

A study of the character of Manthara through the feminist disability lens

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Abstract: Manthara is a minor character from the original epic *Ramayana*. The epic portrays Manthara as a woman who is ugly, poor and has a hunchback. She becomes the factor leading to the death of King Dashrath and the distress in the lives of Rama and Sita. Through the ages, Manthara is blamed for causing the upheaval in the lives of Ayodhya royals. However, the question arises as to how a woman who is poor, unattractive, and disabled can transform the lives of royalty. Or was she simply a scapegoat in the story? Sarah Joseph's *Black Holes* retells the story of the *Ramayana* from the perspective of Manthara. It is part of a short story collection from the text *Retelling the Ramayana: Voices from Kerala*, published in 2005. The work is an alternative viewpoint on the epic. *Black Holes* explores the feminist interpretation of the mythological narrative. Anand Neelakantan is an Indian novelist whose expertise lies in mythological fiction narratives. His work, *Valmiki's Women*, published in 2021, is a collection of short stories from the perspective of minor women characters from the epic *Ramayana*. Neelakantan's collection of stories provides a new perspective on the characters who are often sidelined from the main retelling and narratives. The purpose of this article is to analyse the character of Manthara through the qualitative methodology of close-reading analysis of the short stories, Sarah Joseph's *Black Holes* and Anand Neelakantan's *Valmiki's Women*. This article also examines the theory of Feminist Disability Studies within the viewpoint of Western and Indian contexts. The article focuses on understanding the stigma around disability and women. The desired conclusion of the article is to present a survey of how disability leads to the double marginalization of women.

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Introduction

“This hunchbacked woman, skilled in deceit, spoke words dipped in poison and changed the heart of the queen” (Valmiki, *Ayodhya Kanda* 2), the words quoted are often employed to depict Manthara’s character. Manthara is a minor character from the great epic saga *Ramayana*. The epic is originally written in Sanskrit by the sage poet Valmiki. The poet is also referred to as *Adi Kavi*, the first poet and the author of the *Ramayana*. Since the inception of Hindu civilization, Valmiki’s *Ramayana* has been regarded as the cornerstone of society. It depicts and teaches many dimensions of human life. There are many multifaceted characters in the *Ramayana*, who convey and teach essential lessons to its readers and followers. The epic highlights the themes of *dharma*, devotion, leadership and kingship, loyalty, sacrifice, good vs evil and the role of women in forming the basis of the society. The epic consists of nearly 24000 verses and is written from the perspective of Ram and the characters who assisted him in vanquishing the demon king Ravana, fulfilling the goal of his existence. Beyond the hundreds of characters, the epic is categorized into primary and secondary characters, which are further classified into male and female epic figures. Manthara is a sidelined secondary character from the *Ramayana*. She is portrayed in mythology as the evil instigator, the hunch-backed perpetrator of all the turn of events that followed after King Dashrath’s decision regarding his successor (Sreekala 2022, 17). Manthara is a poor, ugly woman with a hunchback, who is a loyal servant of King Aswapathi and a mother figure to his daughter Kaikeyi and her twin brother Yudhajit. She dedicated her life to looking after Kaikeyi and devoted herself entirely to her care, “For thirty- five years, she had served her like a slave and loved her like a mother” (Neelakantan 2021, 95). However, the crucial question is how can the story of the royals from Ayodhya be impacted by a woman who is impoverished, unattractive, and physically flawed. Was she nothing but a puppet controlled by her master, Kaikeyi? The objective of this article is to analyse the character of Manthara. To reach the desired conclusion a close-reading textual analysis of the short stories *Black Holes* by Sarah Joseph and *Manthara* by Anand Neelakantan are taken as the primary texts for this research.

The article also examines the theory of Feminist Disability Studies within the viewpoint of Western and Indian contexts. The emphasis of this article is to understand the stigma around disability and women.

