



Bodies in Rebellion: Subverting the Normative constructs of Disability, Silence, and Marginalisation in South Asian literature

Sidra Salafi

M.A. English, 2nd year, University of Delhi, New Delhi, India

Received: 16 Sep 2025; Received in revised form: 14 Oct 2025; Accepted: 17 Oct 2025; Available online: 21 Oct 2025

©2025 The Author(s). Published by Infogain Publication. This is an open-access article under the CC BY license (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

Abstract— This paper explores the interrelation of disability, normativity and narrative through a theoretical analysis of three diverse texts: Salman Rushdie's *The Moor's Last Sigh*, Salma's short story "Toilets" and Rabindranath Tagore's "Subha". Anchored in Lennard J. Davis's theory of Normalcy, the paper examines how the normal body is historically constructed and socially enforced. Through Bakhtin's theory of the Grotesque, *The Moor's Last Sigh* is analysed as a site of resistance to corporeal conformity. Salma's "Toilets" and Tagore's "Subha" are both evaluated from feminist theories and disability frameworks of emotional and physical marginalisation. Together, readings underscore the immediacy of reframing disability beyond pathology—cultural and political understanding of embodiment.



Keywords— Disability Theories, Normalcy, Grotesque, Feminist Theory, Mutability, Spatial Exclusion, South Asian Literature

The dialectic between normalcy and disability has been a philosophical and cultural scrutiny. The constitutes of normalcy, and, conversely, abnormality has been the kernel in understanding the societal veneers, which often marginalise those who deviate from the perceived normativity. In the disability discourse, this conceptual bifurcation is investigated through the lens of ableism – a concept popularised by the activists and scholars of the disability rights movement during the 1970s and 1980s. Thomas Hehir, more profoundly describes the concept in his 2002 article "Eliminating Ableism in Education", he writes,

The devaluation of disability [that] results in societal attitudes that uncritically it is better for a child to walk than roll, speak than sign, read print than read Braille, spell independently than use a spell-check, and hang out with non-disabled kids opposed to other disabled kids.

In this paper, I will engage with Lennard J. Davis' foundational theories on normalcy, Sigmund Freud's psychoanalytical approach to normalcy, and the social

construction of ableism to explore how these concepts are represented in Indian literature, particularly in Salman Rushdie's *The Moor's Last Sigh*, Rabindranath Tagore's short story "Subha", and contemporary Indian author Salma's short story "Toilets".

The very term that permeates our contemporary life – Normal – "is a configuration that arises in a particular historical moment. It is a part of a notion of progress, industrialisation, and ideological consolidation of the bourgeoisie. The implication of the hegemony of normalcy is profound and extend into the very heart of cultural production." (Enforcing Normalcy 49).

As Davis argues, a normal body is a theoretical premise from which all bodies, by definition, must fall short. The body confronts an abstraction it cannot rival, as the norm constitutes an idealised quantitative and qualitative standard—one that is detached from, rather than grounded in, empirical observation of bodies, which are intrinsically diverse and variable. This façade of an ideal body also fails to consider the contingencies of bodies functioning within

specific socio-historical contexts. It becomes a body that is diverse in time and space.

David Mitchell and Sharon Snyder in their book *Narrative Prosthesis: Disability and the Dependencies of Disability* (2008), evince through the contradiction of disability and normalcy, that disability discourses are often employed metaphorically, to manoeuvre the articulations of political health of a nation and society. Post-independent and Indian diasporic literary works inspect the nexuses among genders, bodies, diseases and disabilities to depict multiple strains in Indian history and culture. In many of these narratives, physical and mental disabilities are inextricably linked to violence, whether in the form of sexual harassment, decapitations, injuries, alienation, partiality or prejudices.

Before exploring Rushdie's *The Moor's Last Sigh*, I would like to elucidate four aspects of disability that are necessary to understand the conceptual interplay between ableism and ableism. First is that disability comprises a) a system for interpreting bodily variations, b) a relationship between bodies and milieus, c) It is a set of practices that produces both the able-bodied and disabled, d) it is a way of describing the inherent instability of the embodied self.

