

Disability, Identity, and Transformation: A Critical Study of Major H. P. S. Ahluwalia's Narrative in Relation to Marilyn J. Phillip's Transformational Process

In the twenty-first century, disability studies in India have emerged as an expanding and increasingly visible field of inquiry, marked by a growing number of life narratives authored by persons with disabilities themselves. These narratives signal a crucial shift in representation, allowing disabled individuals to articulate their lived experiences and assert control over their identities. However, such a proliferation of disability life writings was largely absent in the twentieth century. It was during this earlier period, particularly in the second half of the century, that figures like Major H. P. S. Ahluwalia began to narrate their own stories, marking an important transitional moment in Indian disability discourse. This period represents a time when persons with disabilities in India were just beginning to reclaim agency over their social images by speaking through autobiographical narratives.

Ahluwalia's disability was the result of a spinal injury sustained during the Indo-Pak War of 1965, an event that radically altered the trajectory of his life. His experience of what he himself describes as a "severe handicap" necessitates narration, echoing G. Thomas Couser's assertion that while the "normal body" can pass without explanation, the deviant or impaired body calls for a story. The need to narrate disability thus arises not merely from personal impulse but from social pressures that demand justification, interpretation, and meaning-making.

Ahluwalia's case is particularly compelling because of his pre-impairment identity as an Indian army officer, a successful mountaineer, and a symbol of physical endurance and masculine achievement, having climbed Mount Everest. Within dominant social frameworks, he embodied the ideal of the strong, capable, and desirable male figure. Consequently, the onset of disability poses a profound challenge to his sense of self, as he is forced to confront the painful realization that he may never again be regarded as a "whole man" according to conventional standards of masculinity and bodily integrity.

As John M. Kinder observes, disabled war veterans are often expected to remain optimistic about recovery and steadfast in their belief in rehabilitation, reflecting broader cultural expectations of resilience, patriotism, and masculine fortitude. Ahluwalia's life before impairment—marked by physical exploration, discipline, and rigorous training—continues to shape his self-perception even after his injury, sustaining a deep passion for life and achievement despite bodily limitations. This tension between past identity and present reality forms a crucial axis of his narrative, revealing the emotional and psychological complexities of living with disability in a society that equates worth with physical ability.

This paper seeks to examine Ahluwalia's autobiography *Higher Than Everest: Memoirs of a Mountaineer* (1973) through the theoretical framework proposed by Marilyn J. Phillip, who outlines four stages in the transformational process of disability experience: marginalization, retreat, renegotiation, and emergence. By applying this model, the paper aims to investigate whether and how these stages are structured and articulated within Ahluwalia's narrative as a disabled war veteran in late twentieth-century India.

The analysis will explore how his text negotiates experiences of social exclusion and internal conflict, moments of withdrawal and introspection, processes of redefining identity, and eventual re-emergence into public life with a transformed sense of self. In doing so, the study highlights the significance of disability life writing not only as personal testimony but also as a powerful cultural intervention that reshapes understandings of disability, masculinity, and agency within the Indian socio-historical context.