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Redefining Disability: *Manalazham* as a Critique of Eco-Social Resistance of the Differently Aabled

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Abstract: The concept of disability is reconstructed and stratified with the development of clinical and medical discourses from the 19th century onwards. As Hevey comments, "The Disability Rights Movement has shifted the construct of disability "off the body and into the interface between people with impairments and socially disabling conditions" (426). Literature often represents disability through various facets of subordination like nick naming, body shaming, physical tortures and mental trauma. Hari Kurusseri's *Manalazham* redefines disability as differently-abled through the resistance and resilience of the protagonist Sachidanandan. The novel also pinpoints the psychological subordination of Sachidanandan by the society through the words he is addressed by, labelling his deformity like "thalanthan", "njondi" and "ezhajevee" or a reptile and his indomitable spirit to resist saying that as a reptile, he is poisonous and beware of him. As Lerita .M. Coleman in the article "Stigma: An Enigma Demystified" rightly comments, "Nature caused us all to be born equal; if fate is pleased to disturb this plan of the general law, it is our responsibility to correct its caprice, and to repair by our attention the usurpations of the stronger" (160). The image of Sachidanandan having deformed legs, moving on his tricycle later transforms him into the leader of an environment protest campaign against sand mining in "Mannida" in the second half of the novel. *Manalazham* is a genuine critique of the environmental issues due to illegal sand mining and brick kilns in Kallada in Kollam district, here masked as "Mannida". The novel progresses through the struggles and encounters of Sachidanandan with the sand mining mafia and the authority, surpassing his physical disability and saves Mannida' from illegal sand mining weaponizing his intelligence and education. Sachidanandan adopts various experimental strategies like writing petitions, blatant criticism in public meetings, representation in newspapers, prayer campaigns, agitations, Naxalisms, Guerilla warfares, Gandhisms and hunger strikes. The novel evolves as an eco- social critique of resistance of the differently - abled against commodification of land and women with his fortitude. *Manalazham* revolves around the life and challenges of Sachidanandan , the Sanskrit teacher and his indomitable spirit to establish himself as differently – abled and as the harbinger of saving Mannida from illegal sand mining by announcing a hunger strike and seeking media attention.

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Introduction

Disability literature serves as a genre of literature that not only discusses the challenges of the disabled but also showcases their incredible lives and thereby motivating the disabled community to establish their identity, rewriting the misconceptions of ableism. As Helen Keller says, “The marvellous richness of human experience would lose something of rewarding joy, if there were no limitations to overcome. The hilltop hour would not be half so wonderful, if there are no dark valleys to traverse” (15). *Manalazham* is a travail on the struggle and survival of Sachidanandan, the disabled, who transforms himself from a guest teacher to an environmental activist to save a historical region named Mannida surpassing his disability.

From the disabled to differently-abled: Transformation of Sachidanandan in *Manalazham*

The saga of Sachidanandan’s struggle as a disabled in Mannida begins with the opening of *Manalazham*, when the “crawling creature” argues with the conductor to find a seat beneath the written board, “reserved for the handicapped” (1). The novel pinpoints the injustice of the society towards the disabled through the conductor’s casual reply that “the seats reserved for the handicapped were removed for placing luggage of the college students as they gathered in large numbers.” Sachidanandan’s struggle persists in his effort to exit from the ‘Comos bus’ by touching the soil of Mannida with his bare hands, when others with their feet as, “Comos bus reached the place as it was ready to deliver. He peeped from the bus. First his head was seen, then his hands and legs. This scene was like a normal delivery” (9). The narration of Sachidanandan’s entry to Mannida itself deliberately distinguishes the struggles of Sachidanandan, the disabled, from the able-bodied natives of Mannida. The novel is a blatant critique on the indifferent attitude of the society towards the disabled through detailing the movement of the protagonists as “He first put his hand on the road and then put his legs which were lifeless and crawled on the road filled with the cover of match boxes and phlegm. Everyone looked at the strange creature” (1). The first chapter of *Manalazham* is titled as ‘Reptile’, itself refers to the disability of the protagonist and he is addressed as ‘thalanthan,’ ‘njondi’ and ‘ezhajevee’ in several parts of the novel. These labelling words show the negative attitude of the society to marginalize persons with disability

Sachidanandan faces several incidents of embarrassment when he tries to find a lodging in Mannida, as the house owner expects an able-bodied man to take care of his property instead of a crippled who struggles hard to move on and his family shows their disinterest to see him as a bad omen in the morning itself. The first part of the novel transverses through the pathetic plight of the protagonist as a representative of the disabled who curses his disability as a tragedy and thinks “it’s better to be dead rather than be a disabled” (10). The novel progresses with the appointment of the

protagonist as a guest teacher for Sanskrit in Nelpura school in Mannida and his transformation into an environmentalist to save Mannida from illegal sand mining and unauthorized brick kilns. Sachidanandan was silenced in a meeting held for saving Mannida, organized by the Tahsildar, out of his constant protest through seeking media attention and complaints, but he realizes the indifference of the society towards the disabled and leaves the meeting saying, “I am handicapped. But my brain is working and the brains of the so-called representatives are frozen” (119). The incident pinpoints the pathetic plight of Sachidanandan as the disabled in an indifferent society that explicitly demarcates disability with ableism through his determination. *Manalazham* is an experimental novel that showcases the determination of the disabled to fight against the sand mafia and quarry owners fearlessly for saving an entire region from complete destruction. Despite his physical disability and perennial physiological problems such as haemorrhoids and pulmonary diseases, Sachidanandan stood firm in his struggles against anthropogenic environmental deterioration. The novel takes notice of the personal shaming he has met with throughout his life, regarding his disability and the resultant clumsy movements. As Stephen Hawking says “I advise the disabled people to concentrate on things, your disability never prevents you doing well, and not to regret the things it interferes with”.