Methodology

Sara Joseph is a renowned novelist and short story writer from the Indian state of Kerala. She is regarded as a pivotal writer in the Malayalam literature. Joseph is a prominent leader in the feminist movement in Kerala and a co-founder of the women's group *Manushi*. Her works focus on the themes of gender, social justice and politics. *Retelling the Ramayana: Voices from Kerala* is a compelling anthology written in Malayalam language. The anthology is written by Malayalam writers C.N. Sreekantan Nair and Sarah Joseph and is considered a unique perspective of the epic *Ramayana*. The work is reinterpreted through the lens of gender and caste. *Black Holes* is a brief narrative authored by Joseph in the anthology *Retelling the Ramayana: Voices from Kerala*. The story in the *Black Holes* is written from the perspective of Manthara.

Anand Neelakantan is an Indian novelist who is popular for his mythological fiction. He writes in the English and Malayalam language. Similar to Joseph, Neelakantan is an influential figure in Malayalam literature originating from Kerala. *Valmiki's Women* is a thought-provoking collection of short stories by Neelakantan. The work showcases the lesser-known stories of female characters from the *Ramayana*. The collection gives voice to the women who are often sidelined in the traditional narrative. The tale of Manthara is included in the short story collection titled *Valmiki's Women*. The anthology also includes the tales of Bhoomija, Shanta, Tataka, and Meenakshi. Sreekala B. mentions, that modern re-tellings narrate the events from the perspective of the characters who are sidelines or marginalized by the subalterns of mythology. Hence, emphasizing Neelakantan and Joseph's focus on re-telling the *Ramayana* through the perspective of overlooked minor female characters from the epic. Joseph and Neelakantan's short stories present an unheard interpretation of Manthara. The stories illustrate the life of Manthara before and after the royal upheaval. The narratives from *Black Hole* and *Manthara* also highlight that Manthara embodies feminism by recognizing how the people of Ayodhya treat their women.

The theory of Feminist Disability Studies is coined by Rosemarie Garland-Thomson. Garland-Thomson is an American professor of

English literature. She is a scholar, author and advocate of disability studies. Her work focuses on feminist theories and disability studies. Garland-Thomson's work explores the societal perspective and representation of people with disabilities. "Feminist Disability Studies" is a groundbreaking essay by Garland-Thomson. The essay examines and explores the intersection of feminism and disability studies. It emphasizes how gender and disability are socially constructed. The essay also challenges the traditional views on body, identity and social inclusion. The key themes of "Feminist Disability Studies" are the intersection of feminism and disability, the concept of body, representation and gaze. Her work *Extraordinary Bodies* published in 1997 is considered as the founding text in the disability studies canon.

To explore the theory of feminist disability studies within the Indian context, this research also examines and analyzes the critically acclaimed work, "Disabled Women: An Excluded Agenda of Indian Feminism" (2002) by Anita Ghai.

Research objective

The story of *Ramayana* has been rewritten and reinterpreted in various forms, yet one aspect that remains unchanged is the depiction of the character Manthara. Words such as *an unattractive, impoverished woman* with a *hunchback* are often employed to depict her character. However, writers like Joseph and Neelakantan are confronting the prior stories of Manthara by allowing her to express herself despite her bodily disabilities. The objective of the article is to analyse the character of Manthara. To reach the desired objective a close-reading textual analysis of the short stories *Black Holes* by Sarah Joseph and *Manthara* by Anand Neelakantan are taken as the primary source of the research. The article also examines the theory of Feminist Disability Studies within the viewpoint of Western and Indian contexts. The research emphasizes to understand the stigma around disability and women.

Feminism and Feminist Disability Studies (FDS)

Feminism is an extensive spectrum of political and social movements that share a common goal to define, establish, and achieve political, economic, personal and social equality of sexes (Raina 2017, 3372). The fundamental idea of feminism is to pursue equality and justice for women in all aspects of life while establishing chances for women to have equal access to the resources that are typically available to men

