Disability, Identity And Transformation: A Critical Analysis Of India's First Disabled Veteran's Narrative In Relation To Marilynn J. Phillips' Transformational Framework

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Individual identity has been kept on changing and modifying within different paradigms of thinking and ages. With the advent of post-structuralism, possession of a single fixed identity by an individual has become questionable. It is flexible and negotiable. Identity politics have always remained significant in the liberation movements of oppressed groups. For persons with disabilities, it is the person's appearance that places them in that category, allocating them what Goffman terms as "social identity" (Goffman, 1968: p.11). Thus, the presence of impairment results in individuals being pushed to the periphery, perpetuating social isolation. From this marginalized position, self-writing emerges as a powerful tool for reclaiming and redefining one's own identity. It is through self-writings, which contain their personal experiences, that the subaltern voice tries to reach center. Having said that, it is important to note that the moment their experiences are being written by themselves, it no longer remains sub-altern because the 'speaking' subaltern is no more subaltern as Spivak puts it. (Spivak, 1999). Huddart writes that "in Spivak's terms, as soon as subaltern memory is written, it is no longer that of the subaltern- it belongs to the ex-subaltern, or more likely is packaged by the metropolitan migrant for consumption, however well-meaning." (Huddart, 2008: p.126).

Culture plays a significant role in the process of identity formation, as it shapes individual experiences, narratives, and beliefs and provides context. Harbord suggests, "The writing of the self involves an engagement with the various cultural resources available, forms which are recognizable to institutions, publishers and audiences" (Harbord 32). The understanding of the word "culture'' has changed over time, leading to the emergence of the 'social definition of culture' in the nineteenth century, as Raymond Williams puts it. He mentions 'culture' to be the "signifying system," through which "a social order is communicated, reproduced, experienced and explored" (Williams, 1981: p.13). As the means of production kept on changing from feudal to industrial capitalist systems, cultural practices also kept on modifying. During the industrial revolution, impaired people were socially disabled as they were considered not so 'fit' to contribute to the production process. In the capitalist system, physically impaired 'non-productive' citizens, as oppose to the so-called productive citizens, are made to appear as a burden for the economy. leading to the creation of a new class of people known as the

"disabled" class. Thus, these 'a-productive citizens' (Ghai, 2015: p. 25) stand as the "self" in binary to the impaired individuals who are people not 'able' enough to contribute. To strengthen the "self," the "other" had to be disabled. Thus, 'a-productive citizens' become part of the 'norm' which implies that "the majority of the population must or should somehow be part of the norm," or else he becomes the deviant individual (Davis, 2013: p.3). This is the puzzling space that persons with disabilities find themselves in.

There are innumerable meta-narratives under the genre of Disability Studies that accommodate the experiences of persons with disabilities that vary in terms of caste, class, race, religion and gender. Marking an individual as disabled and abled is largely culture-specific. However, cultural realities are also different for everyone. The cultural context serves as the foundation that defines norms and deviance, affecting the formation of a person's identity. Oliver and Barnes mention that "there is substantial evidence that social responses to impairment and disablement vary across time and place and different cultures respond to different impairments in different ways" (Oliver and Barnes, 2012: p.100). The polyphonic quality of culture (Bakhtin`,1984) makes it significant to study sub-cultures, especially in the Indian context. Ghai writes, "In India …each culture has many sub-cultures, which means that not all beliefs, values, attitudes, and behaviours are shared amongst all people of one cultural group" (Ghai, 2015: p.22). Each autobiographical text by persons with disabilities provides a way to study their individual cultural experiences and the process of identity formation. These personal experiences contribute to the understanding and formation of theory. Leigh Gilmore points "Every autobiography is the fragment of a theory" (Gilmore, 2007: p.2). From trying to find a disabled character being centrally represented in a novel to disabled people becoming the central character in their own narratives, the genre has come a long way and is still in the process of making its presence powerful. The peripheral positioning of disabled characters has gradually been questioned and replaced by the self-writings of persons with disabilities, which have become the tool for portraying their first-hand experiences and reclaiming their identity. Persons who are publishing their life writings are somehow in a better situation than who are unable to voice out the experiences.

