

Creating a Disabled Atlantis: Shivani Gupta's Fight against the Threatening Environments

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Abstract

*The patriarchal culture views woman as secondary. Even in the contemporary times when there is no need to classify people as man and woman, this dichotomy cleverly plays its role. To a certain extent, people themselves have started acknowledging the differences and oppositions. Woman, during a later period came to be considered the second sex. But there has come no categorisation of sexes in the case of the disabled. Taken into consideration the disabled woman, she gets doubly marginalized. In the social context where disability becomes a serious problem, the body of a disabled woman becomes invisible and she herself wishes a secluded life, away from the public's gaze. When disability strikes a woman, many things are brought under scrutiny including her sexuality, (in) dependence, employment opportunities, and so on. The situation is the same in the case of acquired as well as inherent disabilities. The condition worsens when the woman herself internalises her 'shortcomings.' Shivani Gupta's autobiography *No Looking Back* gives an entirely different picture, where Gupta refuses to internalise the society's concept of disability. Instead of making herself invisible, she finds her disability as an opportunity to change the world's perspective on disability altogether.*

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Simone de Beauvoir, while discussing the condition of women reveals the society's perception of woman as, "Humanity is male, and man defines woman, not in herself, but in relation to himself; she is not considered an autonomous being" (de Beauvoir 5,6). This is the notion held by the whole of humankind, giving woman a secondary status in the social order. This gives form to a patriarchal society. For generations, women were "taught to submit, to accept sexual inferiority, and to be silent" (Hooks 16) as a result of the influence put in by the patriarchal society. Though there has come up the call to give form to a new world for women, the roots of the patriarchal system have gone deep into the human mind in such a

manner that, even women themselves do not appreciate any sort of deviance that gives them more power than men.

Before taking into account the steps of deviance, it is important to look at how the existing patriarchal social system is shaped. First and foremost, women are denied the opportunity even to think of gaining independence by instilling in them the two concepts of masculinity and femininity. Along with this the society spreads the notion that women cannot exist without man, and that a woman becomes complete only with the help of man. Such ideas play important roles in the life of a woman from her childhood on.

While the ordinary normal woman occupies secondary position in the society, the status of a disabled woman is not defined. However, she occupies a lower position than the able-bodied woman as well as a disabled man. Adding to this is the notion commonly held by humanity that, a woman possessing any kind of disability does not have the capacity to perform feminine acts, as a result of which she cannot be categorised under the socially constructed female gender. She possesses only the biological status as someone belonging to the female sex, and is completely devoid of participation in social activities. A large number of literary and visual narratives have emerged, sharing the difficulties faced by disabled women in the contemporary as well as in the past social orders. Among the different genres of literature, life writings, especially autobiographies, have gained utmost importance as they share the first-hand experience of the disabled female. Shivani Gupta's *No Looking Back* is one of its kind which tells how the writer acquired a physical disability in the midst of her youth, and how during a later period she becomes visible to the world as the founder of Accessibility.

Susan Lonsdale, in *Women and Disability* says,

To be disabled.... means confronting the negative attitudes of others and sometimes internalising those negative reactions...It can mean overcoming enormous challenges, leading to a sense of achievement and fulfilment. It can mean a sense of solidarity with other oppressed people and the emergence of a social and political community of people with disabilities (1).

Shivani Gupta passes through both these levels, which she portrays in her autobiography. In the case of women, the effect of disability is very powerful. Already women are perceived as inferior to men, and the disabled woman remains in a more disadvantageous position than the 'normal' woman. The acceptance of such a status is more difficult for those who have acquired disability at a later period in their lives as compared to those who are inherently disabled. This is because; the former group will no longer be able to interact in the society as they used to do before disability struck them. This is more evident in the case of physical disabilities than the other ones, as the former cannot be concealed from public view.

From a very young age itself, women are advised to pay great attention to their physical appearance, contributing to their self-image. Due to this, when something destroys their external appearance along with the society making them invisible, they themselves try to

hide from the gaze of those around. This gets evident when Gupta says, “The last time I had met some of my classmates had been at my wedding... So much has changed since then. It was excruciatingly painful to think of putting up a false front of happiness when all I really wanted was to be left alone and to be forgotten” (Gupta 1). What makes physical appearance very much important in the life of woman is her desire to attain the ideal body. The expectation on every woman, whether able-bodied or disabled, is the same. All of them have to carry themselves physically as per the prescribed standards. Otherwise, they will be considered deviants. But this is impossible in the cases where the woman is physically disabled, which results in them moving away from the mainstream society.

The attitude of the society towards the disabled woman seems strange as they are regarded as living bodies devoid of feelings or power. This becomes a depressing experience to those women who are not born with disabilities, like Gupta. Her experiences in the hospital after the first accident stand proof for this. “All the medical personnel at the hospital appeared to come and poke me with an oil pin or tickle me with cotton, asking me if I could feel it, and I was getting tired of repeating ‘NO!’” (Gupta 14). Along with this, the doctors never told her what she was going through as they had the feeling that there is no need to narrate all the events to her. In short, she is denied her basic right as a patient. Along with this, her physical beauty is further damaged when the doctor shaves her head without her consent. “At any cost was I willing to have my hair shaved off. I had always been very conscious about how I looked and worked hard to look good. My hair and its style were an integral part of my appearance” (Gupta 15). Thus, the accident made her into someone who has no control over her own body. It is one of her friends who first make her aware of the consequences the disability has upon her. On seeing her he vomited. “...how could anyone be so repulsed by me?” (Gupta 34) clearly portrays how much her self-image has been tarnished.