Considering the many metaphoric roles played by disabled bodies, post-independent Indian writers explore the relationship between potent disabled bodies and the emergent validity of anti-colonial national politics. Here, disability often takes a positive role to represent the survival tendency of post-colonial polis. However, the consequent death or neglect of the disabled character delineates a loss of political optimism. In post-colonial discourses through the disability lens, the corporeality of a body's blood, flesh and bones is profoundly challenged and superseded by the notion of architectural and differential metaphors of embodiment, deconstructing the biologically fixed constructions of bodies.

The Moor's Last Sigh, a first-person narrative largely set in Bombay, is ardent about the metaphors between family and nation. By inducing the disease of gigantism, Rushdie creates a sense of doubled time, signifying pre-colonial and post-colonial conceptions of disability and thus building a digressive susceptibility that threatens the post-colonial society of ableism.

In the epigraph of the novel *The Moor's Last Sigh*, Moraes, the protagonist writes, "in the 'early Moors' my hand was transformed into a series of miracles... I was Moor-as-peacock, spreading my many-eyed tail... In another painting, Aurora reversed our relationship, painting herself as the young Eleanor Marx and me as her father Karl" (Rushdie 224).

Here, Rushdie, through the paintings of Aurora, represents disability in history and superstition, representing the social construction of abnormalcy.

Furthermore, it is noticeable that Rushdie challenges the Cartesian model of dualism, where body and mind are separate entities. However, Rushdie overlaps mind and body by making his protagonist make significant connections between his bodily deformity and that of his milieu-Bombay, which reflects Rushdie's historical memories inscribed in his consciousness via his diasporic experiences.

Like the city itself,... I mushroomed into a huge urban sprawl of a fellow, I expanded without time for proper planning. (161-162).

Moraes had been a "mongrel" (172), the hybrid blend of Christian, Jewish and Arabic Muslim from his mixed ancestry that enhances his gigantism and makes him grotesque. However, I would like to argue that this type of grotesque is the Bakhtinian one, offering an optimistic representation of incompleteness where the physiological self-transgresses the boundaries as Moraes does in the novel. Mikhail Bakhtin's subversive theory of grotesque challenges societal normativity in a prolific manner.

Another narrative that I have selected is Salma's short story "Toilets"; the author underscores the taboos associated with female physiology taking birth through the repugnance of society to acknowledge the major differences between gendered physiologies.

The story revolves around Shamim, who suffers from abdomen pain due to her disability to access the common defecating area because of her inferior gender. Salma uses the small space of a toilet as a microcosm to highlight the patriarchal society where women's needs are curtailed. Shamim goes through a series of negative emotions like anxiety, fear, and shame, highlighting how the imposed disability of the body leads to psychological disability. Furthermore, if viewed from Freud's psychoanalysis, Shamim's abdomen pain is a somatic symptom caused by her repressed autonomy. Accentuating Freud's theory of conversion symptoms.

Another instance that disables Shamim is underscored through her menstrual cycle, which is quite natural yet perceived as polluting by the phallocentric society. We women are disabled psychologically by societal perceptions as Shildrick rightly notes in *Embodying the Monster*, there has been such a "longstanding conflation of the feminine with disorder, in terms of both the irrational mind and the leaky body" (30). Shildrick's argument validates the similitude culture produces between femininity and monstrosity.

The structure of Shamim's house is quite patriarchal. She doesn't have a private toilet. She has to walk among the men to use the toilet and is expected to use it without any noise, like a ghost, and such rules are not symmetrical.

