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Beyond Pity and Ostracization: What Happens When a Schizophrenic Mind Meets an Empathetic Heart?

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“Baba’s care was obvious; he stood by her...”
(Amandeep Sandhu)

Abstract: Jeeja Ghosh emphasized that it is crucial to view the disabled individual as an individual first, regardless of the impairment². The society interweave the individuality of a disabled person with the disability itself. This conditioning thwarts their identities. As a result, disabled people are prone to pity, fear, prejudice, pretentious sympathy, segregation, and even violence. The laws, policies, and beneficiary initiatives still rest on paper, and people with disabilities continue to suffer. Providing a protective environment and the inclusivity of people with disabilities in society is still a concern. The writings about and by the disabled people address not only the problems of disabled people but also target numerous atrocities towards these people. These narratives also hint the oppression of the disabled. It was only in the nineteenth century that narratives of physically disabled people were being written³. Unlike physical disabilities, mental disabilities are not visible. The enigmatic nature of mental disability further complicates the situation. With the advent of the twenty-first century, life narratives of mentally disabled people emerged as true accounts of their silent sufferings. These narratives depict mentally disabled people’s atrocities, ostracization, and urge for inclusion in society. But how do these narratives inspire to weave mentally disabled individuals back into society? The present paper answers this vital question. The paper applauds Amandeep Sandhu’s *Sepia Leaves* as an intrepid attempt to unmask the societal ostracization of a schizophrenic person and suggests ‘empathy’ as the prominent solution for the inclusion of mentally disabled people in society.

Keywords: Pity, Ostracization, Mental Disability, Schizophrenia, Inclusion, Empathy.

Introduction

Every civilization consists of humans in their entirety. It would be wrong to aver that in our societies every human resembles the other one. We are born with different body features, emotions, and thoughts. These slight differences in appearances, feelings, and thought processes give us our individuality. But with the emergence of new civilizations, these differences were either appreciated or criticized. Some specific eras and movements, such as the post-industrialization period and the eugenics movement, contributed to identifying disabled people as “misfits” in society. Since then, society has never acknowledged disabled people as a part of society. They are often targeted for being disabled and face numerous sufferings. The plight of the mentally disabled people is even more doleful. Mental disabilities are often associated with ‘madness’ because it is a condition of the impairment of the mind. The prevalent prejudice towards mentally disabled people labels them as ‘mad’ people. These people are called mad as if it’s a nick name for mental disability. Irrespective of the intricacies related to the mental disability, society makes the lives of mentally disabled people even more painful with its harshness, having false assumptions, and showing insincere sympathy.

The Indian society is not distinct from other societies of the world in mistreating mentally disabled people. Renu Addlakha points out that the most neglected healthcare system in India is mental health. In India, it is believed that mental disabilities and illnesses are the result of previous life sins and God’s wrath. Mentally disabled people are deliberately kept away from the rest of society as if they are a threat to society. The false notions attached to mental disabilities and illnesses have created a huge gap between the mentally disabled people and the rest of society. It is because of this mistreatment these people are afraid to receive proper treatment as well. They fear that society and even their own people will abandon them. This scenario has to change. A careful inquiry will unveil that mental disabilities are caused by some chemical imbalances in brain, genes, an abusive environment, and traumas. So, it is not the fault of the person when somebody suffers from mental disability. When it is not in one’s hands to acquire or get rid of a mental disability, then why does society segregate the individual? These false notions and perceptions about mental disabilities should be annihilated. The mentally disabled people should not be blamed, pitied, or falsely sympathized with. To address this prominent concern life writings of mentally disabled people, play an important role. They give a voice to mentally disabled people and aware the society about the plight of these people. In a way, these narratives rewrite the history of mentally disabled people.

The twentieth century marked the emergence of mental disability narratives. In the Indian English literature too, writers such as Anita Desai, Salman Rushdie, and Hari Kunzru have delineated characters having mental disabilities. But the full-fledged accounts about mental disabilities are only found in the writings of Jerry Pinto, Shreevatsa Nivetia, Jhilmil Brekenridge, Namarita Kathait, Gayathri Prabhu, and others. These writers initiate discussions on the marginalized state of mentally disabled people in India and seek a safer space for these people in our society. Though all these writers talk about the helplessness of the mentally disabled people, the inclusivity of these people still remains a dream. Amandeep Sandhu is a promising writer who dauntlessly raises the vital questions related to the mistreatment of mentally disabled people in society and shows a plausible solution to the inclusion of mentally disabled people in society. Sandhu's *Sepia Leaves* is a masterpiece in recording the first-hand experiences of Manjeet, a mentally disabled person, and the way society treats her. Manjeet's husband's empathy for her turns out to be a ray of hope for mentally disabled people.

