

## **Questioning the Self: Exploring Disability and Body Aesthetics**

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**Abstract:**

*The human body is characterized by its diverse physical traits, appearance, and abilities. Certain bodies are prioritized while others are marginalized and considered 'other' due to social and political discourse. Individuals who conform to predetermined cultural norms are accepted, while those who do not meet these standards are often labeled as 'deviant,' 'disabled,' or 'imperfect. Disabilities can be conceptualized using social and medical models. This study examines significant texts and theoretical approaches and cinema that contribute to the discourse on the aesthetics of disability. It explores how authors employ structure, language, and symbolism to resist ableist ideologies and propose alternative aesthetic paradigms. The paper also considers how disability intersects with other areas of identity such as race, gender, sexuality, and socioeconomic status, offering a more layered understanding of disabled embodiment. By mapping these developments, this research highlights the transformative power of disability aesthetics—not only in the realm of literature but also in reshaping broader cultural ideas about identity, body politics, and creative expression.*

**Keywords:**

*Disability, Aesthetic body, Intersectionality, Identity, Politics*

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## Introduction

The medical model considers individuals with certain physical, intellectual, psychological, and mental impairments to be disabled. According to medical science, disability is an individual's personal condition associated with limitations in activity and difficulty adapting to one's surroundings through therapy, rehabilitation, and remedies. Conversely, the social model posits that disability is not about a person's medical or physical condition but rather concerns the interaction between individuals with impairments and their social environment. Disability, in this context, refers to the discrimination experienced by people with certain physical or mental characteristics and 'impairments' in society. As stated in the *Philosophy Stanford Encyclopedia* of (2022), "It is society which disables physically impaired people." Disability, therefore, is a factor that compounds our limitations as a result of unnecessary isolation and exclusion from full social participation. *The Disability Studies Reader*, edited by Lennard J. Davis, is a foundational and interdisciplinary anthology that redefines how disability is perceived, discussed, and theorized. The collection compiles a range of critical essays from scholars in literary studies, sociology, cultural theory, education, and political science to challenge traditional, medicalized understandings of disability. Rather than viewing disability as a personal misfortune or biological deficit, the anthology frames it as a cultural and political category shaped by social norms, institutional structures, and historical contexts. As Davis states in the introduction, "Disability should be seen not merely as a medical or biological condition but as a cultural construction, as a way of thinking about the body and its relation to society" (Davis, *Disability Studies Reader* xvi).

One of the volume's core critiques is of the societal obsession with "normalcy," a concept historically tied to apartheid, industrial capitalism, and standardized education systems. "The very idea of what is normal," Davis explains, "is a construct that has been used to marginalize those who do not fit within narrowly defined parameters of ability" (xvii). Through essays that analyze media, literature, law, and public policy, the reader embellishes how disabled individuals are often portrayed either as tragic victims or heroic figures, thereby contradicting their full humanity and agency.

**"Disability Aesthetics"** by **Tobin Siebers** is a landmark study that reconsiders established notions of beauty, artistic standards, and cultural value by placing disability at the center of aesthetic inquiry. Siebers contends that conventional aesthetic traditions often disregard or devalue disabled bodies by privileging ideals of harmony, flawlessness, and normative physicality. In opposition, he asserts that disability should be recognized as a vital and transformative aesthetic category that

challenges how we interpret representation, subjectivity, and physical presence in art. Through analysis of literature, fine art, design, and critical theory, Siebers illustrates how disability adds depth and complexity to creative practices by emphasizing difference, fragility, and interconnectedness. He expands the concept of aesthetics to account for the diverse experiences and expressions of disabled individuals, arguing that these perspectives offer innovative ways to approach cultural production and appreciation. Ultimately, *Disability Aesthetics* urges a shift toward a more equitable artistic world—one that values diversity not as deviation but as a fundamental element of creative and social life.

### **Growing (Dis)able Differently: Exploring Indian Writings on Disability**

Disability studies in India did not flourish as in other Western countries; however, many Indian disability theorists are working to combat the long-standing misconceptions and biases that are pervasive in Indian society and theorists such as Anita Ghai and Renu Addlakha. Mehrotra and Shubhangi Vaidya are currently working in this field. Additionally through their autobiography's authors and disability rights activists like Malini Chib, Shivani Gupta, Preeti Monga and Naseema Hurzuk have criticized society for mistreating them and struggled for their rights and accepted themselves with their deformed bodies.

Ved Mehta's autobiography *Face to Face* (1957), which recollected his experiences as a disabled person, is considered innovative in India. Autobiographies, as first-person accounts, are regarded as the most genuine descriptions. In disability studies, many influential works are biographies and autobiographies of disabled writers, whose ideas transfigure the field. For example, Simi Linton's *My Body Politic* significantly altered non-disabled authors' perspectives on disability in the UK. Additionally, several notable novels featuring protagonists or disabled characters have paved the way for disability studies in Indian academia. For example, in Anita Desai's *Clear Light of Day* (1980), Baba is a child with autism and his sister Bimla (Bim) is his primary caretaker. This novel focuses on the challenges faced by families with disabled children. Bimla's premature aging and stress illustrate the troubles and tribulations that caregivers endure.

