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Regaining Self-Identity: Disability and Cultural Narratives in Select Indian Autobiographies

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Abstract: This paper examines how Indian disability autobiographies function as powerful sites of identity reclamation, cultural resistance, and narrative self-fashioning. Situated within the interdisciplinary framework of Disability Studies and Life Writing theory, the study explores how autobiographical narratives authored by persons with disabilities challenge deeply rooted cultural constructions of normalcy, dependency, and bodily worth in Indian society. Rather than presenting disability through the dominant medical or charitable lens, these texts foreground agency, voice, and self-definition, transforming personal storytelling into a form of social critique.

Focusing primarily on works such as *One Little Finger* by Malini Chib and *No Looking Back* by Shivani Gupta, the paper analyzes how life writing becomes a medium through which disabled authors resist imposed identities of helplessness and social marginality. These narratives articulate the lived experience of negotiating family expectations, educational barriers, public spaces, and social attitudes shaped by stigma and paternalism. Through acts of narration, the authors reconstruct the self not as an object of care or pity but as a subject capable of desire, ambition, and intellectual authority.

The study draws on the social model of disability to demonstrate how exclusion emerges not from bodily impairment alone but from inaccessible environments and entrenched ableist attitudes. At the same time, narrative identity theory is employed to show how autobiographical writing enables the reconstitution of selfhood through memory, reflection, and meaning-making. The paper argues that these texts challenge the notion of the "normal body" as a cultural ideal and expand the understanding of embodiment, independence, and dignity within the Indian socio-cultural context. By foregrounding first-person disability narratives as significant literary and cultural texts, this study positions Indian disability life writing as a crucial intervention in both literary discourse and social thought. These autobiographies do more than recount individual struggle; they reshape cultural perceptions of disability, advocate for inclusion, and assert the right of disabled individuals to define their own identities. Ultimately, the paper contends that disability life writing in India contributes to a more humane, equitable, and pluralistic understanding of the self and society.

Keywords: *disability life writing, Indian disability autobiographies, narrative identity, social model of disability, ableism and representation*

Introduction

Disability has long been framed through medical deficiency, charity, and social exclusion. In India, these perceptions intersect with cultural beliefs, family structures, and institutional inequalities, shaping how disabled bodies are seen and treated. Rather than being understood as a natural dimension of human diversity, disability is frequently marked as lack, burden, or tragedy. Such views deny agency to persons with disabilities and confine them to roles of dependence and pity.

Disability Studies challenges this reductive framework by shifting attention from bodily impairment to socially constructed barriers. The social model argues that disability arises not merely from physical or cognitive difference but from environments, institutions, and attitudes that exclude non-normative bodies (Barnes and Mercer). In the Indian context, these barriers include inaccessible infrastructure, limited educational inclusion, workplace discrimination, and deeply rooted stigma tied to ideas of karma, fate, and bodily perfection.

Autobiographical writing by persons with disabilities offers a powerful counter-discourse. Life narratives become spaces where disabled authors define themselves beyond medical labels and social stereotypes. Through storytelling, they assert subjectivity, dignity, and political presence. This paper examines selected Indian disability autobiographies to show how narrative functions as a site of identity reclamation, resistance to stigma, and cultural critique.

Disability, Stigma, and Cultural Perception in India

Disability is not merely a biological or medical condition; it is a cultural category shaped by systems of representation and power. The medical model of disability locates the "problem" in the impaired body, emphasizing diagnosis, treatment, and normalization. Within this framework, the disabled individual becomes a passive recipient of care, and social exclusion is naturalized as an inevitable consequence of bodily difference.

In contrast, the social model of disability, articulated by scholars such as Michael Oliver, distinguishes between impairment (a bodily variation) and disability (the social barriers imposed upon people with impairments). From this perspective, disability arises not from the body itself but from inaccessible environments, discriminatory attitudes, and institutional exclusion. This shift from body to society is crucial for understanding the political significance of disability life writing.

