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The Metamorphosis: Through the Looking Glass of a Disabled

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Abstract:

The hideous transformation of Gregor Samsa is ambiguous and situating his un-naturality as the impaired human body unconcealed several socio political discourses that is weaved around the impaired body. Impairment which means functional limitation is almost synonymously used with disability that implied loss of opportunity and exclusion. Gregor is not an exception. The invalidating gaze of society forces him to alienate himself and internalize the socially constructed version of his brokenness and lack of worth. Devoid of voice and agency, his story is at the mercy of others who are speaking of and for him. His body is robbed of individuality and reduced to a locus of power play. Paradoxically, however, the alterity which is at the heart of construction of the discourse of dis/abled is fallacious. Human and humanness is only a floating signifier. Furthermore, the shrine of humans, their body is only temporarily abled. Subjected to time, environment and illness, it is susceptible to malfunction and hence disability.

Keywords: dis/ability, ab/normal, alterity, invalidation, temporarily able bodied.

How would it be, if the drop of little Alice through the rabbit whole, introduced her into a strange space that is inhabited primarily by the species of transformed Gregor Samsa, the beings that possesses the body of a vermin but the psyche is essentially human? They have adopted and adapted their planet in their own terms. They may work in offices, travel in trains, but they need no furniture and there is no necessity of stairs. They entertain themselves by climbing on ceilings and relish on rotten vegetables and humanly inedible cheese. But is not the proportionately 'able bodied' Alice, a misfit in this world of species who have constructed, shaped and structured their world in 'their' own terms? Difficulty to walk, to communicate would inscribe her as the 'other', 'deviant', the (ab)normal and thus inevitably result in her segregation and exclusion. The sympathetic state must intervene here and consequently the progressive human-vertebrate complex species unravel a plethora of potential scientific technology and medicine that they have devised and would amputate and eliminate her otherness. She would soon be cured of her impaired long limbs, fragile useless hand, soft back and other features of her (dis)able bodied human structure and thus be shaped into a vermin. "The Horror! The Horror!" (Conrad, 78). The very proposal of amputation for accommodation in their world challenges the shrine of humans, their own body of its much claimed superiority. It perturbs the stability of much 'obvious' and common place ideas of the dis/abled bodied human and the ab/normal.

Samsa's shocking but undeniable transformation decenters much established notions of society, however, the tragedy that follows with an air of inevitability as predestined opens itself as a potential archive of the silence voiced by all those whose existence so long had been only an absence presence - the 'disabled', the 'crippled', the 'handicapped' or the 'challenged'. Although impermanence of human existence screams aloud at the first reading of the very first line, it must be noted that the translated piece of Kafka's metamorphosis which describes the transformed being as a vermin is partially misleading. The actual term that Kafka had used is '*Ungeziefer*' meaning a pest or vermin but connoting harmfulness and nastiness than identifying any actual creature. (Robertson, 32). Moreover, Kafka's instruction to the publisher on the impossibility of depiction of the 'insect' and the cover illustration instead portraying 'a young man staggering away from the door that leads into a dark room, an image that does not actually match any event in the text' (Robertson, 33) amplifies the scope of reading the predicament of the invertebrate as an embodiment of impaired human body.

The unperturbed sleep but anxious dream in his enclosed room is a metaphorical gestation period and his awakening is the birth of his impaired personhood. His first acquaintance with his body is fragmented and as a collection of unco-ordinated body parts like the armour back, brown segmented belly, pitifully thin legs and driven only by need like he felt 'hungrier than usual'(5). The progress of time symbolized by the fast moving hands of the alarm clock which indicated how with time Samsa gradually accommodated in his new shape and he sees himself as a united whole and comfortable in his difference. The pain and material difficulty in any kind of impairment is an undeniable harsh reality however this functional limitation due to lack or distortion of any part of the body cannot be synonymously paralleled with discourse of disability that implies 'the loss or limitation of opportunities to take part in the normal life of the community on an equal level with others due to physical and social barriers (Godley, 112)'. Samsa's own struggle to adapt to his new existence and thus cope with his limitation for instance the massive effort that he exerts to come out of the bed and unlock the door without the help of a locksmith, disregarding the injury that he might succumb to, certainly deserves applaud. However his courage goes not only unappreciated but also 'unseen'. What strikes his other able bodied observers is the gross ugliness of his transformation. His appearance which is vivid reminder of his otherness becomes the core of his new identity and pivots his future.

