

CONCERN FOR BELONGINGNESS: VISUAL IMPAIRMENT AND THE ANXIETY OF INTIMACY

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We are living in an age when we have outlived the golden era when we knew that our self is a mass of solid gold intrinsically coherent, consistent and unified and struggled to place it as “thing-in-itself” or “thing-for-itself”, and discovered our self/identity as made of elements melting, shaping, in flux and even enameled-moulding into and exhibiting itself in multitudinous pieces of ornaments. My problem for the time being is to re-examine my consciousness/knowledge of this kaleidoscopic critical confusion in terms of “intimacy” and “belonging” confronting, coalescing and conflicting with each other. The concepts of both “intimacy” and “belonging” revolve round the question of identity/subject-position, which, in the context of my present paper, follows the formative principle of physical-mental “ability” forming categories of disable and non-disable/able-bodied. My focus will concentrate upon the related experience/identity/consciousness of persons with visual impairment compounded by multifarious multi-dimensional elements racing with/against each other creating a productive chaotic space – constructing and reconstructing itself.

The categorization itself makes the issue of intimacy and belonging a cite for contestation if it frustrates the state/culture prescribed cohabitation of both and refuses to maintain a compartmentalized groups—the obvious inferior struggling for rights as mass identity and the superior gradually yielding some space carefully maintaining its policed boundary at the same time. Hence, the attempt to resituate/de-situate the “natural” assumption of interchangeability of the terms “intimacy” and “belonging” in context of disabled community may be a mechanism to destabilize the strategy which Julia Kristeva terms “Abjection”—“the process by which a society identifies the abject and excludes it from its order through various prohibitions and taboos” (quoted in Auslander, 114). Refusal to accept the position of either

“normal” or “disable” is a way of defying hegemonic binary. My observations are based on my own experience as a visually challenged woman from a middleclass liberal Indian milieu interacting with both worlds within and outside the segregated institutions.

While political activism focuses on the “reality” in order to act upon in direction to achieve survival and dignity for a minoritized community and to expose illusory representation/simulation, the contemporary theoretical investigations hardly find reality as fixed, stable or representable by language. More over, the need for de-categorization gets compelling since even a core group of visually impaired persons in segregated institution like our secondary residential school the populace was consisted (other-than-visual-impairment factors apart) of late-blind persons, born-blind with no firsthand visual experience, persons with very little conscious remembrance of visual experience only sufficient to form the basic frameworks to interpret the “visible” world, partial blind (of various degree) and many more. This miniature group obviates that to consider disability as global issue should not imply the universal denying specific nuances. If the focus concentrates on difference then the ideal of “belonging” gets problematic, and if grouping gets prioritized, how individual intimacy with persons outside the group could be possible? Hence, my present concern is the Historical and cultural unsituatedness of those unplug from the circuitry who like H el ene Cixous’s Jewoman becomes homeless, perpetual emigrants: “It’s not a question of drawing the contours, *but what escapes the contour*, the secret movement, the breaking, the torment, the unexpected” (quoted in Auslander, 80).

Unless “intimacy” implies some undivided continuity with no distinct consciousness of individuation, subjects are unfailingly constituted with politics, and a potential uncertainty of subject position occurs with the ever-widening cleavage between “intimacy” and “belonging”, the two facets of consciousness—almost inevitably mutually implicating one another—producing instability both in definitional and experiential level. According to common understanding, intimacy essentially draws sustenance from a sense of belonging, a feeling of similarity/oneness of the basic and primary tenets of understanding/experience/perception between two acknowledged different self-s—willing and capable of blurring the distinction between self and the Other. In the same manner, belonging to the identifiable category must be preceded by a kind of knowledge of intimacy—a potential of similar capacity of understanding of and reacting to identical situation which is necessary for any possibility

of sharing our innermost thought. But the consciousness of the fragments within the “self” itself, with their unalterable alterity to one another, finds it problematic to enjoy unflinching intimacy or sense of belonging. With continually deepening sense/knowledge of fragmented selfhood accelerates the process of recognition of interactive cohabitation of both self and Other within. Consequently, it becomes far more problematizing and disturbing whether to accept the alterity of the Other even in metaphorical sense and try to communicate with it or to obliterate Otherness to expedite the process of unification. Therefore, since both concepts of intimacy and belonging involve multiple subjectivity, potential confusion arises out of the process of categorization.

