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***The Other Senses*. Preeti Monga. Roli Books, New Delhi, 2012, 228 pages, Paperback, ₹335**

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The word autobiography was coined by William Taylor in 1797 in *The Monthly Review*. This genre maps the recollection of truth, episodes, thoughts and experiences in the writer's life. However, an autobiography coming from a disabled person encompasses much more than life experiences, as disability aggravates the challenges faced by a disabled individual. A. V. S. Jayaannapurna states that the "onset of 21st century brought to limelight the dreams and ambitions of individual," and people began to express their subjectivity. This gave the individual a "spiritual space of freewill," which Jayaannapurna describes as a "retrieval into self" (28). A psychologist can use the work as a guide to the writer's mind to understand how disability and the dominant discourses about it may have direct or indirect bearing on the writer's mind. Disability autobiography acts as an effective way of counter-discourse. It challenges the dominant ableist perceptions of that disability narrative that have contributed to portraying the negative somatic experiences in literature. It unveils or illuminates various issues that beset people with anomalous bodies, like human rights violations, stigma, and social and financial barriers. According to Causer, people who returned from wars and life-threatening diseases like polio and breast cancer spurred the autobiographical writings in such a way that nothing like this had happened before (1997). Until the 1950s, disability narratives were scant; whatever literature on disability was available was written by non-disabled writers based on their limited second-hand knowledge derived from myths, fiction and medical treatises. "The testimony of disabled people includes gritty accounts of their pain and daily humiliations — a sure sign of the rhetoric of realism" (Siebers 65). Autobiographical writing by disabled writers can inspire many disabled people to come out of their closets to share and assert their identity with pride. People, for a long time, relied on information about disability either in medical science or literary works, which was highly biased and heuristic. According to Thomas Causer, misrepresentation of disabled people could also be the cause of the lack of writing by the disabled about themselves. Thus, it becomes imperative for the marginalised to come up with transgressive autobiographical writing (Causer 5).

Preeti Monga's *The Other Senses* (2012) is an autobiography by a blind writer. *The Other Senses* is written in the same convention as Helen Keller's *Story of Life* (1903). Both autobiographies engage with disability-related issues, battling the ableist strictures in a patriarchal society. *The Other Senses* documents the life of the protagonist and brings out the social and cultural taboos attached to disability. It delves into the most disturbing experiences of the disabled protagonist, who is caught in the web of social hindrances and domestic abuse at the hands of her husband. The story pivots around Preeti Monga, whose vision starts diminishing after she is vaccinated against smallpox. She keeps changing schools due to her father's transfer from one state to another, who worked with the Central Water Power Commission. In her adolescence, she dates a few people who fall short of her expectations and is rejected by others because of her disability. A ray of hope emerges when Keith enters her life; she is elated at the prospect of marrying an able-bodied person who has accepted her regardless of her disability. However, the jubilation is momentary as Keith erupts into a verbal spat with her on the very first day of their marriage. From this marriage, she has two children: Fiona, a baby girl, and Mark, a boy younger than Fiona. After divorcing Keith, she starts working on and off and eventually marries a co-worker named Ashwani, who is also a divorcee and ten years younger than her. *The Other Senses* sardonically upbraids socio-cultural practices and institutions that do not allow the disabled their due share of respect. The writer explores the objectification of disability in medical institutions where a patient is interrogated. Causer argues that a patient's data is analysed by a doctor, and the disabled patient is reduced to a passive agent scrutinised through specialised language that is unintelligible to him (10). Therefore, the disabled must take control of their bodies by writing; Causer asserts that physicians "exercise/perpetuate their power by means of the development and deployment of the specialized language" (19). Alice Hall cites an example of Christy Brown and Keller to elaborate on how writing by the disabled could become an act of "overcoming obstacles, disrupting stereotypes of dependency and vulnerability; it becomes an act of defiant and triumphant self-inscription" (131).