The human obsession with the normalcy embodied in the form of 'normal' able bodied individual is in reality a transitory phase. Man, with aging gradually lose their vitality and energy and the normative functioning of all other organs drop. Before the hideous transformation of Gregor, his father subjected to the flow of time is described as the tired man who usually lay entombed in his bed or sitting in the armchair in his nightgown, who would hardly be able to stand up but as sign of his pleasure, he would just raise his arms. With age, his father's acquired disability to walk and dependency on a stick emphasizes the falsity of rigid social construction of (dis)ability. Indeed, it is not only an issue of disability with age but also susceptibility of the human body to hazardous environment, situational crisis, illness and disease. The 'temporal able

bodied nature' of human body is finely portrayed when Samsa with his distorted shape appears at the door, a sharp contrast to his own photograph on the exactly opposite wall 'when he was a lieutenant in the army, his sword in his hand and a carefree smile on his face as he called forth respect for his uniform and bearing (19)'. The apparently rigid compartmentalization between the abled and partially or differently abled is thus porous, fluidly flowing through the boundaries and challenging the base of such fixations. Gregor's playful imagination on the possibility of something of the sort that happened to him today could ever happen to the chief clerk and her mother's last hope of his son's improvement exaggerate the irony of such construction of monstrous alterity. The discourses of ability and disability are thus like the two hands of the same compass wherein not only one revolves by fixing the mobility of the other but also its existence depends on its alterity.

The discrimination and marginalization, however is not only between the non disabled and disabled individuals but also exist within the categories of disability shared by other individuals. Persons with less disability consider themselves superior and consequently more acceptable in the sphere of able bodied than the others with superlative degree of impairment. In a strike contrast to Samsa's visible appearance as an ugly spineless vertebrate, the invisible spineless of the office assistant and auditory impairment of the boss himself is not pronounced and comparatively unrecognized as a flaw or lack. Furthermore the deaf even reject the term disability, perceiving themselves as linguistic subgroup, totally adequate, self enclosed and self defining subnationality within the larger structure of audist state (Davis, xiv).

Disability is a label, a signifier, that inaugurates consignment to an identity category, which signifies disadvantage and oppression (Jung, 2002: 179). Irrespective of the individual experience of the crisis of impairment, the visibility of his 'flaw' hurls Gregor to a tragedy that is predefined by the society. His individuality is invisible under the professional gaze that perceives only his grotesque appearance and thus ever ready to exclude him. Despite of adequately performing in his strenuous career as a travelling salesman, he is constantly chased by the necessity to maintain the gold standards lest he be kicked out on spot. Compared to his other non disabled travelling salesman who live a life of luxury and has the scope entertaining themselves with breakfast, Gregor has to outperform and rush to the guest house to copy contacts to prove that he is really able and independent. His present failure to catch the five o clock train makes him anxious about the office assistant reporting his absence as sick and which would inevitably sound extremely strained and strenuous as in fifteen years of service as he had never once yet been ill. When the chief clerk himself comes to investigate the case of his delay, Gregor sadly meditates: "Why did (he) have to be the only one condemned to work for a company where they immediately became highly suspicious at the slightest shortcoming? Were all employees, every one of them, louts, was there not one of them who was faithful and devoted who would go so mad with pangs of conscience that he couldn't get out of bed if he didn't spend at least a couple of hours in the morning on company business?"(10). A slight fall in the standard of his performance and inability to be more normal than the normal people is unacceptable to the

society. Paradoxically, 'while they are cast as the dependent other, when they do attempt to gain a foothold on the ladder of individualism then they are expected to demonstrate extra-special, hyper-individual forms of being in order to maintain their place' (Godley, 72).