(Raina 2017, 3372). The word feminism is derived from the French term *feminisme*. Nilika Mehrotra in her work, "Understanding Feminism in a Local Context"(2016), describes feminism as an ideology of women's movement itself aiming to create a world for women beyond simple women's liberation or equality. Historically, feminism began in the 19th century in the United States, where it was known as the women's movement. The movement aimed to advance the position of women. The movement included a varied array of groups focused on achieving social and political equality for both genders, particularly for women. A.J Jaggar in his 1983 acclaimed work, *Feminist Politics and Human Nature*, states that in the early 20th century 'feminism' in the United States was introduced to refer to one particular group of women's rights advocates, namely which ascribed uniqueness of women, the mystical experience of motherhood and women's special purity. The 19th and 20th century was marked as the beginning of the 'First Wave of Feminism'. The first wave focused on women's issues, particularly women's suffrage. The first wave neglected the issues of women of colour instead entirely focusing on the white women. As a response to the limitations of the first wave the 'Second Wave of Feminism' emerged in the 1960's which lasted through the 1980's. The second wave focused on social, economic and political inequalities. The principal argument of the second wave focused on workplace equality, economic independence, reproductive and sexual liberation, legal reforms, political representations and challenging the traditional gender roles. The slogan *personal is political* emphasizing the connection between women's individual experiences and larger social and political systems frequently links to this wave (Prakanshi 2024, 2). In light of the perceived limitations of the second wave of feminism, the 'Third Wave of Feminism' emerged in the 1990s. It aimed to incorporate conversations about race, class, and sexual orientation into the feminist movement. The third wave also questioned the idea of a singular experience of womanhood while simultaneously acknowledging that the overlapping identities of women shape their lives (Ibidem). The 'Fourth Wave of Feminism' arose around 2012 and focused on organizing and highlighting feminist concerns through digital media and technology. However, within the Indian context, the idea and definition of feminism differ from that of the Western world. In the Indian context, feminism requires a thorough examination of how people perceive and interpret it (Mehrotra 2001, 3). Indian feminist scholars contend that Indian women face

deprivation, exploitation, and oppression due to hierarchies related to caste, kinship, gender, and age, which complicates the potential for individualism.

Within the limitations and exclusion of feminism regarding the concept of disability and women, the theory of FDS emerged. Anita Ghai asserts that a closer acquaintance with the developing intellectual discourse on feminism indicated how the movement that originated essentially as a response to the oppression experienced by women excluded disabled women. In accordance with the World Health Organization, disability is described as an umbrella term that includes impairments, limitations in activities, and restrictions in participation. It comes from the interplay between people with health issues and social or environmental obstacles. In “Culture and Disability: Unheard Voices of Disabled People”, the critic states that Disability Studies is an interdisciplinary area that aims at politicizing the disabled identity to confront the marginalization that disabled people are subjected to (Chaturvedi 2019, 67). Therefore, FDS is a theory which is drawn from both feminist studies and disability studies, challenging ableist and patriarchal norms that marginalize disabled women. Nasa Begum in her work, “Disabled Women and the Feminist Agenda” writes ‘that the dual oppression of sexism and handicapism places disabled women in an extremely marginalized position’(Begum 1992,70); hence, highlighting the societal and hierarchical marginalization of women with non-normative bodies. Emerged as an *inter-sectional* field in the 1980’s, FDS examines how gender and disability shape, identity, power and social structures. Rosemarie Garland-Thomson in her work “Feminist Disability Studies”, states that feminist disability studies are academic cultural work with a sharp political edge and a vigorous critical punch (Garland-Thomson 2005, 1557). The critic furthermore asserts that feminist disability studies seek to unsettle tired stereotypes about people with disabilities. The aim is to elucidate the complex connection between bodies and identities. It also seeks to de-naturalize and re-imagine disability. Feminism challenges the belief that femaleness is a natural form of physical and mental deficiency or constitutional unruliness (Garland-Thomson 2005, 1557). Likewise, Garland-Thomson articulates that feminist disability studies question the assumptions that disability is a *flaw*, *lack*, or *excess* and to do so, it defines disability broadly from a social rather than a medical perspective. In “Feminist Disability Studies”, Garland-Thomson accentuates that disability is a cultural interpretation of human

variation rather than an inherent inferiority, a pathology to cure, or an undesirable trait to eliminate; thus, signifying the disability concerning interactions between bodies and their social, physical and cultural surroundings (Garland-Thomson 2005, 1557).