In the Western context, self-writings by persons with disabilities are broadly emerging after the second world war. In the Indian context, this genre is witnessing a proliferation in the twenty-first century. However, the previous centuries did not witness such a spread, but it has definitely set the path for other life writings to appear and control their own narratives. Thus, the process of decolonization of the genre has just begun. The latter half of the twentieth century gets two life writings by persons with disabilities, which are "Face to Face: An Autobiography" (1957) by Ved Mehta and the memoir "Higher Than Everest: Memoirs of a Mountaineer" by Major HPS Ahluwalia in 1973. The paper intends to explore Ahluwalia's memoir which is significant as it is the first narrative by a disabled veteran in India.

Thomas Couser noted that "deviation from bodily norms provokes a demand for explanatory narrative" and "calls for a story" (Couser, 2015: p.457). Major Ahluwalia, the author, has experienced life with secondary disability. He suffered from a bullet hit on his neck during the Indo-Pak war of 1965, leading to his spinal injury. The time of impairment onset plays a significant role in the process of identity formation. Persons with congenital impairment gradually become aware of the conditions, judgements and the social treatment they receive from the beginning of their lives. But for people with acquired impairments, the initial stage of loss is so overwhelming that it becomes difficult to accept the impairment. In his earlier life, Major Ahluwalia has served in the Indian Army, been part of several hill expeditions, and also successfully climbed the 'mightiest' Everest. That life certainly called for a 'story'. The person who has been the embodiment of an ultimate, desirable, successful, and masculine figure for the society, it becomes difficult for him to confront the fact that "he would never be a whole man again" (Ahluwalia, 2016: p.24). He finds it challenging to integrate his new identity of being an impaired individual into his existing sense of self. Culturally, disability has been equated with reduced capability, and for an army personnel who always had autonomy over his body, the acquired disability

makes him feel his own body as "lacking," as he needed assistance to perform his daily routines and he mentions "For some reason, this attention from the nurse annoyed me, and I felt she was trying to shatter a dream from which I did not wish to awake" (Ahluwalia, 2016: p.18). After reaching the UK for his treatment, Major Ahluwalia mentions in his memoir, "I arrived broken in body but not in spirit. I was determined to rebuild my life against all odds" (Ahluwalia, 2016: p.262). After an initial emotional upheaval, the author remains optimistic about his recovery. He writes, "But I had to face the future, and I was suddenly reminded that circumstances had created another Everest for me to surmount" (Ahluwalia, 2016: p.23). John M. Kinder observes "disabled veterans are expected to be optimistic about their recovery… and steadfast in their belief" about their recovery (Kinder, 2014: p.167). Rather than grieving, which is common for any individual, the author embracingly integrates his impairment into his identity, traversing withdrawal, denial, and renegotiation to emerge with a renewed sense of self.

German political theorist Axel Honneth considers that self-confidence, self-respect, and self-esteem provide the foundation of identity formation, which works at three levels: relationships, legal rights, and solidarity. Nick Watson writes, "Through relationships, self-confidence emerges; through rights, a sense of personal dignity emerges; and through solidarity, self-esteem grows" (Riddle and Watson, 2014: p.51) and denial of any three might affect the identity formation of the individual. Attitude towards persons with disabilities and the emotional support and experience of disabilities depend on the social location of the impaired individual. Anita Ghai notes "class cannot be ignored in understanding the disability experience as class modifies and changes the expense of impairment, and reduces the exposure to oppressive social relations" (Ghai, 2015: p.278). It is the family's economic condition that defines their cultural location and that also controls the disability experience. HPS Ahluwalia, along with other siblings, received education at St. Joseph's Academy, where physical activities were compulsory. The author's family had a long history of military tradition, which began with his great-grandfather. Masculinity is often considered to be a significant personality trait of a military personnel. Through the author's narrative, it is evident that he hints at his grandfather to be the epitome of masculinity. He describes his paternal grandfather as "a man of principles, who dominated his large family" (Ahluwalia, 2016: p.29) and his maternal grandfather as a "towering personality" who picked a quick temper and everyone was scared of him.