In Salman Rushdie's novel *Shame* (1983) the character Sufiya Zinobia, nicknamed 'shame' by her mother, experiences psychological disorders and hearing impairment. Her mental braking symbolizes innocence and purity. Society's constant attacks on her due to her psychic disorder affect her psyche, leading to mental instability. It remains suspense whether her condition or societal pressure caused her to become the embodiment of shame. In *The Moor's Last Sigh*, the main character Moreas (Moor) has progeria, causing his body to age twice as fast. Rushdie's portrayal

of disabled characters encompasses various disabilities, both physical and mental, highlighting the reactions of society and the labeling of these individuals as ‘shame’. Indra Sinha’s *Animal’s People* (2007) presents Animal, who walks on all fours due to a gas leak incident referred to as “that night” The gas leak incident caused his spine to become twisted and his backside to rise above his head. This tragedy resulted in numerous deaths and suffering, including his parents. Khaufpur was transformed into a village of disabled survivors and a graveyard for the deceased. Local leaders utilized Animals to monitor outsiders who came to provide medical assistance.

The book, *One Little Finger* by Malini Chib took Chib almost two years to complete due to her physical limitations, and was written using only her one little functional finger. In her interview with Priyanka Dasgupta, she evinces :

“I educated myself, learned to type with my one little finger and speak through the Lightwriter”(https://m.timesofindia.com).

ShreyaChowdhary in the context of disability marks the similar ideas as:

“In late 1998, at the University of London, she was one of the first international students with disability.” (https://m.timesofindia.com).

Renu Addlakha’s review of *One Little Finger* presents Malini Chib’s autobiography as a powerful testament to resilience and self-advocacy in the face of physical disability. Born with cerebral palsy, Chib recounts her life with wit and honesty, narrating her journey from early medical misdiagnosis and societal prejudice to becoming a successful professional and activist. As Addlakha notes, the autobiography “is not just the story of one person’s battle against adversity and prejudice but also the story of an institution and a movement” (Addlakha 498), referencing Chib’s role in founding ADAPT and her connection to the broader disability rights movement through her mother, Mithu Alur.

Chib’s narrative reflects deeply on the differences in attitudes toward disability in India and the UK. She praises the care and education she received at Cheyne, a special school in London, where she felt she “grew from strength to strength” (Addlakha 499). In contrast, she found Indian institutions isolating, inaccessible, and marred by negative social attitudes. Her time at St. Xavier’s College in Mumbai, where she needed help just to access classrooms, reflects the physical and social barriers that continue to marginalize disabled individuals in India (Addlakha 499).

The paper also touches on the emotional aspects of Chib’s life, including her longing for companionship and romantic connection. She candidly observes how her speech impediments and visible disability deterred men from engaging

with her meaningfully, writing, “the ‘poor little bastards’ had never been taught to reach beyond their own needs” (Addlakha 499). This honesty underscores how disabled individuals, especially women, are often excluded from normative romantic and sexual expectations.

A recurring theme is Chib’s internal conflict between her identity and how others perceive her. She poignantly asks, “Did they realize that my mind was normal? Did they consider thinking that my desires were just the same as theirs?” (Addlakha 500). This illustrates the disconnect between internal identity and external perceptions—a central concern in disability narratives. Despite facing exclusion in London’s job market, Chib ultimately found success in Mumbai, suggesting that professional achievement often depends not only on qualifications but also on social context and advocacy networks. Her narrative, Addlakha concludes, resonates globally as it highlights shared challenges such as infantilization, overprotectiveness, and sexual marginalization of disabled people. The autobiography is praised for its “healthy realism and an endearing gentleness” that makes it accessible and impactful for a wide audience (Addlakha 500). It emphasizes that disabled persons experience a range of emotions through various life events, and their struggles can be portrayed with both sensitivity and humor. The autobiography advocates for the equal inclusion of disabled individuals in mainstream society while deepening our understanding of their lives. This social conditioning leads disabled women to believe they are asexual and hide behind a facade of indifference towards their sexuality. In a research paper, “Representation Of Disability, Femininity And Sexual Agency In One Little Finger And No Looking Back” Dr Tejaswini Nandkumar Deo addresses the intersections of disability with other aspects of identity, such as gender and sexuality. Further she threw light on how people with disabilities face systematic exclusion, isolation and social disempowerment.

The lives of women with disabilities in India remain largely unexplored, but in recent years individuals with disabilities have begun to challenge their marginalization and integrate themselves into mainstream culture through autobiographical writing. Chib recounted her adolescent experiences in a co-educational college with non-disabled students. She notes that most boys viewed her as childlike, attributing this to their shyness, uncertainty about how to interact, and concern for their masculine image.

