in a place on the planet decided by the "First

Mother” (34). It is evident that the ability to prognosticate, disables her personal liberty to steer the course of her own life.

Thus the reflections on the social model of disability vis-à-vis the lived experiences of individuals, offer an insight into refractions on the avowed concept of ability. It reiterates the negation of indefectible physicality as ability and discerns how determinants in life facilitating ascent, in an inequitable social milieu, can deliquesce into a disabling descent. Therefore disability in the trajectory of life is an inherent aspect of fragile human existence.



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