

Gendered Experiences of Disability: Reading Disability, Identity and Agency in Select Indian Life Narratives

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Abstract : *Disability is often discussed as though its social consequences are gender-neutral, yet gender shapes the meanings attached to bodily difference, dependence, sexuality, productivity, marriage and social identity. This paper examines that problem through Naseema Hurzuk's Naseema: The Incredible Story, Preeti Monga's The Other Senses, and Shivani Gupta's No Looking Back, read as select Indian life narratives. The paper asks how disability is differently interpreted when the disabled subject is a woman rather than a man and why the consequences of disability may become more severe for women within patriarchal social structures. Drawing on feminist disability studies, disability life-writing scholarship and research on disabled masculinities, the paper places the three women's narratives in dialogue with scholarship on disabled men in India and elsewhere. James Staples's India-specific work is particularly important because it demonstrates that disability does not have a single meaning for men: impairment may challenge masculinity, but men may also reconstruct masculine authority through work, family roles and other performances of gender. By contrast, the selected women's narratives reveal how disability is frequently read through expectations concerning marriageability, femininity, sexuality, dependence, appearance and social respectability. The comparison does not suggest that disabled men are free from discrimination or that all disabled women experience disability more severely in every circumstance. Rather, it argues that the social and relational consequences of disability are gendered, and that women's disability is often compounded by patriarchal expectations that regulate their bodies and life choices. The paper therefore examines the proposition that disability affects women more severely than men primarily in social, cultural, relational and identity terms, while recognising differences of impairment, class, family, region and individual agency.*

KEYWORDS

Disability Studies; Gender; Disabled Masculinity; Feminist Disability Studies; Indian Life Writing; Marriage; Identity; Agency; Sexuality

INTRODUCTION

Disability does not enter a person's life as a socially neutral condition. The meanings assigned to bodily difference are shaped by cultural expectations concerning gender, age, class, family, productivity and social belonging. Disability Studies has challenged approaches that locate disability exclusively in an impaired body and has instead examined the social environments, institutions and cultural assumptions through which impairment becomes disabling. Feminist disability scholarship extends this insight by asking how gender affects the interpretation of bodies and how disabled bodies are positioned within unequal structures of power. The question becomes especially important in India, where marriage, family responsibility, employment, sexuality and social respectability continue to be strongly gendered.

This paper develops a comparative argument from three Indian women's life narratives: Naseema Hurzuk's *Naseema: The Incredible Story*, Preeti Monga's *The Other Senses*, and Shivani Gupta's *No Looking Back*. These texts are not treated as sociological records that can represent all disabled women in India. They are literary life narratives in which lived experience is remembered, selected, interpreted and narrated. Their importance for the present study lies in the way they make visible the social meanings attached to disability and the ways in which disabled women negotiate those meanings.

The paper approaches gender difference as a comparative question rather than assuming that disability has identical consequences for all people. Because the primary corpus consists of women's narratives, the male side of the comparison cannot be manufactured from the three texts. It is therefore developed through scholarship on disabled masculinities, particularly James Staples's ethnographic work in India and Russell Shuttleworth, Nikki Wedgwood and Nathan J. Wilson's theoretical account of disabled masculinity. This distinction is methodologically important: the women's narratives provide primary literary evidence, while research on disabled men supplies the comparative framework needed to understand how gender changes the social meaning of disability.

The central claim is not that disabled men necessarily have easy lives or that every disabled woman experiences greater hardship. Such a claim would reproduce the very simplifications that disability studies seeks to challenge. Instead, the paper argues that gender changes the social meaning of disability. Disabled men may encounter a conflict between impairment and cultural expectations of strength, autonomy, employment and provider status, but those expectations can sometimes be renegotiated within masculine roles. Disabled women, by contrast, are frequently judged through a combination of disability and gendered expectations concerning beauty, marriage, sexual respectability, domesticity, dependence and care. The result can be a distinct form of social disadvantage in which disability is interpreted as evidence that the woman has failed to meet culturally prescribed expectations of femininity.