The autobiography starts on a humourous note; Monga, along with her spouse Ashwani, visits a multiplex to watch a movie. Things turn bizarre when the guard halts the elevator, presuming that Monga's legs are affected by disability. He approaches them with concern and says, "I saw that madam is holding you, and walking as if there is something wrong with her legs; I thought she would not be able to jump on to the running stairs" (1). The guard is assured that she has vision impairment and that her legs are fine. Monga recounts many such humourous incidents where people who escorted her were mistaken as disabled, while Monga passed as an abled one. The narrative flashes back to her childhood visits to different hospitals for the treatment of vision impairment with no cure in sight; she adjusts to the new reality of life and starts her new journey of living with impairment, which is filled with tragedy, stress, upheaval, joy, happiness and inspiration for many disabled who fight against all odds to realise their dreams with limited support and resources.

The plot of the autobiography is not linear, where events follow seamlessly in a sequence. Monga dextrously keeps up with the element of suspense by breaking the chronological order of events, and she moves backwards and forward in the narrative. Monga, unlike many other disabled people, had the privilege of growing up in an educated family. She was born into a Sikh family to Charanjeet, an engineer by profession, and Mohini, a graduate. Her grandfather occupied an influential position in the police department, and many of her uncles settled abroad. She excelled in academics and chose to be strong and resilient by questioning the dominant disabling discourses, practices and institutions. A literary work serves as a significant site for social constructs. However, the same text can be very crucial in reversing and deconstructing the stereotypes that have pierced deep into cultures across the globe. Causer argues that disability does not solely depend on activism and "mobilisation" but on "theory" analysing and deconstructing the biased subjugating cultural hierarchies and believes disability is much produced/permeated discourse as through architectural or social barriers and thus, it challenges this type of discourse. Preeti Monga was not born blind but was rather afflicted with it after she was vaccinated against smallpox, resulting in her gradual vision loss.

Monga finds it hard to find a school which caters to the needs of specially-abled people. After she is rusticated from a school in Delhi, her classmates and friends begin to avoid her when she gets afflicted by smallpox. She is dropped from a workplace when the other employees of the restaurant discover that they are working with a blind female co-worker. What ultimately bogs her down is the task of finding a suitable life partner. The ableist treatment meted out to her shattered her emotionally. According to Monga,

> This was most shocking! What had I done now? Was I so bad that no one, no one at all wished to have anything to do with me? First it was my school, then the music teacher's denial that I would be able to achieve excellence no matter how hard I worked. No one seemed to want to marry me and now hundreds of people were protesting just because I had dared to accept a humble trainee's position at a five-star hotel. This seemed too absurd to make any sense of; just because I was blind, I was apparently being denied the basic right to live in this world. (Monga 88)

The exclusionary experiences shared by Monga were detrimental to her mental health. The above experiences of ableism show the influence of normative discourse on social structures and human consciousness, where the disabled do not fit in this world, which is based on pricing and valuing the able-bodied norms. Different types of ableist oppression surface in the lives of disabled people, which hamper the maturation of their personalities. According to Davis, we are living in a time where everything is measured against the norm, be it the normality of beauty, intelligence, body and sexual potency. Anything that does not snugly fit in the parameters of the norm becomes deviant, be it the colour other than fair, sex and body structures (Davis 1).

Mike Oliver sees this as the reflection of the social model of disability, which argues that impairment is a disease. This functional limitation is the restriction imposed by the ableist society, "ranging from individual prejudice to institutional discrimination, from inaccessible public buildings to unusable transport systems, from segregated education to excluding work arrangements, and so on" (Oliver 32-33). Disabled people are considered asexual or unattractive for marriage due to their dependency and physical deformity. The normative concept of beauty has crept deeply into cultures across the globe, rendering people with disability a miserable fate to endure. According to Kim Hall, "The assumption that disabled people cannot be sexual beings is a feature of disability oppression" (4).