The current paper specifically addresses the issue of the inclusion of mentally disabled people in society. The paper has been divided into two parts. The first section of the paper discusses the plight of a schizophrenic person and the way society ostracizes her. The second section of the paper presents 'empathy' as a solution to the problem of the inclusivity of mentally disabled people.

Sepia Leaves is a semi-autobiographical novel. The novel is set in Rourkela, Orissa, in the 1970s. It was a time of political unrest and social insurrection in Indian society. Appu is the only child of his parents. His father works in a steel plant and his mother is a housewife. His father holds a diploma but his mother was well educated. His family conditions made him go to boarding school, and visits to home became seldom. The novel deals with Appu's (Amandeep Sandhu) struggle to understand his Mamman's (his mother's) mental disability, his father's consistent support for Mamman, and the way society treats Mamman. Appu grows up in an unconventional family environment with a schizophrenic mother. Throughout his childhood and adulthood, he tries to understand the cause of his mother's condition and praises his father's unwavering support for Mamman. The novel specifically raises pertinent questions about the way society treats a schizophrenic person. Schizophrenia is an enigmatic disability. But there are some symptoms that can help in identifying schizophrenia. The World Health Organization mentions that "Schizophrenia is characterized by significant impairments in the way reality is perceived and changes in behaviour..." (World Health Organization).

The symptoms suggest that a schizophrenic person can have myriad versions of reality. The change in behaviour and impaired perception can make a schizophrenic person incomprehensible as well. And maybe that is why everyone around Manjeet could not completely understand her. Appu describes his mother's condition as, Mamman was two Mammans. Once I entered the kitchen, Mamman was shouting swear words at the top of her voice. When I asked for food, she picked up the daal and threw it down the drain. This was the angry Mamman. When I came home the next day, she made some half-burnt puris and kept filling my plate with them even when I was full. She was very calm, as if she didn't hear my repeated refusal. I threw the puris out of the window. That was the over-loving Mamman. (Sandhu 11)

Manjeet's two distinct personalities made her prone to fear, pity, and seclusion. She persistently uttered imaginary things and sometimes talked about persecutory delusions. Appu's bewilderment is evident when he observes her and notes, "she muttered continuously in an even unemotional tone. She wrote one thing and spoke another, maybe that was the problem..." (Sandhu 35). She was loud, emotionally distant, violent, and sometimes became completely out of control. Despite the medication and treatment her health did not improve. It was probably the result of her mental state that she always kept talking about death. In fact, she narrates to Appu the stories that mention only deaths. Appu mentions, "unlike Baba's stories, there was always death in hers" (Sandhu 23).

She suffered severely, but the cause of her disability could not be identified. It is often seen that mental disabilities and illnesses are the result of genes, a toxic environment, traumas, and constant suppression. It can be concluded that the cause of mental disabilities is not just some chemical imbalances in the brain; a hostile environment and too many bad experiences can cause mental disabilities too. In Manjeet's case, the cause of her disability is probably her suppressed childhood and unfulfilled aspirations. She grew up under the patronage of a strict father without a mother. Her father was a socially active man who did not care about the feelings of his children. Manjeet's brother tells Appu that, Once Nanaji [Manjeet's father] was having his lunch. Mamman ran up to him and put some chalk on his plate. She must have been what, nine years old? He tried to recollect, and he slapped her. He slapped her so hard on the face that she was thrown on the ground, and she hurt her head, the right side...Guddi [Manjeet's sister] had given her the chalk to put on the plate...we picked her up and took her to the doctor. After that, Manjeet was so scared of your Nanaji that she didn't speak to him for years, till she finished school, in fact" (Sandhu 174-175)

Her father's harsh treatment, neglect by her siblings, and aloofness made her different from the rest of her family. These situations further contributed to her mental condition. She was a promising young woman before she suffered from schizophrenia. She was well educated. She even taught in a school for some time, but because of her father's intervention, she had to leave her job. She could not live her life the way she wanted to. From her life, friendship, companionship, nurturing parent, and even understanding siblings were missing. In a conversation with her sister, she reveals that she had unrequited love for her former teacher. Her sister negates the very idea of love because the man was their teacher. Instead of listening to Manjeet, her sister simply calls her 'mad' for loving her teacher. This instance clearly demonstrates that even the slightest deviation from societal norms can categorize somebody as 'mad'. The childhood suppression and marriage to a man less educated than her were utter disappointments to her. These failures and the persistent control of his father made her more vulnerable to schizophrenia. No matter what the cause of her mental disability, she did not deserve the kind of treatment she got from her paternal family, her in-laws, and society. Except Appu and Baba, everyone around her pitied her, showered false sympathy, and secluded her. Manjeet's brother highlights that Manjeet's condition is the result of the way people treated her throughout her life. He mentions, "They have made her kamli-mad. She wasn't like that in our [their] childhood" (Sandhu 174).

