

Disabled Intimacy: Navigating Desire in Rabindranath Tagore's "Subha"

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Abstract

This essay argues that Rabindranath Tagore's "Subha" (1893) challenges the ableist assumption that disabled people are asexual and undesiring. Desire remains underexplored in disability research, and disabled people are frequently cast as asexual or pitiable, which denies them recognition as sexual subjects. The essay reads Subha as an embodied character rather than a symbol of female voicelessness. Drawing on disability studies and Indian scholarship on disability, gender, and stigma, the essay traces how the short story gives her an interior life, a non-verbal intimacy with animals and nature, and a bond with another excluded character, Pratap. It then examines what happens to that desire in a society organised around marriageability and productivity. The essay concludes that while Subha's tragedy mirrors real injustice, narratives of pity risk producing aesthetic nervousness, and that literature must also imagine desiring disabled lives with agency and joy.

Keywords: desire, disability studies, Tagore, "Subha," normate, narrative prosthesis, India

Introduction

The construction of disability in cultural narratives has been a source of scholarly scrutiny, especially in works by non-disabled authors. While canonical literature has no shortage of disabled characters, most of these narratives lack sensitivity in representing the corporeal experiences of disabled subjects and disability as a literary and formal category. A disabled character is often a metaphor for an inherent flaw or an auxiliary to a non-disabled protagonist. Richard III and Shakuni from the *Mahabharata* are classic examples, in which villainy is masked as physical impairment. Such representations harm the empowered embodiment of disabled characters more than under-representation does. Literature must therefore be read and produced through a discursive lens, particularly to counter its role in disseminating the hegemonic ideology of the "normate." Garland-Thomson introduced the term in *Extraordinary Bodies: Figuring Physical Disability in American Culture and Literature*, using it to name the unmarked subject position occupied by people whose bodies and social identities go unquestioned, which she calls "the veiled subject position of cultural self" (8). Siebers's concept of the ideology of ability, which treats the able body as the unspoken baseline for judging human worth, is a natural companion to the normate, since both describe an unmarked standard against which disabled bodies are measured and found lacking (Siebers 7).

Disability literary studies is a relatively new body of scholarship that aims to read how disabled characters are constructed in literature and to resist treating disability as a mere symbol so that disabled characters can be read as embodied subjects with interiority and desire. Representation carries political and aesthetic weight and can lend legitimacy to a particular viewpoint. Just as literature inherently exposes disabled people to the gaze of the able-bodied reader, it can also be productive: it can introduce the non-disabled

reader to alternate modes of embodiment, mirror their limitations, and prompt them to question their assumptions about disabled people. The problem of non-disabled authors writing disabled characters through a normative, ableist gaze is evident. Susan Sontag cautioned that aestheticising illness, and by extension disability, risks distorting the lived experiences of those it depicts (3). Tobin Siebers, by contrast, held that the material and the aesthetic are deeply interwoven and must therefore be studied together (Siebers 3). This approach is particularly important for addressing the biases that remain embedded in society. A great deal therefore depends on the author for good representation, and Rabindranath Tagore's "Subha" is an important case study in this regard.

The problem of disability in India is multifaceted. Still distinctly patriarchal in nature, Indian society is characterised by several axes of marginalisation, including gender, caste, sexuality, and material conditions. Anita Ghai argues that disability in India cannot be understood through impairment alone, since it is shaped by intersecting structures of gender, caste, class, and poverty, and that Western disability frameworks must therefore be rethought for the Indian context (Ghai *Rethinking* 101-162). Disability in the Indian context is thus not an isolated concept, and the Western social model, with its emphasis on autonomy, does not fully capture the social relationships involved.

This essay reads "Subha" in Banibrata Mahanta's translation, as published in *Literary and Cultural Disability Studies: A Primer*, edited by Someshwar Sati. Although the story has been translated many times, this version was chosen because it appears in a volume edited by Sati, a prominent scholar of literary disability studies, which lends the translation scholarly grounding in the field.

Desire remains significantly underexplored in disability research, a gap that further pushes disabled people toward social exclusion. Disabled people are frequently cast in dominant culture as asexual, pitiable, or undesiring, and scholars have shown that this desexualisation denies them recognition as sexual subjects and as full sexual citizens (Shakespeare et al. 9-13). This essay argues that Rabindranath Tagore's construction of a mute girl in "Subha" questions the ableist assumptions of a dominant discourse that confines disabled people to the category of undesiring, asexual beings. It further examines what happens to the desiring disabled subject, whether that desire is normalised within society or foreclosed.