Preeti Monga is caught in the same dilemma of finding a suitable life partner. One day, Monga's grandfather advertises in the matrimonial section of the Sunday newspaper to attract prospective suitors for her, without mentioning her blindness, in her own words:

> My father was not at all pleased with this, but now he was not left with any alternative but to go along with it. Following this, we had all kinds of people visiting our home to examine me. Thankfully, I never had to go on display, but it was certainly a nerve shattering experience to watch prospective grooms and their relatives sprint out of our home when they learnt of my impaired vision. (Monga 93)

There is a common perception that disabled people are an unproductive burden over economic resources, but Monga undermines that perception by becoming the first aerobic trainer to impart physical fitness instructions to able-bodied people. She also excels in other fields that she pursues and even outshines her male co-workers. She manifests an intellect to adapt to any situation that makes her withstand the ableist surroundings.

> I became aware that the initial admiration I received from my co-workers degenerated into a curious resentment towards me. This was probably because of my efficient performance at office, which probably gave my co-workers an inferiority complex. They probably felt that if I with my major disability stood at par with them, they should be doing much better as they were more qualified and able-bodied. (Monga 170)

The memoir recounts the horrors of acquiring disability and its aftermath; it also implies the temporal state of able-bodied people, the bodies having the potential to acquire a disability at any point in time. Causer states:

> (I)llness — at least acute illness is relatively conducive to autobiography. It is a more universal experience and thus easier for readers to identify with. And whereas some illness narratives have built an audience of those at risk — for example, narratives of breast cancer — most impairments are not perceived in quite the same way, if they are associated with "birth defects," they don't threaten those who don't already have them; if they are caused by accidents, like much paralysis, their seeming randomness insulates potential readers. (Causer 183)

According to David Hervey, "Disabled people, like black/people of colour, women and so on are aware that their bodies are constructed as the site of oppression … In my experience of being a disabled photographer, disabled people need space to tell the story, the journey, of their body and in doing so, reclaim and be proud of themselves” (117-18). The oppression arising from the twin factors of ‘gender’ and ‘disability’ leaves the person reeling under unending violence by exacerbating the effect of each other. Mintz postulates in *Unruly Bodies* (2007) that “stories of embodiment go beyond simply critiquing the able, male body of patriarchy to confront feminism’s presumption of certain types of female corporeality, thereby rewriting the myth of self-control that problematically exclude some women from feminism’s theoretical and political agenda” and argues that feminism has intellectual stuff to interrogate the female disabled embodiment. But at the same time, she points out the incompetence of feminism in dealing with physicality, sexual limitation, dependence and pains of the disabled female body in the past (Mintz 4-5).

The Other Senses addresses diverse issues and undermines the medical and normative perspectives on disability; these perspectives see disability as an individual defect and dependence. It embodies the critique of social and cultural institutions that exclude and stigmatise disabled female anomalies. It puts forth the narrative of independence and creativity that undermines the trope of the disabled being dependent on others. Mintz writes, “One effect of the challenge to medical discourse as the defining instrument of disability has been a dramatic increase in published personal narratives” (17).

One of the profound features of counter-discourse is the challenge to negativity, attitudes, and myths of the dominant discourse. Counter-discourses do not simply characterise; they seek to reverse the disturbing, politically loaded view. In Preeti Monga’s life, the endeavour to be independent is not just related to upending her relationship with her husband but also aimed at gaining economic independence. Monga is subjected to domestic abuse, which is not uncommon in caste-ridden societies of India. The magnitude of domestic abuse is multiplied when the victim happens to be a disabled woman. According to Monga, “This time he had struck too hard. My aching mind and soul were completely shattered; I would die if I was to continue to live like this for any longer. Something burst inside me; turning around I marched out of the room. For the first time since I had married this man, tears failed to emerge. Anger flared within, bringing to life my dormant self-respect” (114).

Monga takes a pledge to secure her independence for the first time, as she mentions in the autobiography. It begins with an urge for self-respect, and her “marching out from room” can be read as an act of declaring her independence. Monga writes, “I realized with shock that it was I who had to change, and the key to this lay within me” (114). Thus, the first step towards self-independence begins with job hunting. She works as an aerobics instructor training programme, and within a very short time, she starts Preeti’s *Keep Fit Classes*. This transforms her “into a confident self-assured woman” (Monga 20). Monga, in her journey to independence, meets other blind people; soon, she is inducted to teach aerobics to blind students by Vimal Mohit, Director of Education at the National Association for the Blind (NAB). This endeavour parallels the meeting of the disabled to demand their human rights and take pride in their identity as disabled. Divorcing the husband was a crucial decision that she took because she could no longer cope with his usual abuse.

