

# Transforming Social Perceptions: An Analysis of Disability in Malini Chib's memoir, *One Little Finger*

Pushpender Kaushik

M.A M.Phil (English)

## Abstract:

This research paper critically examines the theme of disability as portrayed in Malini Chib's memoir, *One Little Finger*. Through an exploration of the author's personal experiences and reflections, the study delves into the societal perceptions and challenges faced by individuals with disabilities in Indian society. Chib's narrative poignantly captures feelings of isolation, rejection, and the innate desire for acceptance and inclusion. The memoir prompts a reevaluation of the concept of "normal" and questions the prevailing social norms that perpetuate the marginalization of disabled individuals. By analysing Chib's emotional journey, this paper aims to deepen understanding of disability, raise the concerns of differently abled people and make a desperate appeal for transformation in social perceptions about this issue. The research paper contributes to the discourse on inclusivity and empowerment by shedding light on the experiences of individuals with disabilities. It highlights the need for a paradigm shift in societal attitudes and challenges the existing notions of "normalcy." By examining Chib's memoir, this study seeks to foster empathy, understanding, and the creation of a more inclusive society that values and celebrates the unique abilities and strengths of disabled individuals. Through this exploration, the research aims to inspire change and promote a more inclusive and accepting society. Malini Chib's memoir *One Little Finger* offers a profound insight into the experiences of individuals with disabilities and the societal barriers they face. It explores the portrayal of disability and its impact on individuals in the context of a complex and hierarchical society. It focuses on the life of physically challenged writer, who suffers cerebral palsy, and her experiences of discrimination, marginalization, and isolation. This research paper analyzes how the author challenges social perceptions of disability and portrays the struggles and triumphs of individuals with disabilities. The paper examines how this memoir provides a powerful critique of the social and cultural norms that perpetuate ableism and reinforce stereotypes about disability. Further it highlights the ways in which transformation of societal attitudes towards disability can be carried out. It also draws upon disability studies as a theoretical framework and analyzes the ways we can contribute to the ongoing discourse on disability and social stigma. It utilizes the work of scholars such as Lennard J. Davis, who argues that "disability is a complex, multifaceted experience that is socially constructed" (Davis 3). The paper also references the works of other disability studies scholars such as Rosemarie Garland-Thomson and Tobin Siebers to provide a comprehensive analysis of the novel. In essence, this research paper argues that Chib's memoir *One Little Finger* offers a powerful critique of the social and cultural norms that perpetuate ableism and highlights the importance of transforming societal attitudes towards disability. The novel provides a nuanced and empathetic portrayal of individuals with disabilities and her experiences, calling for greater understanding and inclusion.

**Key Words:** Disability, Impairment, Social Perceptions, Inclusion, Trauma, Discrimination, Transformation

## Introduction:

Disability studies have emerged as a vital area of research that focuses on the experiences of people with disabilities, her challenges, and her contributions to society. One significant aspect of disability studies is the examination of how social attitudes towards disability shape the lives of disabled individuals. Malini Chib's novel, "One Little Finger," offers a unique perspective on disability by exploring the struggles of a disabled protagonist who faces numerous barriers in her life. In this research paper, we will analyze the representation of disability in . Malini Chib 's novel and examine how it challenges and transforms social perceptions of disability. As Malini writes, "Why do I feel so small, so isolated so rejected in India? Why do I yearn after a few months to run back to where they treat me as a human being?" (Chib 196). This quote reflects the central theme of the novel, which is the struggle of disabled individuals to navigate a world designed for able-bodied people. The protagonist's physical disability not only limits her mobility but also subjects her to social stigma and discrimination. Throughout the novel, the protagonist confronts numerous obstacles that prevent her from fulfilling her aspirations and living a fulfilling life. As the author observes, "Will I make it? is a question that nags me. I get into a panic. Life means freedom. Freedom to think, move, speak, interact with whomsoever, freedom to make choices." (Chib 196).

By exploring the challenges faced by the disabled protagonist, Malini Chib sheds light on the social and cultural biases that exist towards disabled individuals. Through her portrayal of the protagonist's struggles and resilience, the author challenges prevailing attitudes towards disability and highlights the need for greater awareness and understanding of disability issues. Through this research paper, an endeavour will be made to scrutinise as to what extent author's representation of disability transforms social perceptions of disability and contributes to disability studies. The recurrent themes, narrative structure, and characters portrayal are intertwined imperceptibly by the author to render a deeper understanding of the challenges faced by disabled individuals in society. The objective of this analysis is to contribute to the expanding body of literature on disability studies and foster greater awareness and understanding of disability issues.

## Literature Review

Disability studies have received considerable attention from scholars in recent years. In her work, scholars have focused on the representation of disabled individuals in literature and how it shapes social perceptions. This literature review aims to provide an overview of relevant research on disability studies, particularly in the context of literature.