The analysis consequently concentrates on domains in which gender difference is most visible: marriageability, economic contribution, dependence and autonomy, sexuality and bodily identity, vulnerability to violence, and narrative self-definition. Accessibility and education remain relevant contexts but are not treated as the central organising categories because doing so would reproduce more general

discussions of disability and risk overlapping excessively with other work emerging from the same doctoral research. The emphasis here is narrower: to examine the transformation of disability into a gendered social experience.

The comparative dimension is necessary because a study of women's narratives alone can identify gendered barriers but cannot, by itself, establish what is distinctive about their gendered operation. Scholarship on disabled men supplies that missing dimension. Staples's study of men affected by leprosy and cerebral palsy in India is especially useful because it demonstrates that disability does not have a fixed masculine meaning: depending on context, impairment may threaten masculine authority, but men may also reconstruct masculinity through work, independence, marriage or other culturally valued roles. Shuttleworth, Wedgwood and Wilson similarly identify a tension between cultural constructions of masculinity as autonomy and the dependence that disability can produce. These studies allow the paper to ask not simply whether disabled people encounter barriers, but what those barriers mean when masculinity and femininity assign different values to the same capacities.

The paper uses qualitative textual analysis to read disability as a gendered social and cultural experience. The method is comparative rather than statistical: the three selected Indian narratives constitute the primary literary corpus, while scholarship on disabled masculinity, feminist disability studies and disability in the Indian social context supplies the comparative frame. This approach is appropriate to the question because the narratives do not simply record impairment; they narrate encounters with family, marriage, work, sexuality, dependence and public expectations. These encounters reveal how the meaning of disability changes according to the gendered role assigned to the person who is disabled. Disability does not enter a person's life as a socially neutral condition. The meanings assigned to bodily difference are shaped by cultural expectations concerning gender, age, class, family, productivity and social belonging. Disability Studies has challenged approaches that locate disability exclusively in an impaired body and has instead examined the social environments, institutions and cultural assumptions through which impairment becomes disabling. Feminist disability scholarship extends this insight by asking how gender affects the interpretation of bodies and how disabled bodies are positioned within unequal structures of power. The question becomes especially important in India, where marriage, family responsibility, employment, sexuality and social respectability continue to be strongly gendered.

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DISABILITY AND GENDER: MOVING BEYOND A GENDER-NEUTRAL MODEL

A gender-neutral understanding of disability assumes that the primary social problem is impairment and that men and women encounter essentially the same disabling barriers. Feminist disability studies has shown why this is inadequate. Susan Wendell's work on the rejected body demonstrates the importance of examining the cultural norms through which bodies are judged, while Rosemarie Garland-Thomson's feminist disability scholarship connects bodily difference with representation, social value and the regulation of bodies. Anita Ghai's work is especially relevant to an Indian context because it places disabled women's embodied experience within structures of gender and dependence. These approaches suggest that disability cannot be understood apart from the social expectations attached to particular bodies.

The distinction between impairment and disability is also important for the present comparison. The impairment itself may be similar in two people, but the social consequences can differ because the two people occupy different gendered positions. A disabled man may be judged according to whether he can work, support a household or exercise authority; a disabled woman may be judged additionally according to whether she is physically attractive, marriageable, sexually respectable, capable of domestic responsibility or suitable for motherhood. Gender therefore does not merely add another identity category to disability. It can alter the meaning assigned to disability itself.

Life writing provides a particularly productive form for examining this process. G. Thomas Couser argues for the significance of disability life narrative as self-representation rather than representation produced exclusively by outsiders. Susannah Mintz similarly demonstrates how women's disability life writing can become a site of narrative self-fashioning. In the three Indian texts considered here, the disabled woman is not simply an object of medical, charitable or familial description. She becomes the speaking subject who interprets her own body, remembers social encounters and gives meaning to experiences that may otherwise be reduced to dependence or tragedy.