Tagore and the Bengali Literary Context

Rabindranath Tagore needs no introduction, especially given his role in creating a Bengali literary consciousness. He brought a cultural renaissance to the Bengali-speaking population of India as well as to the nation itself, and his contributions remain unparalleled. Although he came from an extremely wealthy, upper-caste family in Bengal, he wrote extensively in his works about marginalised communities, especially women. Despite postcolonial and subaltern critiques that speaking on behalf of the marginalised can reproduce the speaker's own social position (Spivak 271-313), and despite the fact that Tagore wrote from an upper-caste, landowning vantage point, his representation is itself important in helping push alternative realities and bodily difference from the periphery to the mainstream.

Biographical and critical accounts commonly present Tagore as a reformist humanist whose work questions caste, patriarchy, and narrow nationalism. Standard sources include Dutta and Robinson, Sen, and Nandy, who read Tagore's novels as critiques of nationalist exclusion (Dutta and Robinson 260-265; Sen 91-93; Nandy 80). *Gora* (1910), which unsettles Brahminical and nationalist ideas of pure identity, is the text often cited for this stance. Where Tagore particularly excels is his construction of feminine desire. Charulata from *Nastanirh* (*Broken Nest*) by Tagore's *Nastanirh* (1901) is widely read as a study of a bhadralok wife whose educated, creative desire has no sanctioned outlet within the confined domestic

sphere that Bengali nationalism assigned to women (Chatterjee 120; Sarkar 38-41). Similarly, Bimala in *Ghare Baire* (*The Home and the World*, 1916) and Mrinal in "Streer Patra" are repeatedly read as a sensitive articulation of feminine desire in a patrilocal society.

A separate body of literature exists with disabled protagonists, both before, during, and after Tagore's time. Examples include Rajani in Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay's novel *Rajani* (1877), a blind flower-seller who is both a protagonist and one of the narrators; Kumu in Tagore's "Drishtidaan" (1898); and Bhikhu in Manik Bandyopadhyay's "Pragaitihashik" (1937). These works suggest that writers actively sought to accommodate disabled subjectivity in the social psyche. However, because they are all written by non-disabled authors, they cannot construct the lived experiences of disabled people and are better read as reflections of society's reactions to disabled bodies, since literary narratives often rely on disability for their representational scope (Mitchell and Snyder 47-52).

That being said, the question of crip desire in India is grossly unaccounted for, and "Subha" represents one of the few works where desire remains adequately addressed. Marriage in India is often framed as a family-arranged institution in which a woman's worth rests on her prospects of marriage and motherhood, and her desirability is judged by bodily conformity to caste, class, and gender norms (Ghai 68). For disabled women, impairment is read as reducing those prospects, so desire is denied or displaced onto family strategies of concealment, hasty marriage, or dependence (Ghai 68-72; Mehrotra 412-415). Feminist work on the Bengali "women's question" situates this within a longer history in which the Hindu wife was constructed as the guardian of domestic and national identity (Chatterjee 120-122; Sarkar 30-39). Subha being mute further problematises this framework.

Disability, Stigma, and Ableist Pressures of Normativity in "Subha"

The titular character of the book is Subhashini, which can be translated to "someone who speaks of beautiful things," and yet Subhashini is mute. Rabindranath Tagore is known for his use of ironies and wordplay. Because this irony works through the Bengali name itself, it can be lost or flattened in English, which makes the choice of translation significant for any reading of the story.

Subha is the youngest girl born to a well-to-do family, who happen to be mute since birth. In the third paragraph of the story, Subha is described by her mother as a "personal failing, a cause for shame" (Tagore 181). Disability studies has long contested the medical definition of disability. The medical model treats disability as an individual deficit located in the body or mind, a defect or pathology that results from impairment and that must be diagnosed, treated, cured, or managed by medical professionals so that the person can approximate "normal" functioning (Oliver 22). The mother's description reflects this logic, in which difference is a personal flaw to be corrected or hidden rather than a product of how society is organised. Disability has instead been theorised as a form of social oppression rather than a personal tragedy, produced by a society that excludes people with impairments from full participation (Oliver 11; Union of the Physically Impaired Against Segregation 3-4). Where bodily difference is read as an anomaly, this exclusion rests on the construction of a statistical and cultural "norm" that casts deviation as deficiency (Davis 23), with the unmarked normate defined against the bodies it positions as deviant (Garland-Thomson 8).