The notion of the society is such that, a disabled body is nothing but an object of gaze. It is just a body without a mind. Gupta, in her life story, finds the doctors as a group of people who perceives of her body as something on which medical experiments can be carried out without consent. She also shares her experience with the nurses who come there to clean her with a bed sponge. They had no concern about the privacy of a disabled woman. The latter is furthered away from the status as a woman. “The nurses were careless and rude, unconcerned about another woman’s privacy. ...as a patient I surely deserved more respect...” (Gupta 27).

A woman, from the time of her maturity is trained to become a wife and a mother. Being a woman who earlier was non-disabled, Gupta too aspired to be like the other women around her, with a husband, children, and a happy life together. Even after the accident, her relationship with Sunil goes well without any issue, but later with his marriage with some other girl, she understands that her sexuality is under scrutiny. She finds it no longer important to uplift her self-image. “Clothes and accessories hold no attraction any longer as I know that no matter how hard I tried I’d never look good again.I could be a burden on someone was a new concept that had never crossed my mind before—but I guess society has

a way of looking at things that is so rigid that slowly and unknowingly it becomes a part of your own thinking” (Gupta 43).

Sometimes the society’s perception prompts the disabled to question their own selves. The instance when a woman considers Gupta to be a beggar only because she used a wheelchair stands proof for the aforementioned. These experiences teach her that without herself attempting to become visible to the world, she will be regarded as someone who needs charity. “I wanted to someday become completely independent... I had to find a way to be self-reliant” (Gupta 65).

It is during her search for a way to become independent that Gupta finds out that she has no social life, and it is difficult for her to get acceptance in the society as she used to get. In the first place she is denied the job only because she is a disabled. Instead of her talents, her disability becomes more important in the eyes of the public. According to de Beauvoir, the primary identity of a woman is that of her sex/gender. But in the case of Gupta, who is a woman, her primary identity is not based on her sex/gender. Instead her primary identity is that of a disabled. This made the formerly extrovert Gupta, an introvert. The exact emotion of a disabled person is revealed when Shivani Gupta says, “The hurt I felt each time people sympathized with me was mitigated when someone appreciated my work, my talent and my ability” (Gupta 68).

The society’s influence on Gupta is so strong that she starts internalising the wrong conception of disability and her self. Due to this, she finds a job in a rehabilitation centre, as she thinks that since she too is disabled, the job will suit her and that “...there would always be a place for [her] in the profession” (Gupta 74). In short, she internalises the society’s perception that, a disabled person can live freely and comfortably only with the other disabled, and not with ‘normal’ people. But this concept changed with her visit to London, and the experiences therein. “The most important learning for me from this trip was the realization that disability was not the end of the road; rather, it was just an obstacle to be overcome through rehabilitation” (Gupta 76). This realisation gave her the power to lead the kind of life she used to earlier, by bringing about minor adjustments. Gupta finds her disability as a venue of myriad opportunities, and decides to engage in those activities that may be of help to the society as a whole. Publishing a book on spinal injuries, and the fight at the film theatre are examples of her earlier actions that may be of use in the society to give form to non-handicapping environments. Gupta understands that self-image involves not only physical appearance but also internal talents and thoughts.

The new perception on self-image prompts Gupta to let the whole society become aware of it. By living in a rented house, she got the opportunity to prove before her family that she is no different from the so-called normal women. In a similar fashion it becomes easier for her to convince the society bit by bit. Along with living independently, Vikas’ entry into her life gave Gupta a new way to get acceptance in the society. The notion that the society holds is, a normal person cannot engage in any sort of close relationship with a

disabled individual, as nothing can be expected from the latter which the former demands, especially if the disability is the kind which cannot be concealed.

“The image of ideal ‘womanhood’ extends beyond physical appearance to lifestyle. During their lifetimes, women are expected to fulfil a number of roles. Women who are denied or unable or do not wish to fill these roles are stigmatised...” (Lonsdale 9). From this conventional outlook a disabled woman getting married is weird and impossible as the commonly held notion is that, a disabled woman is incapable of becoming a good wife or mother, and that no one prefers marrying her as everyone wishes for a complete life. “This type of prejudice makes it difficult for disabled women to reconcile their self-image and identity with traditional concepts of femininity” (Lonsdale 74). The various studies have brought about the conclusion that, more than disabled men, it is the disabled women who suffer the ills of such prejudices. Shivani Gupta is no exception from the false notions related to marriage and motherhood. To a certain extent, she has internalised these ‘facts’, which is why she says that she is such a woman who never can have a romantic relationship with a so-called normal man, when it comes to her affair with Vikas. This is why she gets surprised when Vikas tells her that his parents have given him the nod to marry her. She herself says that, if Vikas has told her of planning to marry someone else, she would not have been that much dazed because, this was the response that she expected from anyone who became close to her. The news of their marriage brought no special emotions on the faces of their friends or Shivani’s relatives including her father. Either these people, including Vikas’ parents have changed their mindset and started accepting disability as a part of the diversities around them, or they are sure that the relationship will not stay for long as is the norm of a ‘perfect’ society.

Gaining acceptance in the social order where one resides is of great importance. The stigmatisation and discrimination towards people with disabilities have made them deviants in the society. Vikas opens before Gupta many ways to get acceptance in society, and let others accept her with her shortcomings. He teaches her to be more social by getting familiar with his friends. “I was excited about meeting them; but at the same time, I was nervous and self-conscious because I was worried about their reaction when they saw me... What gave me strength to go out and face the possible rejection was Vikas backing me despite his own uncertainty about how his friends would react towards me” (Gupta 109).

No Looking Back gives a clear picture of how a disabled woman overcame the society’s false notions on the lives of disabled women. It has shattered all the concepts related to self-image so far kept by the society. This gets evident from Shivani Gupta’s words: “Together, we had far beyond what we had dreamt of. I passed the test, and everybody was convinced Vikas was happy. I finally had a family, something I had longed for all my life” (Gupta 207).

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