This narrative agency is crucial to the gender comparison. If disabled women are represented only through statistics, institutional reports or medical categories, the specific meanings of gendered experience can disappear. Life narratives restore voice and interpretation. At the same time, the narratives should not be romanticised as transparent records. They are mediated forms of memory and literary construction. Their value lies precisely in that interpretive dimension: they reveal how the narrator understands the relationship between bodily difference and social expectations.

DISABILITY AND MASCULINITY IN THE INDIAN CONTEXT

A comparison with men requires attention to disabled masculinity rather than treating men as the unmarked norm. James Staples's study of disability and masculinity in India is particularly valuable. Drawing on ethnographic fieldwork with men affected by leprosy and cerebral palsy, Staples challenges the assumption that impairment necessarily produces a uniform loss of masculinity. He shows that different impairments have different social meanings and that disabled men negotiate masculine identities in context-specific ways (Staples). His work is therefore useful not because it establishes an uncomplicated male advantage, but because it demonstrates that masculinity itself is flexible, contested and socially performed.

Staples's analysis also reveals a gendered asymmetry that is directly relevant to the present argument. In his discussion of marriage and family expectations, masculine capacity can be connected to earning, self-management and the ability to occupy the role of provider. A disabled man may therefore remain socially marriageable if he can demonstrate forms of economic or practical competence. The same cultural system can evaluate a disabled woman through a different set of expectations. In other words, disability may threaten masculinity through dependence, but masculinity can also provide a social framework through which a disabled man demonstrates value.

Shuttleworth, Wedgwood and Wilson describe the "dilemma of disabled masculinity" in terms of the tension between cultural constructions of masculinity and disability. Masculinity is commonly associated with autonomy, power, physical competence and independence, whereas disability has often been associated with dependence and helplessness (174–94). This tension can create significant difficulties for disabled men. Yet the conceptual importance of their work is that masculinity is not a fixed category. Disabled men negotiate, modify and sometimes resist dominant expectations rather than simply losing masculine identity.

This scholarship prevents the present paper from producing a simplistic binary. The argument is not that men benefit from disability while women suffer from it. Disabled men may experience stigma, employment discrimination, social isolation, sexual exclusion and threats to self-worth. The point is that the social expectations surrounding those experiences are gendered. The question, therefore, is not whether disability is difficult for men or women, but what kinds of social value are placed at risk when a man or woman becomes disabled.

MARRIAGE AND GENDERED MARRIAGEABILITY

Marriage is one of the clearest contexts in which the gendered meaning of disability becomes visible. In patriarchal societies, marriage is not simply a private relationship; it can function as a major institution through which gender, sexuality, family status and social respectability are organised. Disability can therefore affect marriageability differently depending on whether the disabled person is a man or a woman.

Research on disabled women in India provides strong evidence of this asymmetry. Dean, Tolhurst, Khanna and Jehan's study of disabled women in Gujarat demonstrates how gender and disability intersect in decisions concerning marriage and sexual and reproductive rights. Their participants described social and familial control over relationships, while the study records a particularly revealing gendered assumption: a disabled man marrying a non-disabled woman can be viewed as socially acceptable in circumstances where the reverse pairing is treated as problematic (Dean et al.). The importance of this evidence is not that every Indian family follows the same rule, but that it reveals a cultural double standard in which the marital value of a disabled man and a disabled woman can be evaluated differently.

Staples's research helps explain the logic behind such a difference. Where masculinity is associated with earning, household authority and self-management, a disabled man may retain marriageability when he can perform or demonstrate these roles. The social evaluation of disabled women is often more tightly connected to appearance, domesticity, sexual respectability and assumptions about care. Disability can consequently be interpreted as a greater threat to femininity because the woman's body is judged against both able-bodied and gendered ideals.