The term 'disability' should not be viewed through a homogenous lens, as the experiences and the transformational journeys of persons with disabilities vary, and their ways of presenting their narratives are distinct from one another. Marilynn J. Phillips, in her chapter "Disability and Ethnicity in Conflict: A Study in Transformation," observes four stages of transformation from a narrative of a woman with disability named Margaret Orlinski. Marilynn makes it clear that these stages are not absolute but "dynamic rather than static and do not preclude oscillation between and among the various stages" (Phillips, 1988: p.201). This paper fundamentally attempts to explore Major HPS Ahluwalia's memoir "Higher Than Everest: Memoirs of a Mountaineer," which was first published in 1973, and comprehend the ways in which these stages are being presented and organized in the narrative of a disabled veteran of late twentieth century India. Dawn suggests that "the study of narrative becomes the study of human experience of the world" (Dawn, 2021: p.143) and a narrative is considered to be "both a method and a phenomenon" (Dawn, 2021: p.143). These personal experiences give rise to the political theories as Carol Hanisch already mentioned in the essay "The Personal is Political". The personal experiences are put being articulated in a conscious way.

To locate the stages in Ahluwalia's narrative, it is important to remember that the stages mentioned by Marilynn Phillips are based on a narrative of a woman with disability of Polish origin. There are several differences in the context, including the place, sex and type, and the time of the onset of

disability. The four stages mentioned by Marilynn consist of marginalization, retreat, renegotiation, and emergence accordingly. The narrative begins with his thought process being juggled up between the past and the present. The book is almost presented through the narrative technique of stream of consciousness. Thus, it is evident that this narrative witnesses a constant movement among the different stages of transformation. The narrative begins with his onset of disablement which includes his family, peers, and his own reaction towards the impairment. The initial reaction of his mother and aunt, who were crying and his fiancée in distress, puzzled him. The author also feels guilty for putting his mother into trouble, as she used to come a long way to the hospital everyday. The fact that his mother and fiancée visited him regularly in the hospital and spent time with him, as he notes, underscores the significant role that women play as care-givers in Indian society, highlighting their nurturing presence. He writes, "Above all, my mother was always there to encourage me and keep my spirits high so that I could face any challenges- medical or otherwise" (Ahluwalia, 2016: p.262). The stage of marginalization involves his experience of anxiety, frustration, and merciful behavior. The author experiences this in a nuanced way. When he was bestowed with pity by a friend of his colleague, he writes, "It has always seemed to me that to bestow sympathy and pity indiscriminately on those who do not want it does more harm than good. Such sentimental platitudes carry very little sincerity or conviction and are often counter-productive". (Ahluwalia, 2016: p.21). The Arjuna award ceremony serves as a poignant reminder of the marginalized gaze, he describes, as he met the despairing glances of his peers. The author becomes the center of attention, which he has not expected. This is the gaze of powerlessness and helplessness where the person becomes aware of his bodily difference through his interactions with others. Although he encountered traits of marginalization from a few, he felt largely embraced and validated by the majority. One possible explanation can be that military personnel frequently witness the physical impairment of their peers, as the realities of war are an inherent part of their profession, leading to a higher amount of exposure to such kinds of experiences. It is his professional identity that tries not to exclude him consciously. Major Ahluwalia belongs from an Indian Punjabi family. It is also his religious identity, which empowers him with courage and resilience in the face of adversity, inspiring individuals to persevere and fight valiantly till the end. The masculine story of Sher Singh about Baba Deep Singh, winning battle with his severed head, left a lasting impact on the author's mind. He was reluctant to go and receive the Arjuna award in person, as he thought it would be awkward to be wheeled in the presence of the President. He was conscious of the profound change in his bodily identity, moving from being an example of masculine physical perfection to a reality labelled as 'disabled' by societal standards. He writes, "I almost regretted having come there. A place had been earmarked for my wheelchair" (Ahluwalia, 2016: p.174). The process of identity formation for persons with congenital impairment and persons with acquired impairment is different. Mike Oliver states, "...to be born with impairment is to be assigned a negative identity at the point of detection and diagnosis" (Oliver and Barnes, 2012: p.109).

