

Culture, Norms, and Disability: Reflections on Literary and Cultural Narratives

The representation of people with disabilities in literature has undergone significant transformation over time, mirroring shifts in societal attitudes, cultural norms, and ethical frameworks. Far from being sidelined or reduced to mere metaphors or symbols, characters with disabilities in early twentieth-century Hindi and Bengali literature were often portrayed as integral components of the social fabric, offering a more complex, humane, and inclusive vision of human diversity. This paper explores the nuanced and sensitive representations of disability in selected literary texts, including Hindi short stories such as "Bedi" (1929) and "Dukhiya" (1926) by Jai Shankar Prasad, and "Khitin Babu" (1957) by Agyeya, alongside Bengali novels like *Arthamanartham* (1933) by Saradindu Bandopadhyay and *Putul Nacher Itikotha* (1936) by Manik Bandopadhyay, all examined through their English translations. These narratives challenge conventional and often stigmatizing views of disability by presenting it not as a condition that invites pity, fear, or moral judgment, but as a natural and constitutive aspect of human existence. Through richly drawn characters and socially embedded narratives, these works resist marginalization and foreground the lived experiences of disabled individuals within their communities. The selected texts further demonstrate how literature has historically functioned as a powerful medium for fostering empathy and reconfiguring societal norms surrounding disability, effectively laying the intellectual and ethical groundwork for what would later emerge as Disability Studies, long before its formal institutionalization as an academic discipline. By foregrounding disability as a legitimate and meaningful way of being in the world, these narratives reject reductive frameworks that view disability solely through the lenses of tragedy, deficiency, or "overcoming." Instead, they offer alternative modes of representation in which characters with disabilities are portrayed as complex, emotionally rich, and socially engaged individuals who defy simplistic categorizations and normative expectations. In doing so, these works challenge dominant cultural narratives and invite readers to reconsider assumptions about normalcy, productivity, and social worth. This paper also examines the broader social, cultural, and institutional contexts of the early twentieth century that shaped literary depictions of disability in Hindi and Bengali literature. It engages with prevailing cultural practices, social hierarchies, and normative frameworks that influenced public perceptions and structured the everyday lives of people with disabilities. By situating literary representations within their historical and cultural milieu, the paper addresses critical questions of inclusivity, visibility, and representation, demonstrating how literature has played a crucial role in advancing a more nuanced and ethical understanding of disability. Ultimately, the paper argues for the enduring relevance of these early literary works in contemporary debates within Disability Studies and cultural criticism, underscoring their contribution to ongoing discussions about representation, human diversity, and social justice.