The identity of disabled should be negotiated as embedded in multiple nuances/functions which problematizes the discourse of “intimacy” and “belonging”. The senses of both often vary with our participation in social discourses, especially when the capitalist mode of production promotes the kind of social relation Depending on devaluing and marginalizing the groups that are not directly contributing to its labour market. The more in number and intensity of other kinds of marginality, the more becomes the desperation to belong to and feel intimate with the greatest defining feature of disability and vice versa.

The political dimension of belonging precepts a common platform which often gets enmeshed with the concept of category. The agenda of emancipation in spite of its attempt to fracture the metanarrative of disability as a lack often encourages the narrative of oppositional identity. What we cannot deny in the process of acquiring material and humane rights, is a political and social need for what Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak calls “strategic essentialism”. The need for grouping together can never be denied for persons whose very existence is mapped as negative/undesirable through various cultural formation, posing a threat to the discourses of childhood, education, employment, marriage and parenting, old age and uncountable other by which a normal subject is born. In manner of Marxian alienation, where the labourer feels alienated selling his labour to the capitalist owning the product/production process including the sold labour force, the disable persons also feel commodifying their alien disability to bolster the fiction of perfection of “normal” persons and are forced to confinement in category. We act as the willing and initiating agent of the ideological agenda of difference/derivative/inferior as part of Louis Althusser’s interpellation which positions us, transforms from individual to

subjects: “We assume our interpellated position, identify with received social meanings, locate ourselves within these meanings and enact its goals under the guise of having freedom to make this choice (Quoted in Auslander, 36).

Consequently, in various cultures in varying ways and degree, structural obstructions apart, which a disabled person suffers most from, is a lack of proper/wholesome sense of belonging with the “common/universal” humanity comprised of able-bodied family, friend, locality, institutions and society at large. A feeling of “alien”-ness even deters identification with the most intimate of relations. Naturally, in spite of even the unmistakable presence of intense intimacy born out of affection the disabled person faces a kind of identity crisis: owing to the experiential (since the sensory perception of the world differs) and behavioural (participation in motional and expressional activity varies) difference s/he cannot identify her/his self with those s/he interacts with any actual or potential intimacy of knowledge. The mutual inaccessibility to an Other’s experiential/definitional identity gradually leads to an imperceptible alienation of the disabled person from the surrounding and withdrawal into the cave of private consciousness isolating individuals and blocking the way of reciprocal expression of even the very personal thoughts, feelings and experiences. Thus intimacy gets damaged. In most cases—depending upon gender, financial condition, cultural attitude etc.—the process becomes grosser instead of subtle seesaw of feelings leading to total collapse of both “belonging” and “intimacy” with simultaneous loosening of strong compulsory bonds.

While medical model certifies that body as disabled which fails in normative appearance and comport/behaviour and social model highlights society’s role in creating disablement in impaired body, the problem lies with the fact that our subjectivity grows not out of body alone, it consists of becoming in world of others, occupying a socio material space to act and be acted upon. We are, in terms of Maurice Merleau-Ponty, “embodied subjects” (Iwakuma, 80), knowing and functioning in relation to other bodies around, enjoying discontinuities before being narrativized. E.g. when waiting as a patient in a doctor’s chamber, often any irregularity in mobility gets defined as illness and authenticates our belonging to a universal patienthood while the inability to describe the ailments in visual terms problematizes the medical procedure along side creating a disable identity for us.

The process of categorization/classification often dissociates “belonging” from “intimacy” as the categorized, therefore typified,

individual experiences a forced alienation from other categories in order to maintain communal solidarity and distinction and feels bound to re-position her/his personal choices. The breach produces huge tension. Thrown into a commonality shared by accessible disabled peers, one is sometimes forced to compromise and re-adjust the contour of her/his personality. S/he tries or gets pressurized to submerge her/his own distinct class- cast-regional-religious-ethnic-linguistic-cultural-economic- familial and so many more facades of identity into the majoritarian identity adopted by the interest group in order both to strengthen the political voice and cope up with their own Sense of isolation felt outside the community. In both situation “intimacy” and “belonging” fail to coincide spontaneously. If the outer-world-alienation becomes prominent, the factor of disability becomes the shaping principle of identity and the deeply craved intimacy with the community weakens the sense of belonging with other groups though the interim process (sometimes lifelong) of repressing the memory/habit remains full of stress. If the other-than-disability factors play greater role either in positioning her/him in society or in the built of personality, even then the intimacies and belongings become fractured and compartmentalized with moments of discontinuity during sharing same platform with able-bodied intimates.