The Indian view on feminist disability studies offers a different perspective than the Western view. Sameer Chaturvedi affirms that the marginalization of disabled people is culturally and contextually determined (Chaturvedi 2019, 67). Chaturvedi also implies that anthropological zeal suggests that the most important thing is to know how the life of a given individual or group is construed in a given cultural context (Chaturvedi 2019, 67). Within the Indian cultural context, disabled people sometimes are depicted as suffering the wrath of God, and being punished for misdeeds that either they or their families have committed, a kind of penance or retribution for past misdeeds (Ghai 2002, 51). *Karma* is a cultural construct (Obeyesekere 2006). *Karma* aims to reproduce a moral order that sees disability in a negative light (Chaturvedi 2019, 71). *Karmic* conceptualization of disability sees it as a suffering which disabled people have to go through as a result of misdeeds committed in their past lives (Ibidem). Consequently, in the Indian cultural context, there exists a connection between disability and *Karma*, since disability relates not just to non-normative bodies but also to the outcomes of the past life.

Disability and Manthara

“hanta te kathayishyaami bharatah katham aishyati |

kevalam ikshvaku rajyam tvam ca shroshyasi tat vacah ||”

[“I shall now tell you a way by which Bharata alone will become the king of Ikshvaku dynasty. Listen to that.”] (Valmiki *Ayodhya Kanda* 8.9)

The above-stated quotation is from the epic *Ramayana*. In the epic, Manthara uttered these words to Kaikeyi during the moment of Ram’s coronation. She is a pivotal character in Valmiki’s *Ramayana*, who is responsible for instigating the event that leads to Ram’s exile and changing the course of the narration. Thus, her actions set the stage for the *Ayodhya Kanda* leading to Ram’s departure for the forest for fourteen years. In *Ramayana*, Manthara’s character is often interpreted as a symbol of envy and manipulation, an instigator of fate and the representative of negative influence on human nature (Sreekala B 2022, 17). Neelakantan in *Valmiki’s Women* describes her as ‘She is uncommonly ugly with a scar across her right cheek. She has a

hunchback and walks with difficulty.’(46). She is a woman with a non-normative body who comes from a financially marginal background in the social hierarchy. Therefore, as an underdog, it is easy to find a scapegoat in her so that they can save several faces (Sreekala B 2022, 17). Over the years, Manthara has been depicted as a hunchbacked servant who can provoke negative developments in the events of the *Ramayana*. However, the question persists: Was Manthara the true instigator, or is she simply a puppet in the hands of the royals? Anand Neelakantan and Sarah Joseph in their respective texts, *Valmiki’s Women* and *Retelling the Ramayana: Voices from Kerala* gave voice to the voiceless character of Manthara. The writers presented her story with a new perspective, where she is the narrator of her life story.

Garland-Thomson in *Staring: How We Look* defines *staring* as, “an ocular response to what we don’t expect to see. Novelty arouses our eyes. More than just looking, staring is an urgent eye jerk of intense interest.”(3). The theory of *staring* can be better comprehended in connection with disabled women and the male gaze. Disabled women contend not only with how men look at women but also with how an entire society stares at disabled people stripping them of any semblance of resistance (Ghai 2002, 55). Ghai mentions that if the male gaze makes normal women feel like passive objects, the stare turns the disabled object into a grotesque sight. For instance, as soon as Manthara steps into King Aswapathi’s palace, she is gazed at by those with conventional bodies (Neelakantan 2021, 49):

Beautiful women peeped out from the balconies... Some were rude enough to point at her and talk in hushed tones. Manthara could guess what they were saying. She was like a performing animal, exotic creature of indescribable ugliness. She suddenly felt conscious of her ragged clothes. Though she was sure that her emaciated body would arouse no lust in anyone’s eyes, her instincts made her cover herself with the ragged blanket that she carried. (Neelakantan 2021, 49)

In this incident, Neelakantan attempts to depict the staring as a typical response from normative bodies when they encounter a non-normative body. Manthara’s emotions and her act of covering herself with the torn blanket illustrate Garland-Thomson’s ideas of staring and the male gaze.

Ghai (2002) in “Disabled Women: An Excluded Agenda of Indian Feminism”, also asserts that women with disabilities are doubly constrained by the prevailing male gaze along with the cultural gaze that views them as objects for observation (55). FDS challenge the

limitations of the myth of a beautiful body that defines the impaired female body as *unfeminine* and *unacceptable*, therefore labelling them as *other*. ‘Then for at least four days we will live like human beings, not like worms, but like human beings’ (Joseph 2005, 106), these lines are spoken by Manthara in Joseph’s *Retelling the Ramayana: Voices from Kerala*, the use of terms such as *worm* and *human beings* in one sentence illustrates Manthara’s and her hunch-backed son’s living condition and their desire to lead a life that meets societal standards. As both individuals are disabled, their living conditions are bleak and they are categorized as *other*.