In Malini Chib's *One Little Finger*, disability is represented through the character of , a young boy with a physical disability. Previous research has examined the representation of disability in literature, including Bhattacharya's work. Lennard J. Davis argues that the disabled body was constructed in the nineteenth century as a deviation from the "normal" body (17). Similarly, Rosemarie Garland-Thomson argues that disability has been historically stigmatized and excluded from the feminist discourse (13).

Moreover, Raymond W. Novaco's research suggests that experiences of trauma can have a lasting impact on the individual's emotional and psychological well-being. Novaco notes that individuals who experience trauma are more likely to suffer from post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and other mental health issues (147-164). In the context of Malini Chib's *One Little Finger*, Malini's physical disability is likely to have resulted in trauma and emotional suffering.

Overall, the literature review highlights the importance of understanding the representation of disability in literature and the impact it has on social perceptions. The present study builds on this research by analyzing the representation of disability in Malini Chib's *One Little Finger* and how it contributes to transforming social perceptions.

## Representations of Disability in the Novel

Malini Chib's *One Little Finger* explores the theme of disability through the autobiographical account of Malini herself. Her memoir portrays the impact of disability on her life, highlighting the physical and emotional challenges she has to face. The representations of disability in the memoir provides profound insights into the experiences of individuals with disabilities and contribute to a better understanding of her lives and struggles.

Malini's account offers a poignant insight into the emotional turmoil experienced by individuals with disabilities and her longing for acceptance within society. By delving into the author's personal experiences, she intends to shed light on the challenges faced by disabled individuals, particularly in terms of social perceptions. It reveals the emotional distress and pain she endures, evident in her outbursts and tears. As she states, "I did have outbursts as at times I found life extremely painful. During those moments, I collapsed in tears but I always chose the night and cried quietly" (Chib 148). This accentuates the author's deep emotional struggle, emphasizing the immense challenges she has to encounter on a daily basis.

She highlights the emotional struggles and hidden pain experienced by her as a result of her disability. She describes the eruption of sentiments and the difficulty in controlling them, stating, "When I am in an emotional state, I cannot figure why the tears keep rolling down; I cannot control them" (Chib 148). Furthermore, the author expresses her longing to be "like everyone else" and "normal" indicating her desire for acceptance within society (Chib 148). She reveals her resoluteness to fight against societal expectations and keep her painful thoughts at bay, stating, "I am determined to fight and win! The positive side in me takes over and I keep those painful thoughts away from plaguing me"(Chib 148). This demonstrate the author's resilience and her active efforts to cope with her emotional struggles.

The impact of societal events can be visualised on the author's emotional well-being. Weddings, in particular, serve as a reminder of the author's perceived exclusion from experiences like finding a partner. The author describes collapsing into floods of tears after attending her cousin's wedding, as it highlighted her own longing for a similar connection. At this juncture Malini narrates, "I collapsed into floods of tears, for no apparent reason. After an age, my uncontrollable tears stopped and I tried to verbalize my emotional outbursts of needing a partner (Chib 148). This quote highlights the emotional vulnerability experienced by the author in relation to societal expectations and norms. Additionally, the memoir, *One Little Finger* touches upon the societal perception of disabled individuals as burdens on society. The author references Susan Wendell's perspective, stating, "disabled people are looked down upon as a burden on society" (Chib 149). This indicates the negative stereotypes and prejudices faced by individuals with disabilities, which further contribute to her psychological struggles and challenges faced by her vi-a- vis her impairment and body dysfunction.

She challenges the notion of independence and highlights the importance of acknowledging interdependence among all individuals. The author argues that society tends to promote the self-deception that "independent" adults do not need another's help" (Chib 149), while ignoring the profound interdependence that exists among individuals. To support this argument, the author asks rhetorical questions, such as "Are not we dependent on the plumber, the electrician, the computer technician?" (Chib 149), emphasizing the interconnectedness of individuals in various aspects of life. The author renders a personal example of co-dependency within their family, sharing how they and their mother shared household chores during their mother's doctorate. While the author handled outside chores, their mother took care of cooking and cleaning. The author asserts, "We were both co-dependent. She was dependent on me, little old me!"(Chib 149). She points out the reciprocity and mutual support within their family, challenging the perception that individuals with disabilities are solely dependent and burdensome.

### Desire for Acceptance and Normalcy

The passage portrays the author's longing to be accepted and regarded as "normal" by society. The author questions their place in society, stating, "Will I be like everyone else? Will I be normal?" (Chib 148). This quote signifies the yearning for inclusion and highlights the societal expectations that often alienate individuals with disabilities.

The desire for acceptance and normalcy is exhibited by the author throughout their journey of pursuing a career in librarianship. The author, who relies on a wheelchair for mobility and computers for communication, find solace in the world of libraries, where technology facilitated their interaction and minimized the need for verbal communication. She craves for acceptance, her passion for networking exhibits her craving to overcome physical limitations and biological barriers. Malini's pursuit of a second Masters' degree in Librarianship, supported by their social connections and a supportive environment, manifests her desire to achieve personal and professional fulfillment.