Persons with different disabilities do not have anything in common except their shared experience of stigmatization that creates commonality (Thomson, 15). Gregor's awareness that his difference in appearance may not be acceptable and thus he easily presumes their possible reactions that is if they are shocked to see him then he would sleep peacefully and if they take it calmly then he could possibly still prepare himself for office and attempt to catch the eight o' clock train. However, as he emerges at the door the chain of reactions that follows is beyond his expectation. The chief clerk shocked, and 'with his hand pressed against his open mouth, retreat(ed) as if driven by an invisible force'. Gregor's mother took two steps towards him and sank down onto the floor into her skirts that spread themselves out around her as her head disappeared down onto her breast. 'His father looked hostile, and clenched his fists as if wanting to knock Gregor back into his room. Then he looked uncertainly round the living room, covered his eyes with his hands and wept so that his powerful chest shook'(18). A slight effort on his part to prevent the chief clerk from leaving in such amazement and his approach to fill in the distance and explain his situation so that he can save his job and the family that is dependent on this job worsens the situation. Shocked and petrified his mother knocks the table and drops the coffee pot. "'Mother, mother", said Gregor gently, looking up at her but this set her screaming anew and fled from the table and into the arms of his father. The chief clerk expecting something, leaped several steps and disappeared while Mr. Samsa 'seized the chief clerk's stick in his right hand picked up a large newspaper from the table with his left, and used them to drive Gregor back into his room, stamping his foot at him as he went.'(23). It is the unconscious fear of degenerating into equivalent state of ugliness that operates at the psyche and the triggers an absurd amalgamation of pity, fear, hate and shame. 'The uncanny encounter with another, then, puts us face to face with our own vulnerability 'with and for others'. And, it is the fear and denial of our own vulnerability that causes us to hate and exploit the vulnerability of others'. (K. Oliver, 2007: 349).

Passively internalizing the discrimination and bearing the mark of being the monstrous other of the extraordinarily abled is painful and affective, however, Gregor is extra careful about the subtleties of expectations and response that is demanded from him to preserve the fast weakening bonds with his family in particular and society in general. He repeatedly perpetrates assault on his 'self' so that others do not have to suffer because of his personal tragedy. Disavowing himself as outsider, he appreciates even little mercy shown to him by his darling sister by providing him with choice of foods and cleaning his room once a day. However, this sparing engagement with Gregor coupled with lack of communication by assuming his present sub human condition must have robbed him of human speech, empowers Grete with the authority to deconstruct his actions and thus construct his-story disregarding of what he actually want speak. 'No need to hear your voice when I can talk about you better than you can speak about yourself.

No need to hear your voice. Only tell me about your pain. I want to know your story. And then I will tell it back to you in a new way. Tell it back to you in such a way that it has become mine, my own. Re-writing you I write myself anew. I am still author, authority. I am still colonizer, the speaking subject and you are now at the center of my talk' (Hooks, 343). Deprived of any agency, Samsa is merely reduced to a locus of hegemonic power play. There is much more intricate play of power than mere display of love and possessiveness when Grete's de-monst(e)r-ates unmindful obsession about her brother. Her depression and fierce revolt against her mother's act of cleaning Gregor's room all by herself without considering any necessity of permission is a refined articulation of her anxiety and fear about the potential threat of intrusion in the exclusive domain of her authority and hegemony she exercises over Gregor.

