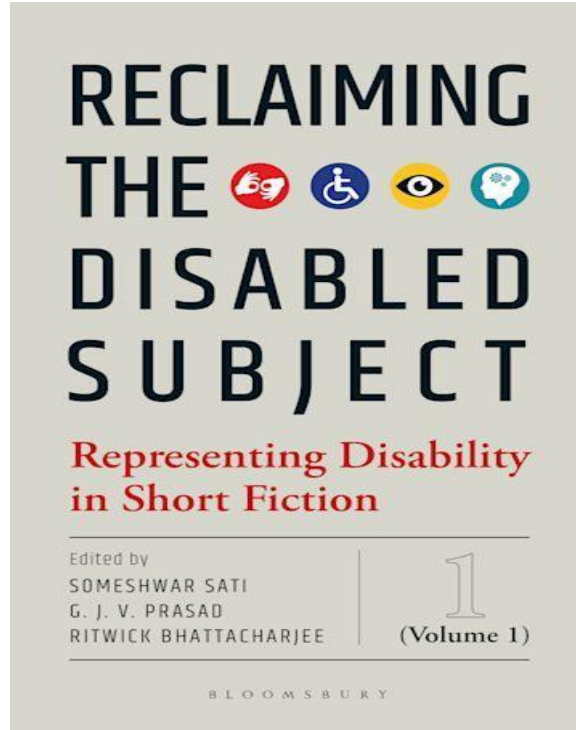


Someshwar Sati, G.J.V. Prasad, and Ritwick Bhattacharjee (Eds). 2022. *Reclaiming the Disabled Subject: Representing Disability in Short Fiction*, Volume 1. New Delhi: Bloomsbury India. xii+288 pages. ISBN: 978-93-54353-30-7.



Normative and ableist forces, in conscious and unconscious ways, disable “bodominds” which are sociopolitically constituted material entities that emerge from structural contexts and individual experiences (Price 271). This disablement not only marginalises persons with disabilities but also enforces control over their everyday life, diminishing their subjectivity through social, cultural, political, lingual, literary, medical, and policy-oriented exclusions. The volume under review anthologises and translates into English seventeen short stories written in twelve different Indian languages with a view to writing back to such forces. As the title suggests, the volume intends to “reclaim” the “disabled subject” – and it does so by identifying and subjectifying disabled bodyminds within normative structures by examining narratives across societies, cultures, and languages in India. The translators trace such normative structures and create space for disability subjectivity through their translations; the editors introduce the stories

by contextualising them within the purview of disability experience. They together identify how such experiences are rooted in the idea of “normalcy” in societies, cultures, politics, languages and thus, literature, where authors often resort to exploiting the bodies and experiences of persons with disabilities for narrative gains and conformist ideations. To reclaim is “to reject,” “to demand the restoration or return,” and “to win back” (“reclaim”). The editors too “reject” normative ableism and acknowledge the pre-discursive space for persons with disabilities, which is why persons with disabilities in these short stories are also translated as subjects. The book calls for a collaborative academic space for persons with disabilities while reclaiming a definite – *the* disabled subject.

The editors point out that although hegemonic normative structures have marginalised persons with disabilities, it “has not resulted in their representational erasure from literature” (1). However, while academicians turn to gender, race, class, religion, caste, and ethnicity for critical enquiries as a matter of course, disability as a vector of oppression is yet to be recognised as a valid academic concern in India. The editors emphasise that this has led to academic ableism, so that even scholars working on “the representations of marginalised subjectivities” (1) are unable to identify disability texts unless directed. It is to counter this attitude and to build a corpus for taking forward literary and cultural disability studies in the country that the editors have put together this anthology about disability experiences and disabling conditions in India. Anne Waldschmidt, writing about this book, notes that “literary narratives about the experiences and lives of people with disabilities living in countries of the global South are rare” and that this anthology of “Indian short stories dealing with disability” aims “to fill these gaps” (i).

E. Santosh Kumar’s “Moonnu Andhanmar Anaye Vivarikkunnu” (“Three Blind Men Describe an Elephant”, trans. Shalini Rachel), for example, is a retelling of an age-old Indian parable of visually-impaired persons describing an elephant, viciously propagated as material logic to invalidate the reality of the visually impaired. Santosh’s version, however, calls for an inclusive reality, proposing that one can know only certain aspects of reality, and thus one’s judgements are necessarily relative to those of others. Although Santosh Kumar “does not allow the absence of sight to govern the realities of the three characters in the story,” they make the narrator apprehend “the fragility of the divide” between his able world and the world of the visually impaired (235-236).