In rural societies, the stigma attached to being disabled or to producing disabled children persists. In the Indian context, disability is often stigmatised through intersecting beliefs about karma, family honour, caste, gender, and poverty, so that impairment is read as moral failing or misfortune and disabled people, especially women, are positioned as burdens or as desexualised (Ghai, 68; Ghai, 103). Scholars have

argued that Western models such as the social model must be adapted for this setting, where stigma is bound up with family structures and religious-cultural explanations of impairment (Ghai, 103). So when Subha is born without speech, her mode of communication is not seen as a difference but as a burdensome deficiency.

Much of the scholarship on "Subha" reads her muteness as symbolic of the silence imposed by a patriarchal society. One such reading takes Subha's muteness as a figure for female voicelessness in a patriarchal, arranged-marriage society, where a daughter's wishes are neither sought nor heard; this resonates with Spivak's question of whether the subaltern can speak (271-313).

But this reading goes against what disability scholars have argued. Disability has been used throughout history as a crutch on which literary narratives lean for their representational scope (Mitchell and Snyder 49). This "narrative prosthesis" damages the subjectivity of disabled people. We need to refrain consciously from seeking the symbolic in disability and instead read disabled characters as embodied, with individual, functioning consciousness. "Subha" is the story of a mute girl. Her biological inability to speak is a medical condition, but her lived experience and the reaction of the non-disabled gaze around her are what make her disabled.

Marriageability and the Surveillance of Subha's Future

Subha's disability is "a silent weight reigning heavy on her parent's heart" (Tagore 181). This is symptomatic of the patrilineal social existence in rural India, where a girl child is already a source of pressure for her parents solely because of societal mores of marriageability. Disabled young women in India face acute pressure around marriageability, since a woman's worth is often measured by her prospects of marriage and motherhood, and impairment is read as reducing those prospects, so families may conceal the disability, marry the daughter off hastily, or leave her unmarried and dependent (Ghai, 68-72). In this way, Subha is doubly marginalised. Everyone around her constantly debates her "future" and subjects her life to surveillance. This tireless scrutiny stems not from her bodily difference as such but from the fact that her difference does not conform to the normativity her family performs flawlessly in their own lives. That she could remain unmarried and living with her parents is a deviation from their sensibilities.

In Tagore's short story "Drishtidaan", the protagonist Kumu suffers from the same fate. The story starts with her brother and her husband having an altercation about what to do with her impaired eyes. Like Subha, there have been several attempts by able-bodied humans around them to either "fix" their medical impairments or pressurise them to conform to dominant assumptions, such as marriage. In both cases, Subha's and Kumu's bodies have been taken away from them, and they have no control over their own decisions.

Desire, Intimacy, and Foreclosure in "Subha"

Because the use of disability as an aesthetic trope strips disabled bodies of interiority, very few cultural narratives in India give such characters the ability to desire. This is again where disability occurs: cultural imaginaries cannot foreground disabled characters as desiring. Few texts do so; exceptions include films such as *Margarita with a Straw* (Bose and Maniyan) and *Barfi!* (Basu), which portray alternative modes of embodiment. Disabled characters are otherwise shown as asexual or desexualised, and this stereotyping further damages a disabled person's ability to create a meaningful life. Cliffords from D. H. Lawrence's *Lady Chatterley's Lover* and Laura from Tennessee's Williams' *The Glass Menagerie* remain canonical examples. In the Indian corpus, epic characters like Shakuni are portrayed more as deviant than as desiring.

"Subha" is one of those rare characters in Indian canonical works by a non-disabled author to address desire. It is characteristic of Rabindranath Tagore to create complex, rounded characters with psychological depth and to pay particular attention to women's embodiment, so it is unsurprising that Subha's interior life is rendered with significant humanity: "Subha would enter the cow-shed, wrap both of her arms around Sarbashi's neck" (Tagore 183). Sarbashi is one of the animals with whom Subha finds companionship, precisely because their communication extends beyond verbal modes to gesture and touch. Subha communicates with her hands, affectionately touching and "consoling" her animals, and forms an intimate bond with them. She has a natural propensity for the natural world: the "ripples of the river" and the "chirping of birds" (Tagore 183) are more comprehensible to her than human language, because their mode of communication is more phenomenological than verbal.

People who do not use speech communicate through a range of modes, including gesture, facial expression, vocalisation, touch, and manual signs, which are recognised as complete communicative resources and not deficient substitutes for speech (Beukelman and Mirenda 3-4). There have been attempts to legitimise communication that extends speech. Apart from haptics, proxemics, facial expressions and paralanguage are used significantly by Subha. Other literary precedents

Subha's communication of desire in the text is never verbal but disseminated through touch. The registers through which the reader perceives her likings are haptics. This is particularly evident in her interactions with the animals; she often relies on touch to relay her feelings of affection. In *Phenomenology of Perception*, Merleau-Ponty argues that touch is reciprocal: the hand that touches is also touched, so perception is an embodied exchange between perceiver and world and not a one-way act of grasping (Merleau-Ponty 105-106). This reciprocity designs Subha's relationship with the world around her, especially the animals she finds refuge in.