> I wept the last tears I ever shed in relation to Keith’s ill-treatment … and I knew for certain, I had a real battle on my hands. Yes, this was a full-scale battle; a battle I had to win, for my children and me: The right to live, the right to safety, the right to be happy, the right to love and be loved, the right to freedom, the right to care and to be cared for, and the right to be human. (Monga 131)

She makes up her mind to do everything that it takes to win this battle and decides to make her own decisions from then on. Monga could not resist the temptation to write; according to Monga, “As I sit at my computer this morning, writing about my life experiences, I am unable to resist the temptation of drawing for you the glorious pictures stored away in the closet of my reminiscence. I therefore surrender to the flight of my fingers on the keyboard" (5). She compares her writing to coming out of a closet. Writing about disability can goad other disabled people to write about their own experiences and repudiate the medical and literary discourses about anomalous bodies, which are fraught with negativity.

The next chapter in Preeti's life is the epitome of resilience and fortitude. For the first time, she started the disability awareness programme, simulating the Human Rights Model of Disability, which can be aligned with race, LGBTQ and anti-colonial activism. Awareness urges people to take action against injustice; it creates a sense of unity and pride among the fragmented group that gathers under one movement. It was her effort that enabled the first disabled person to open an account in the bank. She took the challenge to call out the structural injustices that were embedded in the Indian administrative setup that discriminated against non-normative bodies. Monga, being a woman and disabled, has a multitude of challenges and restrictions to face: sexism, ableism, domestic violence, and a host of other cultural taboos. She tackles all these issues head-on.

Disability is marked with stigma; for the affected, it's something to be hidden from the public eye. But Monga chooses to parade her disability in a ramp show with pride, along with models like Aishwarya Rai. She used her disability as the potential to catapult herself ahead in her career and worked to better the conditions that those afflicted by disability have to face. In her own words, "I invited people home, went to friends and advised colleagues, delivered lectures and conducted workshops and training sessions wherever possible, I never missed an opportunity of being noticed by the media" (Monga 176). To be an independent person, she launched her organisation and practised the art of writing her body. The resistance shown by Monga against ableism, sexism and domestic violence is an act of counter-discourse by raising the voices against prevailing norms, domestic abuse and social exclusion. The autobiography reads as a transgressive memoir by castigating the practices that hinder and subject minorities to oppression through structural barriers and negative discourses.

Language appropriation and abrogation play a significant role in *The Other Senses*, as Monga uses this technique to good effect in her autobiography. She uses localised lexicons and lyrics — Pata tuta dal say, Chotey Se Aishe, Hukam Nama, and Ina mina mo (Monga 16) — to create a niche for cultural distinctiveness in the narrative. *The Other Senses* is mixed with a bit of everything that appeals to every kind of reader: pathos, humour and suspense, which acts as a counter-discourse to the traditional stigma-laden perception of disability. Monga uses writing as an asset to combat ableism that, like imperialism, has pierced deep into the culture of common thinking as a final or unchallenged truth. Thus, disability life writing, like post-colonial writing, is an act of writing back to the empire, challenging its foundation by taking control of language to unsettle the taken-for-granted centres of ableism, norms and medicalisation that define the marginal/subaltern. Here, Monga uses her writing not only to counter ableist discourse but also gender, and her memoir serves to challenge the dominant discourse. The strong aversion to the medical practices shown by Monga can be read as a statement against surrendering the body to medicalisation, where the doctor acts as the sole interpreter of the body and reduces the patient to an object to be experimented with. Monga is the first Indian disabled woman who vehemently questions the norm of gendered disability. She can be seen as a trailblazer in life writing in India who overturns the old paradigms of looking at disability.

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