Manalazham vehemently voices against the caustic attitude of the society which is unable to value the merit of an individual beyond his physique. As Robert. M. Hensel observes, “There is no greater disability in society than the inability to see a person as more.” The novel progresses with the events in the life of Sachidanandan, who finds a new meaning and purpose through the ‘Mannida Samrakshana Samithi’ and survives every insult with indomitable spirit and establishes himself as a saviour of Mannida. As Haben Girma says, “If you face a challenge, it is an opportunity to come up with new solutions. Disability drives innovation” (61).

***Manalazham* as an Eco-Social Critique**

Manalazham, as a novel that addresses environmental issues at large, introduces the protagonist to Mannida with water drops from the sand lorry of mining mafia through a metaphor, “The water drops that fell from “Maravuri” which helped Dushyantha to reach Ashram, similarly the water drops that fell from the sand lorry showed Sachidanandan, the way to Mannida” (10). As the novel progresses, Sachidanandan actively involves himself in various environmental protests against issues like illegal sand mining and unauthorized brick kilns in Mannida rather than being a guest teacher along with Radhakrishnan, Prashoban and Santhosh.

Sachidanandan’s arrival and his active interest in the ecological issues there gave a fillip to the youth’s sporadic environmental activism in the region. Eventually, there arises a bitter struggle, both legal and agitational, against the avaricious exploitation of natural resources such as land sand mining from paddy fields and dry lands, clay extraction for brick making using furnaces and earth moving

from hillocks on the southern side of Sasthamcotta Lake. Environmental activism had to undergo many ordeals like the accusation of extremist politics. The other side comprised sand contractors, the real nature looters, their henchmen, politicians, police, revenue authorities and a large section of the public who were fascinated by the huge immediate gain from selling the sand in their lands. The revengeful retaliations against the activists include physical attacks, defamation, and implicating in false cases. The upcoming generation was also found attracted to the lucrative business of land sand. Almost all paddy fields in the village, which were once fertile *puncha* fields lie as a vast tract of waste land which is full of big pits. The sand sucking motor was a recurring image of the environmental disaster in Mannida. People's initial attitude towards the contractors, sand sellers, and clay extractors was not supportive. But it changed abruptly as the former amassed money and thereby increased social influence. The village has been left to be a forlorn place after a massive land sand extraction. It is a place of greedy people who blindly disregard the dire consequences of their blatant ecological destruction. Backbone of the plot is the environmental activism initiated under the leadership of Sachidanandan, a differently-abled person and a guest teacher of Sanskrit in a high school in the locality. Along this issue, other environmental concerns are also discussed. The agitation against the uncontrolled quarry mining is mentioned as a previous site of his environmental activism. Hence *Manalazham* raises the grave issues of environmental breakdown in a historical village, which was once renowned as the granary of Deshinganad, that has now become a victim of land sand extraction on a commercial basis.

Manalazham is also a critique on various anti-social activities like prostitution, alcoholism, gambling, consumerism, bribery, broken - family bonding, and moral degradation in Mannida as a part of the money flow and luxury life associated with sand-mining. The novel details the moral degradation of the natives as "the tasty foods, drinks and lust were the by-product of sand mining and many jewellery shops opened their branches in Mannida. Major mobile companies installed their towers in Mannida. New bars and cinema theatres were opened in Mannida. The people of Mannida enjoyed all the amenities which came as a result of selling the land" (92). The air pollution from unauthorized brick kilns evokes severe health issues for natives, especially children and old people who migrate to nearby places out of suffocation.

The second part of the novel witnesses different modes of resistance adopted by Sachidanandan by organizing 'Mannida Samrakshana Samthi' like seeking media attention, organizing public campaigns and meetings, hunger - strike and filing an appeal in high court along with a few natives. The novel ends when Sachidanandan establishes himself as a saviour of Mannida through gaining a favourable high court order to stop illegal sand mining and leaves Mannida after his marriage.

Conclusion

As Lennard J. Davis comments in the article “Constructing Normalcy: The Bell Curve, the Novel, and the Invention of the Disabled Body in the Nineteenth Century”: “If disability appears in a novel, it is rarely centrally represented. It is unusual for a main character to be a person with disabilities, although minor characters can be deformed in ways that arouse pity” (11). Unlike other works of disability literature, *Manalazham* is unique in contextualizing the struggle of a disabled person as the protagonist against anthropogenic environmental deterioration by evoking ecological consciousness in the natives rather than their pangs and pathos. The novel also raises several pertinent questions on the violation of reservation for the disabled. Sachidanandan, though qualified for the post of a college lecturer, is portrayed as a guest teacher in a high school with a meagre salary. *Manalazham* portrays Sachidanandan as the representative of the disabled who struggle hard to find the reserved seat in a bus, who remains unemployed amidst the so – called reservation and identifies that the needs of the disabled are not yet fulfilled. *Manalazham* as a novel with a purpose concludes by rewriting the word ‘reserved’ with ‘deserved’ through the incredible transformation of the protagonist from disabled to differently-abled. As Marsha Saxton in the article “Disability Rights and Selective Abortion” rightly comments, “Many disabled people have a growing but still precarious sense of pride in an identity as “people with disabilities.” With decades of hard work, disability activists have fought institutionalization and challenged discrimination in employment, education, transportation, and housing. We have fought for rehabilitation and Independent Living programs, and we have proved that disabled people can participate in and contribute to society” (107). The novel showcases the fortitude of the protagonist to fight for a noble cause surpassing his physical disability with intellect and proves that “disability is not a permanent uniform” and rejects the socially constructed pervasive stereotypes of the disabled people as defective, burdensome and unattractive.

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