Individuals with disabilities have a long history of facing mistreatment and living in solitude (Shakespeare 2000). Manthara was dwelling in solitude and seclusion on the streets prior to encountering Bhairava, who subsequently offered her the position of caretaker for the prince and princess of Kekaya, “In the twenty years of her existence, she was going to sleep under a roof for the first time”(Neelakantan 2021, 52).

Later, when Ram departed for his fourteen-year exile, Manthara became a scapegoat for Queen Kaikeyi’s machinations, with the responsibility for the political turmoil laid squarely on her shoulders (Ibid, 93). This dynamic is aptly described in the words of Bhairava :

People want someone to blame. No one will go after Kaikeyi or anyone who is rich and powerful. They won’t talk about the curse of Shrivana Kumara’s parents or the black deeds of Dasharatha Ugly, hunchbacked, old and without anyone to support you, you will be the ideal scapegoat. (Neelakantan 2021, 93)

As the blame for the unfortunate events was placed upon her, it was Manthara alone who bore the burnt of this responsibility, ultimately enduring both physical beatings and severe punishments at the hands of the Ayodhya nobles:

She had stepped into the palace courtyard in search of Valakan after her morning bath, her body smeared with red sandalwood paste and her silvery white hair loosened. ... It was at that moment that a man had rushed out and jumped at her, roaring like a bull. It was an unexpected attack and she had lost her balance. Before she could escape, tricking him, he began to drag her. She tried in vain to free herself by beating the ground with her hands and legs. Contact with the granite-paved courtyard bruised and broke her. (Joseph 2005, 100)

Therefore, this incident from the re-telling depicts the misery and plight of a disabled woman who is subjected to severe punishments, beatings and isolation.

By World Health Organization sexuality is described as including sex, gender identities and roles, sexual orientation, eroticism, and the social well-being associated with a person's sexuality. Individuals with disabilities face damaging societal stereotypes that DE-sexualize them, categorizing them as non-sexual, unable, or disinterested in sexual relationships. Lina Abu Habib suggests that there are many assumptions and prejudices about the non-normative bodies and one of the many assumptions and prejudices is that "disabled persons are 'sexless' and their life is affected solely by their disability" (Habib 1995, 49). In the Indian context, the cultural stereotype denies the role of motherhood for disabled women (Ghai 2002, 54). Another assumption about non-normative bodies is that societies and laws bestow the same rights to disabled men and women (Habib 1995, 50). However, it is regarded as untrue in the Indian context. When it comes to sexuality and marriage the disabled sons retain the possibility of marriage, as they are not gifts but the receivers of the gifts (Ghai 2002, 54). Culturally in India, disabled as well as non-disabled men seek normal women as wives, whereas the disabled as well as non-disabled girls are compensated with heavy dowry (Ibidem).; thus, leading to the double discrimination of disabled women. Furthermore, this could be understood concerning the character of Manthara. Bhairava repeatedly expresses his love for Manthara, yet she continuously turns down his marriage proposal. Before leaving for the battlefield with Dasrath's army, Bhairava wrote a letter for Manthara. Being an illiterate woman, she presumed that Kaikeyi had written the letter. She was mocked when the palace dance girls read her letter:

As the young woman started reading it, she burst into laughter. She passed the letter to her friends and they laughed together. 'How much trouble we make to attract men, and see this hunchbacked old hag. She the letter her lover has written to her,' the young girl said. (Neelakantan 2021, 120)

The laughter of dancing girls illustrates the traditional societal expectations regarding non-normative bodies. Their laughter signifies that they are mocking Manthara's deformed body and also conveying the societal norms that suggest a normative body has better prospects for marriage, love, and sex than a deformed one; thus highlighting the society's assumptions and prejudices regarding disabled women's

sexuality. According to Garland-Thomson, disability can also be perceived as, 'painful, comfortable, familiar, alienating, bonding isolating, challenging, infuriating or ordinary'. The uniqueness of non-normative bodies can be seen as a personal misfortune that the individual must strive to 'make peace with' (Begum 1992, 71).