The development of an individual's identity relies heavily on social interactions and is influenced by the responses of others within that culture. At this stage, the author feels incomplete because of a society that has produced certain parameters of becoming a "complete" individual. The author remains in a state of denial after suffering the bullet injury, as he thinks he "... must have had any accident when descending from the summit" (Ahluwalia, 2016: p.18) and hopes he will recover soon and return to the mountains. The stage of denial is followed by the realization of the gravity of the condition and in his attempt to accept the impracticability of 'complete recovery'. Phillips mentions in her chapter that Margaret was considered incapable of marriage and motherhood. This is not the case for Major Ahluwalia. It was he who did not want to be the "burden" on his wife. This probably hints at the idea where the husband is often considered the head member of the family, and he does not want to be the 'burden' as he would not be able to play the traditional role of being a husband. The striking aspect is that, on the one hand, it is the society that marks a woman with disability as incapable of marriage, and on the other hand, a man with disability is considering himself a "burden' for his future wife. The author alienates himself by abandoning his relationship with his fiancée. In the entire narrative by

Ahluwalia, he is never questioned about his capability of marriage and parenthood. This indicates that a man with disability at least has control over his decisions about marriage, which is just the opposite for a woman with disability because a woman is considered to be the eternal 'care-giver' and having a disability means losing her worth.

Every person experience marginalization in their own way. Here, it is his profession that makes his experience of marginalization different. Marginalization often involves a social image of devaluation, which was not exactly the case for Major Ahluwalia. He comes across a few indicators that characterize marginalization. The first chapter is named "End of a Long Dream," which hints at his own marginalized feeling. The chapter is immediately followed by the episodes of his childhood and youth. After recounting about the hospital scenarios, he goes back to his childhood, introducing readers to his family members, reminiscing about his youth in Mussoorie, Kolkata, and getting admission to the Academy. These episodes are followed by his mountaineering, photography, and expedition days, where his life revolves around risks, progress, achievements, fulfilment, etc. The narrative marks a stark contrast between his initial perseverance despite knee pain during his first climb and his subsequent forced withdrawal from exploring the hills due to physical impairment, marking a clear retreat in the narrative. In Mumbai Naval Hospital, he was skeptical of meeting his old friends as he thought he might feel unwanted. Initially, social adjustments became difficult for him. This resulted from his encounter with someone he refers to as 'uncle', who hails the author as a hero but consciously fails to acknowledge him after becoming disabled. This is the phase of retreat where he discovers his disability is, as Phillips writes, "a catalyst for growth" (Phillips, 1988: p.208). The author experiences the "positive value of disability" as he mentions things that he learnt about human behaviour and nature during this period and acknowledges the good that happened to him. This characteristic marks the retreat stage, and the narrative clearly illustrates the transformative process underway, revealing the author's gradual shift. The narrative revisits his hospital memories, offering a poignant contrast between his past and the present, and inviting readers to witness the transformative journey that has reshaped his life. He was gradually trying to establish his own system by communicating with people through his newly acquired typing facility, meeting some visitors in the hospital, and also leaving the hospital once or twice a week to monitor the work in the Films Division on their film "Everest". While mentioning his experiences in the Mumbai hospital, the narrative undergoes a significant shift, integrating elements of retreat and renegotiation and navigating through withdrawal and rediscovery.

The fluid movement of the narrative between retreat and renegotiation reaches climax in a definitive shift towards the process of renegotiation, fueled by the transformative impact of his medical experiences at the Stoke Mandeville Hospital, United Kingdom. He regained his confidence, and shed his earlier reservations about socializing and enthusiastically reunited with friends, a testament to his personal growth. He writes, "For the first time I dared to hope, to look forward to a day when I could once again live a meaningful life and enjoy the simple pleasures of life" (Ahluwalia, 2016: p.263). His UK days were filled with diverse engagements, from dinners to felicitation programs, where he shared his story of climbing, illustrating his gradual transition from a physical adventurer to a narrative ambassador. He could negotiate with his earlier achievements of being a physical explorer in the literal sense of the term by communicating the experience of his life when he had not been disabled, which fundamentally included his experience with mountains. The film 'Everest', which was made based on their expedition, got previewed and the show was covered by reporters. He was gradually re-establishing his presence as the center of social attention, returning to a life where he was at the epicenter of interest. Through the narrative, often the identity of being a mountaineer who had climbed Everest, surpassed his veteran status, marking a significant evolution in his identity and public persona. In the later part of his narrative, he mentions that his daughter, Sugandha, is growing up in a mountaineer's home. Perhaps the reason lies in the fact that conquering Everest is a far more exclusive and rare achievement than being a war veteran, conferring a unique distinction on his identity. After spending five months at the Stoke Mandeville hospital, he returned to India.