The women's narratives make this process experiential rather than abstract. In *The Other Senses*, Monga's account repeatedly places visual impairment in relation to social expectations about relationships, appearance, independence and personal worth. The narrative demonstrates that blindness is not interpreted solely as a sensory condition; it becomes a basis on which others may make assumptions about what kind of woman she can be. Her later assertion of self-determined living is therefore significant because agency involves reclaiming authority over decisions that had previously been interpreted through disability.

Hurzuk's and Gupta's narratives likewise place disability within family and social relationships rather than treating it as an isolated bodily condition. The significance of marriage in such narratives is therefore broader than whether a marriage takes place. Marriageability becomes a measure of social value. A woman who is regarded as unlikely to marry can be positioned as incomplete, dependent or burdensome, whereas a disabled

man may be granted greater cultural space to establish worth through employment or provider status. The difference is not produced by impairment alone; it emerges from gendered systems of valuation.

The marriage comparison makes the gendered consequences of disability especially visible in the social and relational sphere. The conclusion must nevertheless remain qualified. Marriage outcomes vary with class, family structure, region, impairment, education and economic position. The argument concerns a recurring social pattern, not a universal rule.

EMPLOYMENT, ECONOMIC VALUE AND GENDERED COMPETENCE

Employment offers another important point of comparison. Disability can disrupt access to work for both men and women, but employment has gender-specific meanings. In dominant constructions of masculinity, paid work is often linked to adulthood, independence, authority and the ability to provide for a family. A disabled man may therefore experience disability as a threat to masculine identity. Yet employment can also become a route through which he re-establishes social value.

Shuttleworth and his co-authors identify autonomy and independence as central elements in dominant constructions of masculinity. When disability is associated with dependence, disabled men can experience a particularly visible contradiction between bodily limitation and gender expectations. Staples's Indian research similarly demonstrates that men negotiate masculinity through provider and household roles even under conditions of disability. The implication is that employment can be simultaneously a source of pressure and a resource for masculine reconstruction.

For disabled women, employment can carry a different but equally restrictive burden. Women may be expected to work, yet their economic participation is often evaluated alongside assumptions about domestic responsibility, marriage and family care. When disability is introduced into this structure, doubts about competence can become gendered doubts about suitability. A disabled woman may have to demonstrate not only that she can perform a job but also that disability does not make her socially dependent or unsuitable for other expected roles.

Monga's narrative is particularly useful here because professional achievement becomes part of her reconstruction of self. She recalls being invited to conduct "a motivation seminar for the employees of the corporate giant Nestle" and explains that the experience helped her add corporate training to her professional skills (175). The significance of this passage lies in the transformation of the social meaning of blindness. The disabled woman who can be regarded as dependent becomes a professional whose expertise is publicly recognised. Yet the very need to establish competence reveals the ableist assumption against which her achievement is measured.

The ending of *The Other Senses* offers an even clearer formulation of agency. Monga writes that she is "living life on my own terms" and describes herself as continuing to dream and act upon those dreams (177). The phrase is important because agency is not presented as the disappearance of disability. It is the narrator's

assertion of authority over the terms on which her life is interpreted. Professional participation becomes one element in this larger process of self-definition.

The comparison with men should therefore not be reduced to an employment-rate argument. The literary question concerns what work means within gendered identity. For men, employment may be strongly connected to masculine provider identity; for women, employment may be a route to autonomy while remaining entangled with expectations of femininity and family responsibility. Disability intensifies these tensions differently. This comparison is significant at the level of social meaning rather than suggesting that disabled men face no employment barriers.

FAMILY, DEPENDENCE AND AUTONOMY

Dependence is another area in which gender changes the meaning of disability. Disability may make assistance necessary for anyone, but dependence is not interpreted in the same way for men and women. Feminist disability theory has repeatedly challenged the assumption that dependence is a personal failure. Wendell's work is particularly useful here because it exposes the cultural preference for independence and the ways in which bodily difference becomes socially devalued when people cannot conform to ideals of autonomous productivity.