When the doctor arrived to examine Shamim's problem and failed to detect it, an old woman was called to tell Shamim's problem on behalf of her. Her autonomy was silenced. Here, I would like to include feminist disability scholar Susan Wendell's observation, "the cognitive and social authority of medicine to describe our bodies affects how we experience our bodies and ourselves, how society describes our experiences and validates/invalidates them," and "how society supports or fails to support our bodily sufferings and struggles" (rejected body 119). The society failed to understand Shamim.

Now we examine Tagore's short story "Subha", then there also, her muteness denies her agency in marriage and rejects it. Subha's father married her in a hurry, concealing her speech disability; however, when her husband discovers her disability, he realises that he has brought home a bride who could not speak in a language he could understand, the language of the ableist patriarchy.

Subha's muteness is not merely a physical impairment but is an emblem of the systematic silencing of the female subject in a patriarchal society. Her condition is read as a dearth, however drawing from the notion of Lennard J. Davis' "normate", she is ostracised from the boundaries of intelligibility, her silence interpreted as absence more than resistance. Her muteness proffered her existential agency, and her refusal to perform the expectations of verbal femininity became an inadvertent rebellion.

If we analyse "Subha" from the lens of Rosemarie Garland Thompson's theory of "stare"; then, Subha's disabled body is considered to be different. Therefore, her corporeality becomes a canvas that projects societal repugnance, neglect and discomfort. Her fate, marriage, abandonment and desolation unfold not because of her mutability but rather, society's lack to listen beyond speech. Thus, her disability is not a dearth but rather a reflection of the ableist architecture of society.

Conclusively, this paper has critically scrutinised the construction of disability where normative and ableist forces consciously and unconsciously disable body and mind, which are socio-politically constituted material entities that merge from architectural contexts and individual experience. Drawing from Davis, the analysis foregrounds how the idealised body becomes a weapon for exclusion. Through Bakhtin's notion of grotesque in *The Moor's Last Sigh*, the text resists the sanitised aesthetic of the "normal", instead reclaiming corporeal excess and hybridity as sites of subversion. Salma's "Toilets" highlights

the gendered politics of accessibility and bodily vulnerability, accentuating how women are disabled through shame, surveillance and spatial exclusion. Finally, Tagore's "Subha" illuminates the silent violence of the ableist and patriarchal expectations through a character whose muteness disturbs the dominant scripts of femininity and communicability. Together, these texts delineate that disability isn't confined to our body's corporeality but extended towards socio-cultural and political as well as emotional terrain that requires critical attention and theoretical nuances. By traversing across postcolonial, feminist and disability studies, this paper offers a multifaceted lens that interrogates the voices beyond voice, visibility and normativity.

REFERENCES

- [1] Davis, Lennard J. *Enforcing Normalcy: Disability, Deafness, and the Body*. Verso, 1995.
- [2] Hehir, Thomas. "Eliminating Ableism in Education." *Harvard Educational Review*, vol. 72, no. 1, 2002, pp. 1–32.
- [3] Mitchell, David T., and Sharon L. Snyder. *Narrative Prosthesis: Disability and the Dependencies of Discourse*. University of Michigan Press, 2000.
- [4] Rushdie, Salman. *The Moor's Last Sigh*. Vintage, 1995.
- [5] Salma. "The Toilet". Translated by Lakshmi Holmström, in *The Inner Courtyard: Stories by Indian Women*, edited by Lakshmi Holmström, Rupa & Co., 1990, pp. 229–237.
- [6] Shildrick, Margrit. *Embodying the Monster: Encounters with the Vulnerable Self*. SAGE Publications, 2002.
- [7] Tagore, Rabindranath. "Subha." *Selected Short Stories*, translated by William Radice, Penguin Books, 2005, pp. 117–124.
- [8] Wendell, Susan. *The Rejected Body: Feminist Philosophical Reflections on Disability*. Routledge, 1996.
- [9] Bakhtin, Mikhail. *Rabelais and His World*. Translated by Hélène Iswolsky, Indiana University Press, 1984.
- [10] Garland-Thomson, Rosemarie. *Staring: How We Look*. Oxford University Press, 2009.