Gregor Samsa's imprisonment within the socially constructed discourses of disability and strategic denial of voice follows the precariousness of being metaphorically castrated. Disabled people's sexualities have been ignored, controlled, denied and treated (Shakespeare et al., 1996) and thus the danger of being stigmatized as 'asexual' looms large over him. Among all the other furniture in his room which is his world, the presence of the portrait of 'a lady fitted out with a fur hat and fur boa who sat upright, raising a heavy fur muff that covered the whole of her lower arm towards the viewer' deserves special mention. Moreover, despite his busy schedule of his job as a travelling salesman his interest in one of the chambermaids of provincial hotel and a slow but serious affair with a cashier from hat shop exemplifies not only his heterosexuality but also his ability to love as passionately as his normative other. Ritchie Robertson's further interpretation of the content of his 'troubled dreams' and the 'mass of little white spots which he was unable to interpret' covering his belly may result from a nocturnal emission is adequate to establish the normative functioning of his sexuality. (Robertson, 53) However, his cry is silenced, eliminated, and processed to fit in the already available versions of his-story. His desperate attempt to protect the portrait, metonymic of his sexuality from being removed is unacceptable to his able bodied others in the particular social milieu. When his mother encountered him in a position where he is pressed against the portrait of the woman with his massive body, she faints in repulsion. And as a corporeal punishment for all the consequences that he has aroused by being resistant, he is bombarded with apples by his own father. Ironically, just as he loses consciousness from the pain he sees "his mother rushing out ahead of his screaming sister; in her chemise,... he saw his mother running towards his father, shedding her loosened petticoats one by one on the floor behind her; and how she stumbled over her skirts to fling herself upon him, and embraced him, quite united with him". Sexuality seems only a right for the abled and the normal. Invalidating gaze of the society associates sexual dysfunctioning almost as a complementary effect of any kind of impairment.

Human and humanness is only a floating signifier. The apple that lodged in Samsa's back and decayed there foregrounds the real rotten temperament not of Gregor but of his family members. It exemplifies the fallacy of all ideals which is the pride of humanity. It questions the values that makes one claim the superiority of the humans. Is it the perfect body, the rationality or an

expectation of some concern from his fellow creatures? Theorist have claimed that beings of same community do share a bond of appreciation for each other's pain and trouble however Gregor's ugly reality alienates him from participation not only in the community abut also his own family. Situated in such a place, that even Gregor have internalized the constructed 'truth' of his flaw and (lack of) worth as a personal tragedy. His predicament is comparable to that of Fanon's black man who 'begin to suffer from not being a white man to the degree that the white man imposes discrimination on me, makes me a colonised native, robs me of all my worth, all individuality, tells me that I am a parasite on the world.'

In the name of tolerance, the torture that man indicts upon their 'others' is finely exemplified by the animalistic treatment meted out to Gregor. The charwoman called him 'old dung beetle', dumped all the useless filth and junk in his room including the kitchen dustbin while his darling sister did no longer bother about how to please him but just hurriedly pushed some food into the room with her foot. Ironically, however, it is Grete's who fanatically outbursts- "we can't carry on like this. Maybe you can't see it, but I can. I don't want to call this monster my brother, all I can say is: we have to try and get rid of it. We've done all that's humanly possible to look after it and be patient, I don't think anyone could accuse us of doing anything wrong." Her recognition of Gregor, not as Gregor but as monstrous being amplifies the demonic inhumanity which man reveals easily when faced with slightest discomfort. On the other hand, Gregor, despite his increased pain and immobility, his indifference to his suffering elevated him to the level of a sacred man who had not only forgiven his oppressors but 'thought back of his family with emotion and love.'(68). Ruminating peacefully until morning when it slowly began to get light everywhere outside, his last breath flowed weakly from his nostrils. The 'emotional labour' to act in ways that fit the expectation of others led to his calm acceptance of his own death. He proved yet again that he had understood what Grete and his father complained of not understanding. He was indeed 'differently abled. Contradictory to the stigma of subhuman being inscribed on his body, Gregor again outperformed than the normal and elucidated the quality which is beyond human. Paradoxically, his death yet promises no change, neither in his indifferent family members nor the society at large. Man's obsession with 'perfect' shape and appearance continues as Grete stretches out her young body as soon as they reach their destination.

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