For disabled men, dependence can directly conflict with masculine expectations of self-reliance. The "dilemma" described by Shuttleworth, Wedgwood and Wilson is therefore not merely psychological. It reflects a social structure in which masculinity is attached to autonomy and control. Yet the family can also provide a space in which masculine identity is renegotiated. Staples's work shows that disabled men's identities are relational and context-dependent rather than permanently destroyed by impairment.

For disabled women, dependence can be framed differently. Women are often culturally associated with care and family responsibility, yet a disabled woman may herself be positioned as the recipient of care. This can produce a double bind: she may be expected to embody feminine responsibility while simultaneously being represented as someone who requires protection. Protection can become control when others assume that disability removes the woman's capacity to make decisions about relationships, sexuality, employment or mobility.

The three selected narratives repeatedly contest this reduction of the disabled woman to dependency. Hurzuk's narrative develops from bodily vulnerability towards public participation and disability activism. Monga's professional and personal development challenges assumptions that blindness determines the limits of adult autonomy. Gupta's narrative similarly centres identity reconstruction and the demand that disabled people be recognised as active participants rather than passive recipients of assistance. These trajectories should not be read as simple "overcoming" stories. Their importance lies in the struggle over who has the authority to define the disabled self.

The distinction between assistance and control is crucial. Agency does not require complete independence from others. A person may need assistance and still possess decision-making authority. Feminist disability

scholarship helps prevent the analysis from treating dependence as inherently negative. The problem arises when dependence is converted into social incapacity. The selected women's narratives repeatedly expose that conversion and demonstrate the importance of relational autonomy.

SEXUALITY, BODILY IDENTITY AND VULNERABILITY

Sexuality provides perhaps the strongest evidence of gendered difference. Disabled people of all genders have historically been desexualised, infantilised or excluded from dominant ideas of attractiveness. Yet disabled women face a particularly complex intersection between disability stigma and patriarchal regulation of female sexuality. Their bodies may be regarded simultaneously as undesirable, vulnerable and in need of protection, while their sexual autonomy is questioned or denied.

Dean and colleagues demonstrate that disabled women in Gujarat experience sexual and reproductive rights within a social environment where family authority, gender norms and disability intersect. Their study shows that marriage and sexual decisions can be controlled by parents or guardians and that disabled women may be treated as incapable of making autonomous choices about intimacy and reproduction (Dean et al.). This evidence gives social context to the literary narratives, in which questions of desirability, relationships and emotional vulnerability cannot be separated from disability.

Garland-Thomson's feminist disability scholarship is useful here because it challenges the cultural regulation of bodily appearance and normalcy. The disabled female body is not simply a body with an impairment; it becomes a body read against ideals of femininity. The result is a form of social surveillance in which disability can alter how attractiveness, adulthood and sexual agency are imagined.

Monga's narrative is especially significant because it refuses the assumption that visual impairment eliminates desire or emotional complexity. Her narrative includes relationships, love, disappointment and the desire for self-directed life. The importance of such material is representational as well as personal: the disabled woman is shown as a desiring subject rather than merely as an object of care. Gupta's narrative similarly contributes to the recognition of disabled women as complex subjects whose identities cannot be reduced to physical impairment.

The male comparison again requires nuance. Disabled men can also be desexualised, infantilised or judged as unable to fulfil conventional masculine roles. Shuttleworth and colleagues identify sexuality as one of the domains in which masculinity and disability intersect. Yet masculine identity may sometimes be reconstructed through alternative performances of competence, relationships and adulthood. The cultural assumption that a man can remain a provider or autonomous adult even when disabled can create possibilities that are not always extended to women. This asymmetry is one reason sexuality and marriage are particularly revealing for the present comparison.

VIOLENCE, VULNERABILITY AND THE GENDERED BODY

Gendered vulnerability also becomes visible in the relationship between disability and violence. Disabled people may be vulnerable to abuse because of dependence, social isolation, communication barriers or restricted access to support. For women, these vulnerabilities can intersect with broader patterns of gender-

based violence. Indian research has documented concerns relating to intimate-partner violence and sexual and reproductive rights among women with disabilities. Such evidence strengthens the argument that disability does not operate independently of gendered power.