The intimacy introduced in the first half of the story is one in which she feels most herself in the sanctity of nature, because the people around her cannot comprehend her. Subha suffers severe isolation, an exclusion imposed by the ableist world outside. Disabled characters are often socially excluded because deviation from the normal is treated as pathological, and Canguilhem's argument that norms are produced and enforced by social and institutional life, not discovered in nature, shows that the exclusion of bodily difference rests on a constructed standard (Canguilhem 240-243). This construction tends to produce automatic assumptions that Subha is asexual, yet she shares an intimacy with someone whose relationship with her is "difficult to define" (Tagore 183). This is where Subha excels. Subha's sense of affection is not only orientated towards the natural world but also towards a fellow villager.

Excluded Intimacies: Subha and Pratap

Subha finds comfort in Pratap, a villager's son who, though able-bodied, is also socially excluded because he subverts masculine assumptions of responsibility. Hegemonic masculinity is tied to the figure of the strong, able-bodied provider, so a man's worth is measured by his capacity to earn, protect, and head a household (Connell 186-190). His parents have deserted him, and yet he finds Subha's company peaceful, because her silence is the kind of sound he does not mind while fishing. There is a transcendental, unspoken understanding between them despite their not speaking to each other. Subha conjures a parallel world in her head where these stifling norms around her don't exist. In that world underneath the sea, she imagines herself being desired by Pratap.

Subha's methods are more repressed as she navigates this fondness for Pratap. Subha and Pratap share a silent bond where Subha's primary means of closeness is through physical proximity. This is what Edward

T. Hall calls proxemics (125-130), where meaning is transpired through closeness. She sits quietly next to Pratap while he fishes. Unlike the others, Pratap doesn't prod her to be normal, and the feeling is mutually shared by Pratap. This mutual sanctuary finds more meaning than conventional mediums of communication like speech often refuse. Subha finds peace in her habitual meetings with Pratap, a rhythm that works as chronemics, meaning carried by time and repeated presence, while her longing gaze, a case of oculosics, expresses what she cannot say aloud (Knapp, Hall, & Horgan 125).

And yet Subha constantly yearns to be "of some use" to him (Tagore 184). This is a society in which gendered roles are rigid and one's value is determined by the labour one invests in upholding the system. Disability is often understood as arising from a person's perceived inability to be productive, so that bodies are judged by their capacity to work, earn, and contribute, and impairment is redefined as incapacity and dependence rather than simple bodily difference (Oliver 23). Subha is constantly aware of her "lack" and her inability to help Pratap, without realising that Pratap is excluded for the same reason.

Despite her desperate refusal, Subha cannot communicate verbally to her parents that she desires someone else when she is married off to a man in Calcutta. She does it using paralanguage. Disabled people are often denied the language, recognition, and authority to articulate their own desires and choices, as paternalistic assumptions about incapacity lead families, professionals, and institutions to speak and decide on their behalf, which strips them of sexual and personal agency (Oliver 91-93; Shakespeare et al. 9-11). Disabled women in India often have little say over their own bodies, relationships, and choices, as gendered family structures leave them exposed to control and abuse while their own voices carry little weight (Mehrotra 412-415). She "burst[s] into tears" in front of her affectionate father, Banikantha, who replies with "tears rolling down his cheeks" (Tagore 186) and yet cannot fathom Subha's distress. But this difference in expectations is not the result of different communication models; it stems from the father's conscious decision not to listen, amid societal pressure.

Conclusion: After Subha

The text does not foreground happiness for Subha. She is unable to communicate her yearning for Pratap, and her unconsented marriage to a man in Calcutta is never transformed into a meaningful relationship. Upon discovering her muteness, her husband remarries someone "who can speak his language" (Tagore 187). Subha's fate is tragic, as are the fates of other disabled characters constructed in literature. Their tragedies are a necessary step in mirroring real plights in society and are particularly written to move the non-disabled audience towards the characters. But this also falls into the trap of most disability narratives turning into sob stories meant to invoke pity, what Quayson calls "aesthetic nervousness" in the non-disabled reader (15-19). Disabled subjects need joy. If literature is to counter the ideology of the normate, it must also imagine disabled lives with desire, agency, and joy, for if it cannot, there are few other places where such possibilities can be found.

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