This autobiography asserts that disabled individuals can function independently when provided with proper infrastructure and access. The autobiography highlights the contrasting attitudes towards disability in India and the West. Chib states-

“In India, if you are disabled, you are simply not welcome”, and “Societal perceptions in India are as fractured and potholed as its infrastructure. Till today, I regularly catch people staring at me as if I were a monkey in a zoo. The polite amongst the masses whispers pointing at me. The rude ones talk disparagingly and pityingly about me right when I am there as if I don’t exist or I exist only for their amusement and ill-informed judgment.”(97)

The treatment of disabled individuals in Western countries tends to be more progressive, with legal, societal, and technological systems designed to foster independence and inclusion. In contrast, many Eastern countries, as exemplified in MaliniChib’s *One Little Finger*, face deep-rooted cultural, infrastructural, and economic challenges, which often lead to marginalization. Chib’s book, while rooted in her Indian experience, speaks to the universal need for greater empathy, accessibility, and equal opportunity for disabled people across the world. Prithviraj Singh Chauchan also highlights his views on the differences in Eastern and Western countries about disability in his “Attitude, Accessibility and Disability: Decoding the Trajectory of Exclusion in MaliniChib’s *One Little Finger*”. He further mentions that during her time in London, Malini was admitted to specialized schools: Roger Ascham School in Cambridge, where she ‘Grew strength to strength’ (11).

### **Conclusion**

The exploration of disability in literature and cinema, as surveyed, reveals a significant evolution in the representation of disabled bodies—from marginal and pathologized portrayals to more nuanced, complex, and humanized depictions. This body of work underscores the intersectionality of disability with race, gender, class, and sexuality, and how these representations can either reinforce or challenge normative ideologies.

Writings by scholars such as Lennard J. Davis and Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, alongside cultural critiques and cinematic analyses, have been pivotal in shifting the conversation from medical models to social and political understandings of disability. Films like *Black*, *Margarita With A Straw*, and *Taare Zameen Par* serve as notable examples of how mainstream media has begun to engage with disabled identities in ways that are at times empathetic, yet still frequently constrained by tropes of inspiration or pity.

Despite this growing body of critical engagement, a notable research gap persists. Much of the existing scholarship has focused either on Western texts or on select canonical representations. There is limited examination of non-Western or regional literatures and cinemas that portray disability in culturally specific contexts. Additionally, while disability studies made considerable theoretical strides, there is

still a scarcity of interdisciplinary analyses that blend literary criticism, film theory, and disability theory in a cohesive framework. Furthermore, the voices and narratives of disabled creators themselves remain underrepresented in academic discourse.

Disability is an interdisciplinary approach that covers a broad range of conditions, including physical, sensory, cognitive, intellectual, developmental, and mental health issues, which can hamper a person's ability to engage in certain activities or interact with their environment. It also includes the social and environmental barriers that prevent full societal participation. According to the World Health Organization (WHO), 'disability is not merely a medical condition but rather the result of the interaction between individuals with health conditions and the barriers they encounter in society and the environment'. Indian Literature and Cinema offers a deep exploration of the intersection of disability, gender, and societal views.

These works function as autobiographical texts, a form of resistance, personal stories of pains and disability that also address large social issues. By sharing their personal experiences, the authors transform their lives into metaphors for the broader struggle against discrimination and marginalization, creating narratives that are both personal and political.

Examining disability through Literature and Cinema, reveals the complex nature of disabled identity and autonomy. These works deliver conventional portrayals of disability by depicting their main characters not as mere recipients of care or subjects of sympathy, but also as individuals with intricate desires, intelligence, and self-determination. The aesthetics of disability in these works question the traditional perception of beauty and 'normalcy', presenting alternative representations that celebrate disabled bodies and experiences. Additionally, these works explore often neglected aspects of disabled life, such as sexuality and the quest for independence. By addressing these dimensions, they enlarge the conversation on disability, creating space for narratives that recognize pleasure, agency, and emotional depth. To summarise, these works not only contribute to the field of disability studies but also advocate for inclusive and genuine portrayals of disabled individuals in literature and Cinema. Future research could delve into the intersection of disability with other social identities, enlarging our understanding of the various experiences within disabled communities. Through such kind of exploration, we move closer to a world where every individual's story is acknowledged, heard, and valued.

The literature and cinematic narratives examined under the theme of the *Aesthetics of Disability* reveal a dynamic shift in how disability is perceived, represented, and aesthetically expressed. Autobiographical works like Malini Chib's

One Little Finger, Shivani Gupta's *No Looking Back*, and Naseema Hurzuk's *The Incredible Story* provide powerful personal testimonies that challenge societal stereotypes and illuminate the lived experiences of disabled individuals. These narratives move beyond the conventional 'tragedy' framework, offering instead stories of resilience, autonomy, and the redefinition of identity. Each autobiography critiques the societal structures that marginalize the disabled while celebrating the agency and accomplishments of the authors, asserting their right to be seen, heard, and represented authentically.

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