The significance of this research for literary analysis is not that the narratives should be treated as statistical evidence. Rather, empirical scholarship helps identify the social structures that give meaning to experiences represented in life writing. The narratives can then be read as accounts of how vulnerability is experienced, interpreted and resisted at the level of everyday life.

At the same time, the paper avoids a victim-centred interpretation. Hurzuk, Monga and Gupta are not presented simply as women to whom things happen. Their narratives are acts of self-representation. Couser's account of disability life narrative is useful here because autobiographical narration can challenge the authority of representations produced by institutions and outsiders. The narrator becomes an interpreter of disability rather than merely its object.

This movement from vulnerability to agency is particularly important when comparing gender. A focus on the greater social restrictions experienced by some disabled women should not result in another representation of disabled women as helpless. On the contrary, the point is that social structures may impose more severe restrictions while the narratives simultaneously document the capacity to contest those restrictions. Severity and agency are therefore not opposites.

GENDERED IDENTITY AND NARRATIVE AGENCY

Identity is the point at which the paper's different strands converge. Disability is not experienced as a single identity that simply replaces gender. Instead, disability interacts with gender to reshape the meanings of selfhood. Garland-Thomson, Ghai, Wendell and Mintz all provide different routes into this problem, but they share an interest in the cultural and embodied production of identity. Couser adds the importance of narrative authority: the disabled person can reclaim interpretive control through life writing.

The three Indian narratives demonstrate this process in different ways. Hurzuk's narrative moves from the experience of bodily change and social restriction towards a public identity connected with education, work and disability activism. Monga's narrative reconstructs blindness not as the total definition of the self but as one dimension of a life that includes professional competence, emotional experience and self-directed aspiration. Gupta's narrative places disability identity alongside questions of accessibility, public participation, professional life and social recognition.

Hurzuk's narrative places interpretive authority with the narrator from the beginning of her changed bodily condition. She recalls, "No one told me but by now I knew that I had become a paraplegic" (Hurzuk 26). The statement matters because the narrator does not wait for an external authority to define the meaning of her body; she recognises and interprets the change herself. The moment therefore links bodily knowledge with narrative agency.

The narratives therefore challenge the cultural tendency to make disability totalising. A disabled woman can be simultaneously a daughter, professional, friend, partner, citizen, activist and narrator. The problem is not that disability exists within this identity but that social institutions repeatedly attempt to make disability the dominant explanation of the person. Gender can intensify this tendency because disabled women are frequently interpreted through narrow expectations of femininity.

The comparison with disabled masculinity reveals an important difference. Staples shows that disabled men may negotiate masculine identity by selectively drawing upon provider, worker, husband or household roles. Their masculinity is not simply erased by impairment. This does not mean that disabled men experience less stigma in every setting. It means that culturally available masculine roles can sometimes provide routes for reconstructing social value. Disabled women may have fewer equivalent routes when the cultural value of womanhood is tied to beauty, marriageability, sexuality, domesticity and care.

Agency in the three women's narratives therefore has a specifically gendered dimension. It is not merely the ability to perform tasks independently. It includes the ability to define one's body, relationships, aspirations and public identity against assumptions imposed by others. Monga's declaration that she is living "on my own terms" captures this movement particularly clearly (177). The phrase is not a rejection of social relationships; it is a rejection of the idea that others should determine the meaning of her disability.

This is also why the title of the present paper joins disability with identity and agency. A study limited to oppression would reproduce a deficit model of disabled women. A study limited to resilience would risk turning structural inequality into an individual success story. The selected narratives occupy the more complicated space between the two: they reveal structural restrictions while documenting the narrator's continuing work of self-definition.