Through translations of stories such as Medha Trivedi’s “Vishakha” (trans. Nilufer Bharucha), Ishwar Petlikar’s “Lohini Sagai” (“Ties of Blood”, trans. Shilpa Das), Rabindranath Tagore’s “Subha” (trans. Banibrata Mahanta), Mahadevi Varma’s “Gungiya” (trans. Shubhra Dubey), T. Jayakanthan’s “Kurai Piravi” (“Incomplete Being”, trans. Hemchandran Karah), and Rashid Jahan’s “Woh” (“That Woman”, trans. Shilpaa Anand and Aneesa Mushtaq), this volume also writes back to the idea of “the good girl/woman” that pervades Indian

culture at large, and is operative either as a presence or an absence in all these stories. In “That Woman,” the female narrator Safia records the experiences of *nob* – the unnamed woman who has two gaping red holes instead of a nose. This aberrant corporeality becomes enough reason for her to be called a “slut,” a “prostitute” who is “obscene and characterless” (129-131). The disgust and hatred for her are so much that nobody ever sat on the chair she occupied. What begins in the story as disgust for her “wretched face” (130) culminates in old Naseeban assaulting her verbally and physically. Subha, in Tagore’s story, is denied agency in marriage and rejected after it. Her father hurriedly arranges a match for her by hiding her disability, but when her husband discovers the deceit, he brings “home a bride who could speak in a language he could understand” (83): the language of ableist patriarchy. While Subha’s husband does not deem her fit to be a wife, the protagonist of Rashid Jahan’s story is not deemed fit even to be present among the able-bodied.

The gamut of disability experiences in the volume is complemented by narratives about the complexities of caregiving. Mangu’s mother in “Ties of Blood” subtly resists the medicalisation and institutionalisation of disability when she tells everyone: “If as a mother I cannot be a caregiver to her, how can I expect the people in the hospital to look after her with love and affection?” (49). In the same breath, she also likens Mangu to “infirm or disabled cattle” (49). “Vishakha” narrates the story of a woman deserted by her husband, who has to take care of her daughter with a psychiatric disability. Both Vishakha and her daughter Chandudi are stigmatised for birthing/being a disabled person. Vishakha has to keep Chandudi inside the house and away from other children. This stigmatisation is also the reason that the mother in Kalindi Charan Panigrahi’s “Pangu” (“Handicapped”, trans. Subhendu Mund) “could not lift her face in embarrassment and desolation” (63) and could only wish for her son’s death.

The translations also problematise our quotidian, ableist use of language. Along with translating the stories into English, the translators have ensured a language acceptable and respectable to persons with disabilities. While Tagore resists the ableist metanarrative of languagelessness of the mute and hearing impaired by acknowledging the alterity of Subha’s language, Banibrata Mahanta has translated, described, and subjectified Subha as “mute” (78), identifying her disability as a performative challenge and not a lack. Likewise, in “Ties of Blood,” Shilpa Das introduces Mangu as one whose “hearing was impaired and who was mentally disabled,” whereas others simply called her “mad” (49). While the translations retain the essence of the original language, they also respond to the topological placement and consequent typological disqualification through lingual discursive practices emerging out of ableist structures.

The book creates a unified space within which the editors call for a necessity of the heterogeneous disability discourse. In “Khitin Babu” by

Sachidanand Hiranandan Vatsyayan “Ajnyeya” (trans. Ritwick Bhattacharjee), we see the “symbolic attestations” (180) of the supercrip, which is imposed on persons with disabilities. The husbands of Subha and Gungiya reject them and subsequently secure their abled normalcy and patriarchal privilege. P. Padmarajan’s “Thakara” (trans. Sanju Thomas) shows how people, when faced with a reality that challenges normative structures, turn to “insidious ways of erasure” (152) of disability. In T. Jayakanthan’s “Kuravi Piravi,” Rajaram refuses to employ Selvi – a girl with anaemia, disfigured teeth, malformed face, and mind of a twelve-year-old – as an ayah for his baby boy Balu and chooses Ranjitham instead. Steeped in the stigmatising structuring of normalcy, he “cannot help puking” (Karah 107) when he looks at Selvi’s face. However, when Balu is afflicted with small-pox, it is Selvi who takes care of him, and it is only when she is mortally sick that Rajaram “discards the charade of normalcy” (104).

These narratives reflect Davis’s argument that “the ‘problem’ is not the person with disabilities; the problem is the way that normalcy is constructed to create the ‘problem’ of the disabled person” (Davis 24). Persons with disabilities, it is argued, “do not need *any* translation” (Sati and Prasad 2) but a translation from *their* language to the written language. This disability “turn” in translation can subjectify them and write back to silencing processes in the form of activist and interventionist strategies (15).

The editors have foregrounded the “cultural articulation of disability” (110), struck at “processes of silencing” (75), and attempted to dismantle the “structural instability” (181) for persons with disabilities that ensue from normative discursive practices within Indian societies. The anthology asserts a space for persons with corporeal, performative, and cognitive differences who do not fit into the essential normative definitions and expectations of “bodymind.” Each story is preceded by an introduction that critically engages with the story from the disability studies perspective. Although these critical introductions affect the experience of reading, they guide readers through ableist ideological layers and familiarise them with disability subjectivity and normative discourses in disability texts. The translations, however, could have included translators’ notes to familiarise the readers with the issues that they encounter in the process of translation, and the lingual and contextual transitions being affected in the course of the translations. Such an approach could probably have done more justice to the efforts that the translators have taken.

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