The pressure for massification to achieve political goal or secure political interest often requires obliteration of individual distinction. It demands that individual’s private psychic life should assume the quality of public statement and receive public expression in accordance with a specific political agenda. The process itself initiates a kind of power play: political sameness gets upper hand over individual difference and the common characteristic gets prioritized over uncommon ones. The drama of domination gets enacted by highlighting or making primary the shared quality and making other distinguishing traits unimportant and minor which sometimes are the building blocks in carving of personality. Interestingly, the force is exerted both from outside and inside: the reductive method adopted by the self/centre consisted of able-bodied disablist ideology accelerates Otherization and confirms rejection and domination—symbolic and actual—and the magnifying method from within tries to erase the individual traits for the communitarian ones—finally assigning the nonconformists an outsider status. The internal hierarchy thus blocks intimacy by forcing it upon its members.

The mainstream-minority/centre-margin dichotomy and a complication produced by the constant confrontation between

centrifugal (centre pushing margin away by marginalizing it more as alternate as well as by co-opting margins within its own hegemonic net) and centripetal (margin pushing its way to centre by internalizing the ruling principles of centre) makes “inclusiveness” a tantalizingly complex phenomenon. On one hand, in-group politics constantly demands submersion of ungrouply tenets of its members; and consequently either the members compromise their intimacies in order to belong to the centre within the group or are forced to suffer minority status being unable to completely extricate themselves from the group both in fear of damaging the in-group intimacies and losing the platform to belong to the identity group of disabled. On the other hand, the hierarchical position of the outside able-bodied world tempts disabled margin with the alluring prospect of situationality/habitation in mainstream leading to a breach within group even among those who both belong to and feel intimate with the communitarian platform. They try to locate themselves as part of the mainstream and highlight their distance from the uncovered position in the margin.

More over, in our mediatized age representation becomes so much saturated with image that it instead of representing reality becomes reality itself and if the world cannot be reproduced—owing either to lack of Information/technology or horror/repulsion of many unpalatable facts – it is invested with distance (social and experiential), an inaccessible Otherness and aura (concept of sixth sense for example). Hence, it happens that, unable to have the “perfect” body image projected by the instruments of image production, disabled persons try to emulate the able-bodied body image or conform to a disabled image catering to the fantasy of mainstream. The use of non-functional accessories like watch (not Braille or talking) by VI persons or denial of functional ones like white cane well exemplifies the point. Sometimes a hyper-theatricalized existence adopted in order to belong to the non-disabled—of course as innocently/safely Other not as dangerously same – becomes self-deprecating. By another mechanism, the urge at least to participate in world of able-bodied lead to keen sense of failure resulting in unnecessary and troublesome imitation and repetition of the denigrating logic of centre. Often in our hostel day’s fun was purchased at cost of our peer’s disability and even the general undesirability: interestingly pokers of fun included both the privileged and despised, but with varying degree, the consciousness of “mere comic” used to disappear even with those apparently well-placed exposing their almost unrecognized isolation.

Oppression lies in the very structuring structures of identity and function. Hence the disturbance occurs when someone takes up the politically “incorrect” identity or functionality challenging what Pierre Bourdieu terms “doxa” (quoted in Auslander, 69) to refer to the taken-for-granted, unquestionable and unexamined ideas about social position that appear commonsensical and natural to even the posited individual as well as the power relations that exist between social classes perpetrating and perpetuating social inequality. The use of cultural capitals by able-bodied persons being replicated by disabled world proves assaults on to their symbolic value (the attempt to decorate rooms by VI persons makes them different from both worlds rather than disturbing functional value). This concentric of denial (the centre denying same-footedness with the margin and the marginalized itself denying one of the defining features in themselves and those identified with it in order to belong to where they are barred to enter) push the refugees into a vacuum.