It is very upsetting that her own family treats her like an outcast. Guddi [Manjeet's sister] herself admits that she and the rest of the family have no obligations towards Manjeet because she is married. She says to Appu, "She is mad, my dear. We have married her off. We have nothing to do with this any longer..." (Sandhu 157). This kind of emotionally distant behaviour and carelessness shows how families treat mentally disabled people. Instead of helping the patient, they simply abandon them. It is mentioned in the novel that once Manjeet's in-laws tie her and beat her. This kind of behaviour is quite disturbing and certainly inhuman. These experiences limit unheard sufferings of the mentally disabled people and emphasize the utmost need to create a safe environment for them. The neighbours and friends often pitied Manjeet and sympathized with Appu. Instead of showing pity and sympathy, these people could have lent a hand in making their lives bearable. The problem was not that Manjeet had schizophrenia, but the way people made her life even more stifling is the main concern here. In Manjeet's case, the society left Appu and Baba on their own and became mere spectators. Appu notes, "I felt that my friends and neighbors silently pitied me, and it made me uncomfortable. I did not know what to do" (Sandhu 181).

Manjeet was ostracized by her society. The people around her made fun of her, called her 'mad', and avoided her presence. She was not treated as a member of her society but rather as an outcast who still continues to live among them. Despite knowing the severity of her mental state, people still continued to perceive her as a threat and simply wanted to get rid of her. Manjeet's husband was often advised by friends and colleagues to admit her into a mental hospital. It is because of this mentality that people stopped coming to their house. Everyone simply boycotted the entire family as if it was a normal thing to do so. Appu mentions, "we were not accustomed to guests. Wherever we lived...we never had many people coming home" (Sandhu 6).

Through Manjeet, Sandhu targets the inappropriate practices done by medical practitioners while treating mentally disabled people. He discusses at length Dr. Nanda's treatment given to Manjeet and point out the malpractices of doctors and health care workers towards mentally disabled people. Manjeet's doctor, Dr. Nanda, turns out to be an incompetent doctor. He doesn't care much about Manjeet's condition and continues with Electroconvulsive Therapy until Baba intervenes and stops him from doing further treatment. Alok Sarin emphasizes, "the psychiatrist [Dr. Nanda] appears as a distant, rigid, authoritarian figure" (Sarin 71). Dr. Nanda's treatment raises vital questions about the safety and well-being of the mentally disabled people in healthcare service institutions. It is quite interesting to note that the way society treats Manjeet is indeed a reflection of the beliefs and core values they uphold. These people isolated Manjeet because she was not normal like them. But this unveils that the false notions they attached to Manjeet was not normal either. Manjeet was actually the victim of the narrow mindedness of her society. She was unashamedly called 'mad' by society. A society that pretended to be progressive lacked basic manners. Appu's Baba efficiently highlights the shallowness of the society when he explains why people call Manjeet 'mad'. He asserts, "...See, we are all a little different from each other: our faces, our handwriting, our way of walking...But mad is when you are more different than considered normal" (Sandhu 46). Baba raises a critical issue here: the idea of labelling what is abnormal. Who gave society the right to decide that Manjeet should be called mad and that she should be ostracized? How come everyone agreed to this silent treatment and played along in making Manjeet's life more miserable? The answer to all these questions comes from Thomas Szasz's idea that all the mentally ill and mentally disabled people are simply the 'social scapegoats'⁴. The way scapegoats are blamed for others' faults similarly, Manjeet was blamed for her mental condition. Even though she had no say in inheriting or getting the disability, she became the target of the entire society, including her own family. The society hides its own hypocrisy in isolating Manjeet from the rest of the society.

Manjeet's husband turns out to be a ray of hope for all the mentally disabled people. Sandhu strategically delineates Baba's love, affection, and care, which is urgently needed for these people. Baba's care is not just mere sympathy, but it is the result of the empathy he experienced towards Manjeet. *Sepia Leaves* becomes a one-of-a-kind text in propounding empathy as a possible solution for the inclusion of mentally disabled people in society.