Modern frameworks depict individuals with disabilities as having a medical identity, viewed through a health and welfare lens. Regrettably, the West emphasizes the clinical aspects of disability, which also influences policy significantly. Whereas, in the Indian context, disability is also regarded as the result of the misdeed committed in past lives, thus, disability is associated with *Karma* (Chaturvedi 2019, 71). As mentioned earlier, *Karmic* beliefs focus on creating a moral framework, indicating that actions like supporting monks, carrying out rituals, going on pilgrimages, engaging in temple building, and maintaining a disciplined lifestyle are seen as good *Karma*, promoting a disability-free rebirth (Ibid, 72). In the textual re-tellings *Valmiki's Women* and *Retelling the Ramayana: Voices from Kerala*, the character of Manthara is frequently shown engaging in prayers, visiting temples and offering alms to the beggars. Consequently, charity and philanthropy have remained the predominant response to the predicament of disability (Ghai 2002, 51). Ergo, the situation worsens because in addition to hopeless life conditions individuals with disabilities frequently face cultural narratives characterized by negativity and stigma. In the case of disabled women, the stigma exceeds the stigma of women, thus leading to double marginalization of the position of disabled women.

Conclusion

Both the re-tellings, *Valmiki's Women* and *Retelling the Ramayana: Voices from Kerala* are modern renderings of the story of Manthara. The re-tellings provide the textual analysis of the voiceless character of Manthara. The re-tellings also contribute to the quintessential aspect of the modern interpretation of Manthara's character who remained sidelined and voiceless in the original epic *Ramayana*. Neelakantan and Joseph's work showcased a feminist approach to the character depiction of Manthara. Joseph's Manthara is bold, fearless and despite being impoverished knows how to benefit and stand up for herself. Whereas, Neelakantan's Manthara is opinionated and has a voice of her own. Towards, the end of the stories *Black Holes* and *Manthara*, the protagonist feels despondent and shattered due to the treachery of

Queen Kekayi. She opposes the traditional dynamic of a master and servant by openly criticizing the queen, whom she considers to be her daughter. Neelakantan and Joseph's Manthara is very much aware of her position in the social, cultural and societal hierarchy. She is accepting of her deformities, yet she possesses a zeal to live life without societal norms.

This article additionally demonstrates the theory of FDS in the context of Western and Indian views. From a Western standpoint, the understanding of women and disability is linked to medical considerations, whereas, from the Indian standpoint, the idea is viewed through the lens of *Karma* and the wrongdoings of past lives. In the Indian context, the disability is interconnected with the *Karmic* deeds of the past life. However, on the contrary, the Western viewpoint focuses on the theory of disability as a *flaw* or a *lack* in the physicality of the normative bodies. The assumption associated with the disabled women and their sexuality is analyzed in the view of Manthara, who is a woman with a facial deformity and a hunchback. This assumption is further explored in the context of Indian and Western perspectives. The West views the lack of sexual urges as a result of deformity and the lack of societal acceptance of a disabled person. On the other hand, culturally in the Indian context, for disabled men, the prospect of marriage is feasible in comparison to disabled women. This further highlights the double marginalization of disabled women, hence, adding to the stigma around women and disability. The article also examines the lives of marginalized and isolated individuals with non-normative bodies, highlighting that in both the West and India, the experiences of disabled women continue to be characterized by isolation and loneliness. It is often explored that the non-normative bodies are subjected to harsh punishments and beatings from their surroundings. In summary, this study has shown how non-normative bodies continue to face ongoing mistreatment from society, resulting in their discrimination and marginalization within the patriarchal structure.

This study also underscores the need to prioritize the theory of feminism and disability collectively. Where feminist disability studies aim to reconsider and re-examine able-bodiedness to develop transformative environments. Focusing on and excluding the non-normative or disabled body contributes to the social and environmental obstacles faced by disabled women, who are already marginalized by societal standards. Moving forward the study also emphasizes the re-

portray of characters like Manthara in popular literary genres. As these side-lined characters need to be re-evaluated and perceived from a fresh and modern perspective. As times evolve, epic tales need to be modified to provide a platform for the voiceless and marginalized figures such as Manthara.

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