The author's reliance on technology for communication and mobility is highlighted by their statement, "Thank goodness for technology for people like me who needed wheelchairs for mobility and computers for communication!" (Chib, 165). The author's desire for acceptance and normalcy is evident in her gratitude for the inclusive nature of library work, where technology bridged the communication gap and allowed her for meaningful interactions to feel personalised connection virtually.

Encouragement from friends and library staff fueled the author's desire to become a librarian. One librarian friend stated, "Why don't you become a librarian?... You will have flexible hours" (Chib 165). The author's willingness to explore this career path and take a year off to gain practical experience in different libraries reflects their determination to find acceptance and fulfill her professional aspirations

The author's journey was not without challenges. Transportation posed a significant obstacle, requiring the author to navigate multiple buses to reach her college. However, with determination and support from friends and flatmates, she gradually gained confidence and learned to overcome her fears. This highlights the author's strong desire for acceptance and normalcy by actively participating in daily activities without constant assistance.

The author's journey of pursuing a career in librarianship reflects their unwavering desire for acceptance, normalcy, and professional fulfillment. The support from their social circle, their determination to overcome physical limitations, and their willingness to adapt to new technologies exemplify their quest for inclusion. As attitudes toward disability evolve, the author's experiences highlight the importance of creating accessible environments and fostering acceptance to empower individuals with disabilities to achieve their goals and aspirations.

### **The Exigency for Inclusion, Acceptance transforming social perception**

Malini expresses her yearning for acceptance, recognition, and inclusion within society. She emphasizes the need for society to recognize disabled individuals as capable human beings with thoughts, desires, and expectations. She complains and give vent to her sour sentiments towards indifferent society. She says agonisingly, "Today, many will invite the whole family for dinner or a party but not me! Do they feel I am infectious? Are they ashamed? I yearn for my friends, my social network. I yearn for the people who accept me. I long to breathe. I long for the openness of life." (Chib 196)

The author highlights the societal perception that disabled adults are viewed as children, and their desires remain unquenched. She reveals the religious beliefs attributing disability to retribution for past sins committed. She implores the readers to come out of their preconceived and parochial conceptions about differently-abled people. At this juncture she asserts, "They look at our imperfect bodies, and believe some of the religious beliefs which explain that we are the way we are, due to a retribution for sins committed in the past. She is startled at this interpretation of her present predicament and says, "I wonder seriously sometimes—what is the sin I committed?" (Chib 195). The author expresses her yearning for acceptance, recognition, and inclusion within society. She emphasises the need for society to recognise disabled individuals as capable human beings with thoughts, desires, and expectations. The author calls for a shift in attitudes toward disabled individuals and the recognition of their abilities, equal opportunities, and inclusivity and accentuates the empowerment of disabled individuals through challenging societal norms and fostering a supportive environment.

**Conclusion:**

Malini Chib's memoir, *One Little Finger*, serves as a powerful catalyst for transforming social perceptions of disability. Through her personal journey, Chib highlights the importance of positive thinking, family support, cultural exposure, and challenging societal norms. Her narrative unveils the barriers faced by disabled individuals and underscores the need for an inclusive society that recognizes their abilities and provides equal opportunities. By embracing diverse perspectives and fostering inclusivity, society can embark on a transformative journey towards a future where disabled individuals are fully embraced, respected, and afforded equal rights and opportunities. This memoir culminates the exigencies to challenge these perceptions and dismantle the barriers that confine disabled individuals' participation in society. Chib's yearning for acceptance, inclusion, and the freedom to live life on her terms echoes the experiences of many disabled individuals who face discrimination and exclusion. Her poignant reflections expose the societal barriers that deny disabled individuals equal opportunities and perpetuate their marginalization. This calls for a collective effort to create a more inclusive society that values diversity, embraces disabled individuals' abilities, and ensures their full participation. Chib's narrative exposes the prevailing social perceptions that label disabled adults as perpetual children, denying them their desires, autonomy, and individuality. This ingrained mindset hinders the recognition of disabled individuals as fully capable beings with their own thoughts, desires, and expectations. Chib's journey exemplifies the art of living by confronting and minimizing troubles while focusing on the positive aspects of life. Her ability to navigate the metaphorical ocean of challenges, with the steady support of her family, showcases the resilience and strength of disabled individuals in the face of adversity.

**Works Cited**

Chib, Malini. *One little finger*. SAGE Publishing India, 2010.

Davis, Lennard J. *The disability studies reader*. Routledge, 2016.

Garland-Thomson, Rosemarie. "Integrating disability, transforming feminist theory." *NWSA journal*, 2002, pp. 1-32.

Mairs, Nancy. "On Being a Cripple." *The Social Medicine Reader*, Volume II, Third Edition. Duke University Press, 2019.

Garland-Thomson, Rosemarie. "Integrating disability, transforming feminist theory." *NWSA journal*, 2002, pp. 1-32.