Baba's decision to stay with Mamman in every circumstance is praiseworthy. He was the only person in the entire world who stood by her. Sandhu suggested two things through this. One is the much-needed empathy for the mentally disabled people, and the other one is disability writing activism. Empathy is the faculty of emotionally understanding others. An empathetic person feels, tries to comprehend the context by imagining the state, and acts to improve the state of others. Appu's Baba is clearly an empathetic person who not only understands Mamman but also stands by her throughout his life. He stands with his wife against the rest of society. Manjeet may not have liked him, but his empathy created a soft place for him even in Manjeet's heart. Once she says while muttering that she'll kill everyone except Appu's father. It was Baba's pure care, affection, and respect for her that made her feel that way. It is quite sad that a schizophrenic mind changes with Baba's empathy, but the rest of the society still continues with its prejudice. Baba presents a scathing critique of a society that pretends to be sane but acts foolishly.

Baba protects Manjeet and shuns every attempt that tries to hurt her. He is the true hero who stands for a just treatment for Manjeet and sets an example. When one of his friends tries to demean her in front of Baba, he outrightly dismisses him. Sandhu writes that Baba said, "Don't call her mad, Mr. Rao. There is some problem, but don't call her mad" (Sandhu 85). Baba's firmness in protecting Manjeet from society is indeed admirable. Baba raises serious questions about the way mentally disabled people are treated in hospitals. When Dr. Nanda mistreats Manjeet with unnecessary electroconvulsive therapy, Baba takes hold of the situation and immediately discharges Manjeet from the hospital. He tells Dr. Nanda clearly, "My wife is fine. I shall withdraw her from the hospital right away. Your shock therapy has not helped. It has only worsened her health. Look how she has aged in one week!" (Sandhu 92). This whole incident not only highlights Baba's astounding support towards Manjeet but unmasks the false practices of some doctors who don't care for the patients. Irrespective of the consequences of the electroconvulsive therapy, Dr. Nanda doesn't stop despite seeing no improvement in Manjeet. This again raises the concern of the safety of mentally disabled people. There comes a point when even Appu leaves Mamman's side and asks his Baba to leave her.

But Baba doesn't move by his words and makes him realize that it would be absolutely wrong to leave Manjeet all alone. He tells Appu, "Don't speak like others...She could have gone mad after our wedding...or had an accident and lost her limbs. Should I have left her then? We have to earn her trust. Yeh sab Sanjog hai. This is fate" (Sandhu 95). The way Baba makes Appu understand Mamman's situation is way beyond simply kindness. He is the epitome of empathy and an inspiration for others.

Baba tries to clear the prejudices attached to Manjeet too. He tries his best to convince everyone that Manjeet is not a bad person and that she should be given a chance to be a part of society. He calmly tells Appu, "Beta, she is a good person. I do not know what is wrong with her, but I know she doesn't have any ill feelings towards anyone..." (Sandhu 40). Sandhu tries to weave Manjeet into the society through Baba's empathetic efforts. He suggests that there can be another perspective regarding mentally disabled people, which is beyond prejudices and segregation. Baba's empathy becomes a potent weapon to combat social negligence, familial oppression, and the ostracization of mentally disabled people.

Conclusion

Amandeep Sandhu ends *Sepia Leaves* with – "I want to edit the world" (Sandhu 208). This is not a simple assertion but an urge to alter the world for a better purpose. It is an appeal to denounce the prejudices and false notions attached to mentally disabled people and the segregation of these people as well. Throughout the novel, Sandhu's genuine concern is to make the world a safer, more secure, and positive place for the mentally disabled people. He insists on empathy over prejudice and ostracization. The inclusion of mentally disabled people in society is only possible when we use empathy in understanding these people's plight.

Works Cited

1. See Amandeep Sandhu's *Sepia Leaves*, especially pp.207.
2. See Jeeja Ghosh's "Participation, Inclusion and the Law: Moving Beyond Rhetoric", pp.414-422 in *Disability Studies in India: Global Discourse, Local Realities*.
3. See Sara Newman's "Disability and Life Writing Reports from the Nineteenth-Century Asylum", pp.261-278 in *Journal of Literary & Cultural Disability Studies*, Liverpool University Press, vol.5, no.3, 2011.
4. See Thomas Szasz' *The Myth of Mental Illness*, especially pp.170.