Commenting on gender once Judith Butler argued, “Identity is performatively constituted by the very ‘expressions’ that are said to be its results” (Butler, 25). The logic which establishes doing/performance as gender identity, constructs the disable-able-bodied duo by words, expressions, dress, actions and habits. Butler farther observes, “Subjection is nevertheless a power assumed by the subject, an assumption that constitutes the instrument of that subject’s becoming” (quoted in Auslander, 75). In every little instance of experience the consciousness of one group feels alienated and alienates “theirs”. How reductionism reduces the infinite possibility of intimacy and belonging could be demonstrated by simple instance: when I listen to a song (in non-visual medium) in company of my able-bodied peers the continuum of our auditory experience is sometimes broken by sighted person’s reaction to any silent change of appearance of the scenario as well as visual memory, so differs my experience with six peers whose memory, visualization of possible situation (since there are multiple representation of visualizable reality of the world to each) from one another. Hence, the in-group pressure to take up a typical subject position by certain repetition and prohibition or desperate attempts of individual to imitate the subject position of the state-prescribed docile able-body produces tension and creates outcasts.

However, what is needed is a fuller understanding and realization of self and personal choice, a need for the knowledge of richer variety of configuration of subjectivity. If a Visually impaired person, unaware of an identifiable differently able group, remains completely detached

from her/his likes; s/he often becomes a prey of the culturally constructed fiction of disability and suffers isolation in a confined world. At the same time it is epistemologically impossible to belong to a certain category—even that of disabled. The production and validity of knowledge is almost inevitably associated with the question of legitimacy and authority/authenticity of the knowing subject. Rod Michalko holds, “Periphery, depths, below, underground, margin—all of these is apt metaphors for the equally metaphoric imagined geographical location of disabled people” (Michalko, 176). Since we live and move about in Other’s geography—both literally and metaphorically—where our “local” knowledge is granted as based on special and particular way of perception (we, versed in visual knowledge, often used to laugh at born-blind’s perception of things). At last we come to accept through an alternate curriculum that seeing subject is the only objective knower and knowledge/concept resides in eye and that we have to outgrow our private space and knowledge and estrange familiarity in order to imitate “sighted” knowledge/language to participate in public domain and dispense with disability. Again to quote Michalko, “Without a version of local knowledge as estranged-familiarity, and without the inside/outside understood as a *figure* that acts to expose critically the operations and interior machinery of the background of ‘normalcy’ against which this figures stands, subjective knowledge’s from disability ‘run’ the danger, as Haraway says, of being appropriated, romanticized and melded in to the background of the ‘like-everyone-else’” (Michalko, 182) In such matters, the cultural and material rights apart, a common platform to affiliate our identity is compelling. Belonging of course is sometimes needed to be intimate with one’s own self: in absence of the “seeing” but “not-seen” eyes, visually challenged persons feel at home with gestures unafraid of being censured by vision. Some unintelligible sounds made by our peers perhaps to cope up with the inability to express all feelings in the language of non-seeing world—otherwise bound to use the alien vocabulary—may substantiate the point.

The model of universal humanity pathologizes, homogenizes and segregates impaired persons ignoring difference between and within groups. Imitating this disablist model, an internal hierarchy often accelerates the process as in my hostel power often lied with stereotyped disability oppressing partial blind and better off in socio economic terms. The structuring knowledge often refuses to acknowledge the complex web of issues that underpins identity and behaviour. The dichotomy between practiced and professed

allegiance, between conscious acceptance of an image and expected/perceived role and unexpected experience, between struggle to keep up with social expectancy and to uphold individuality complicates the whole business of relationship. The Individual is torn between a “desire for normativity and stability on one hand and openness and innovation on the other”, between “ethical responsibility to maintain and supporting established social order on the one hand and to bring about social transformation on the other” (Auslander, 40). What I oppose is the reduction of human complexity and social relation into metonymic representationality in favour of the subject as unfinalizable complex of identities, desires and voices. If subject is not a thing, but a process, in Bakhtinian sense, dialogue must consist of struggle and contradiction (referred to in Auslander, 40). We may allude to Luce Irigaray’s position about identity of woman to enhance the cause of human rights of disabled persons: “In order to become,” she writes, “it is essential to have a gender or an essence . . . as horizon. . . . To become means fulfilling the wholeness of what we are capable of being”. But of course “this road never ends” (quoted in Auslander, 109). Following same logic the discourse of disability may stand as an ongoing process of becoming that never reaches a defined goal. If disability is a corporeal style depending on how we live or are made to live in body produced by discourse and social relation, this analysis of the problematics of “intimacy” and belonging” may open a dialogue and widen the spectrum of an antihegemonic understanding of the identity of disability, thereby, encouraging potential area of investigation in disability studies.

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