Cultural narratives play a central role in producing disability as a social identity. As Lennard J. Davis argues in *Enforcing Normalcy*, the concept of the "normal body" is a relatively recent historical invention tied to industrial modernity and statistical thinking. Once normalcy became a cultural ideal, bodies that deviated from this standard were marked as deficient. In India, these ideas intersect with religious beliefs about karma, family honor, and social productivity, often resulting in the concealment or overprotection of disabled individuals.

Life writing disrupts these cultural scripts by allowing disabled authors to narrate their own lives. Instead of being spoken for by doctors, caregivers, or institutions, they claim narrative authority. Autobiography thus becomes a counter-discursive space where the disabled self can be represented as complex, relational, and agentive.

Life Writing as Narrative Self-Fashioning

Life writing is not simply a record of events; it is a process of meaning-making through which individuals construct a coherent sense of self. Narrative identity theory suggests that people understand who they are by organizing life experiences into stories. For disabled authors, whose lives are often fragmented by medicalization, stigma, and institutional control, the act of storytelling becomes a means of reconstituting the self.

G. Thomas Couser, in *Signifying Bodies*, notes that disability autobiography challenges conventional expectations of life narratives. Rather than following a linear trajectory of growth toward independence, these texts often foreground interdependence, vulnerability, and embodied difference. They question cultural assumptions that equate autonomy with worth.

Similarly, Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, in *Extraordinary Bodies*, emphasizes how disabled bodies have historically been displayed as spectacles. Autobiography reverses this gaze: the author becomes the observer rather than the observed. By narrating their own bodies and experiences, disabled writers reclaim interpretive power.

In the Indian context, where family structures and community norms strongly shape identity, life writing becomes a negotiation between individual voice and collective expectations. Disability autobiographies often depict the tension between familial love and paternalism, protection and restriction. Through narrative, authors articulate a self that is both relational and self-determining.

Reclaiming Voice in *One Little Finger*

One Little Finger offers a compelling example of how life writing can challenge dominant narratives of disability. Malini Chib, who has cerebral palsy, writes with humor, intelligence, and sharp social insight. Her autobiography resists the sentimental “inspirational” trope that often frames disabled individuals as heroic simply for existing. Instead, Chib foregrounds her intellectual life, friendships, and political consciousness.

A key theme in her narrative is communication. Because her speech and movement are affected, others often assume cognitive incapacity. Chib’s writing directly confronts this prejudice. By producing a sophisticated, reflective narrative, she exposes the gap between bodily appearance and intellectual ability. Writing becomes both a literal and symbolic assertion of voice.

The autobiography also critiques educational and social institutions. Chib describes the barriers she faced in schools that were unprepared to accommodate her needs. These challenges are not presented as personal misfortunes but as systemic failures. In doing so, she exemplifies the social model of disability: the problem lies not in her body but in inaccessible environments and narrow attitudes.

Family plays a complex role in the text. Chib acknowledges the support she received while also highlighting moments of overprotection and lowered expectations. Her narrative navigates gratitude and critique, illustrating how even loving relationships can reproduce paternalistic assumptions. Through storytelling, she asserts her right to make choices about her own life, including education, work, and relationships.

Importantly, *One Little Finger* situates disability within urban, middle-class Indian society, challenging the idea that disability marginalization is confined to poverty or rural contexts. Chib's experiences reveal how stigma operates across class lines, embedded in everyday interactions and institutional structures.

Resisting Marginality in *No Looking Back*

In *No Looking Back*, Shivani Gupta narrates her journey after acquiring a disability due to illness. Her autobiography emphasizes transformation, but not in the sense of "overcoming" disability. Rather, it depicts a reorientation of identity and purpose. Gupta becomes a disability rights advocate, using her experience to challenge social attitudes and promote accessibility.

A central concern of the text is mobility—both physical and social. Gupta's descriptions of navigating public spaces highlight how infrastructure reflects assumptions about whose bodies matter. Stairs without ramps, inaccessible transportation, and unsympathetic bureaucracies demonstrate how the built environment enforces exclusion. These accounts make visible the everyday politics of space.