COMPARATIVE DISCUSSION

The comparative argument requires careful qualification. The discussion does not establish a universal hierarchy of suffering. Disability is heterogeneous, and gender intersects with class, caste, religion, age, impairment type, family position, education and economic resources. The male scholarship considered here also demonstrates that disabled men can experience profound stigma, loss of status, employment difficulty and challenges to masculine identity.

The evidence becomes most persuasive when disability is examined through the social and relational consequences produced by gendered expectations. Marriage is a particularly strong example. Research from India indicates that disabled men may retain marriageability through provider and adult-masculine roles in circumstances where disabled women are judged more harshly as potential wives. Sexuality reveals a similar asymmetry because disabled women's sexual and reproductive choices may be more directly controlled by family and social norms. Employment demonstrates a different pattern: both genders encounter barriers, but work carries distinct meanings because masculinity is strongly linked to provision while women's employment is negotiated alongside expectations of femininity and domesticity.

The selected narratives also demonstrate that disability can become more socially consequential when it is interpreted through patriarchal expectations. The problem is therefore not simply “disability plus womanhood.” It is the interaction between disability and a social order that assigns different values to male and female bodies. The same impairment can therefore generate different forms of stigma, dependence, protection, exclusion or pressure depending on gendered location.

The male comparison is especially important because it prevents feminist disability analysis from treating men as the invisible norm. Disabled masculinity scholarship shows that men also experience gendered disablement. The difference is that masculine norms can simultaneously produce vulnerability and provide cultural resources for reconstructing status. A man who loses physical capacity may experience a threat to masculinity, yet paid work, fatherhood, household responsibility or public authority can offer routes through which masculinity is renegotiated. Disabled women face their own gendered expectations, but the cultural devaluation of disabled femininity can restrict access to equivalent forms of social validation.

The comparison is therefore best understood as a claim about patterned social consequences rather than biological severity. The literary and contextual evidence shows that disability intersects with gender in ways that can intensify restrictions on women’s marriageability, sexuality, bodily autonomy and social identity. The conclusion remains open to variation and does not erase the complexity of individual experience.

Conclusion

A gendered study of disability must move beyond the assumption that impairment has identical social meanings for men and women. The three Indian life narratives considered here demonstrate that disability is interpreted through relationships, institutions and cultural expectations, and that those expectations are deeply gendered. The narratives of Naseema Hurzuk, Preeti Monga and Shivani Gupta reveal women negotiating disability within structures that regulate marriageability, sexuality, dependence, work, appearance, family responsibility and social respectability. Their life writing simultaneously challenges those structures by making the disabled woman a speaking, interpreting and self-defining subject.

Scholarship on disabled masculinity complicates the comparison in productive ways. Staples’s Indian research demonstrates that disability does not uniformly erase masculine identity; men negotiate the meanings of impairment through work, family, authority and other gendered roles. Shuttleworth, Wedgwood and Wilson show that disability can conflict with ideals of autonomy and strength, but their analysis also treats masculinity as dynamic rather than fixed. The comparison therefore reveals not a simple opposition between suffering women and privileged men, but different gendered routes through which disability affects identity and social value.

Taken together, the narratives and comparative scholarship indicate that disability can acquire particularly restrictive social, relational, cultural and identity-related meanings for women. Women’s disability can be compounded by patriarchal expectations surrounding marriage, sexuality, beauty, domesticity and dependence. At the same time, the narratives refuse to reduce disabled women to vulnerability. Agency emerges through narration, education, employment, relationships, activism and the insistence on self-

definition. The significance of these life narratives lies precisely in their ability to expose disabling structures while refusing the identities those structures attempt to impose.

The paper therefore argues that disability is not gender-neutral in its social meaning. To understand disability adequately in the Indian context, scholarship must examine both disabled femininity and disabled masculinity and must ask how gender changes the value assigned to bodily difference. Such a comparative approach makes visible not only the barriers faced by disabled people but also the different cultural resources and constraints through which men and women negotiate identity and agency.

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