Gupta also reflects on changing relationships with friends and family. Disability alters social dynamics, revealing the fragility of relationships based on norms of productivity and physical ability. Yet the narrative does not portray her as isolated; instead, it shows the formation of new communities grounded in shared experience and activism.

Like Chib's autobiography, *No Looking Back* rejects pity as a framework for understanding disability. Gupta insists on being seen not as an object of sympathy but as a citizen with rights. Her narrative links personal experience to broader political struggles, illustrating how life writing can contribute to collective movements for social change.

Narrative Prosthesis and the Refusal of Metaphor

Literary scholars David T. Mitchell and Sharon L. Snyder, in *Narrative Prosthesis*, argue that disability has often functioned as a metaphorical device in literature—a “prosthesis” that props up plots and symbolizes moral or psychological states. Disability autobiographies disrupt this tradition by insisting on the material reality of disabled lives.

In the texts discussed here, disability is not a symbol of tragedy or moral failure. It is a lived condition with social and political dimensions. By centering everyday experiences—schooling, work, friendships, and public transport—these narratives resist being reduced to allegory. They demand to be read as accounts of real social worlds.

This refusal of metaphor is particularly significant in the Indian cultural context, where disability is frequently interpreted through religious narratives of karma or divine will. By offering secular, experience-based accounts, these autobiographies challenge fatalistic explanations and emphasise human-made barriers.

Gender, Embodiment, and Respectability

Both Chib and Gupta write as women in a society where female bodies are closely regulated and evaluated. Disability intersects with gender to shape experiences of visibility, vulnerability, and respectability. Their narratives reveal how disabled women are often perceived as asexual, dependent, or unsuitable for marriage—assumptions that further marginalize them.

Through life writing, these authors reclaim their embodied identities. They discuss friendship, attraction, and desire, challenging the notion that disability negates womanhood or sexuality. At the same time, they critique the pressures placed on women to conform to ideals of beauty and domesticity. Disability exposes the narrowness of these norms, highlighting their exclusionary nature.

Autobiography as Cultural Intervention

By circulating in print culture, disability autobiographies reach audiences beyond the immediate disability community. They intervene in public discourse, offering alternative ways of understanding embodiment and difference. In educational contexts, such texts can challenge students’ assumptions and foster more inclusive attitudes.

These narratives also contribute to the development of Disability Studies in India by providing locally grounded accounts that complicate theories developed in Western contexts. While the social model remains influential, Indian life writing shows how disability is shaped by caste, family structure, religion, and economic inequality. Autobiography thus becomes a bridge between theory and lived experience.

Reimagining the Self and Society

At their core, these autobiographies are about redefining what it means to be a person. They reject the idea that independence must mean physical self-sufficiency and instead highlight interdependence as a universal human condition. By foregrounding dignity, choice, and relationality, they propose a more inclusive vision of humanity.

The self that emerges from these narratives is not a passive victim or inspirational hero but a complex subject negotiating structural barriers and social relationships. This reimagined self challenges readers to reconsider their own assumptions about ability, productivity, and worth.

Conclusion

Indian disability life writing represents a crucial intervention in both literary discourse and social thought. Through autobiographical narrative, authors such as Malini Chib and Shivani Gupta reclaim voice, assert agency, and challenge deeply rooted cultural constructions of normalcy and dependency. Their texts demonstrate that disability is not merely a personal condition but a social and political identity shaped by environments, attitudes, and institutions.

By foregrounding first-person experience, these autobiographies resist reductive representations and expand the possibilities of life writing itself. They call for a society that values diverse bodies and ways of being, and they insist on the right of disabled individuals to define their own identities. Ultimately, disability life writing in India contributes to a more humane, equitable, and pluralistic understanding of the self and society—one in which difference is not erased or pitied but recognised as an integral part of human diversity.

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