In a country where persons with disabilities, especially any gender other than male, witness exclusion from core institutions including education, employment, and many others, the author gets a job in an ordnance factory with the support from his peers. Impaired individuals who are discriminated against on the basis of disability, as Ghai writes, "experience other levels of marginalization such as that of class, gender, poverty and rural-urban divide" (Ghai, 2015: p.101). As the author belongs to a certain kind of economic and professional background, employment and poverty do not seem to be problematic factors. Often, people with impaired conditions fail to opt for and continue proper treatment because of their poor economic condition. For the author, the state takes up the responsibility of the treatment. This is because of him being the disabled veteran who sacrificed his body for his country. The state also secures him a job in the ordinance department. This is not something that other disabled persons experience. Persons with disabilities, especially any other gender than male, have less accessibility to opportunity and are also often underpaid, which reduces their capacity to access basic services, leading to "a drop in social status, a lack of confidence, low self-esteem, feelings of subjection and increased defencelessness, and the reality of discrimination" (Ghai, 2015: p.105). Major Ahluwalia does not struggle to find a 'work' that is a necessity for survival. It also points out or marks one's existence. Although he is no longer 'able' to serve as a soldier, he finds a job in a government office. Thus, with a supportive background to draw upon, the process became significantly manageable, facilitating his successful navigation through this stage. Upon returning to India, he tried to rebuild his life by re-establishing a new routine. He started driving his own car, which increased his self-confidence and his sense of independence as he could go anywhere without any assistance. These are the small steps that helped him form a new identity. Through these small yet significant actions, he began to reforge his sense of self, carefully reintegrating elements which he had been forced to abandon and emerging with a revitalized identity. He became a part of the Central Asia Cultural Expedition, which started on May 17, 1994, and goes on exploring the "desolate and inhospitable terrains" (Ahluwalia 238). He was trying to explore the "trekking along the pilgrim's path" (Ahluwalia, 2016: p.238)… write from the Asha Hans book

The author refutes the traditional portrayal of persons with acquired impairments being perpetually grief-stricken. Instead, he sets out to assert his identity as an explorer, shifting his focus from mountain peaks to new frontiers to strengthen his identity as a lifelong explorer. This expedition was his vision, brought to life through determination and proper planning. He thought to "rediscover for India's youth the spirit of adventure and thirst for knowledge that has driven civilizations to seek to expand the frontiers of excellence" (Ahluwalia, 2016: p.235). He also emerges as a person who is vocal about the importance of physical and mental rehabilitation for persons with disabilities, leading him to create one of the best spinal injury centre in Delhi that addresses the complex needs of individuals navigating life through disability. Prior to his impairment, his life was a story of exploration and duty, unfolding from a carefree Mussoorie childhood steeped in sports and adventure to a notable career in the army, mountaineering achievements, and ultimately, a disabled war veteran who embodied resilience. Major Ahluwalia's life following his impairment mirrored the stages outlined by Marilynn J. Phillips in her seminal work, which was based on Margaret's experiences. His journey traversed marginalization, retreat, renegotiation, and emergence despite the difference in experience of the two persons in respect of time, space, culture, age, and gender. Major Ahluwalia's professional foundation, however, provided a comparative advantage in navigating these stages. Language plays an important role in deconstructing any narrative. The memoir by Major Ahluwalia witnesses repeated usage of the words like 'able' and 'ability', especially at the onset of impairment. The word 'able' encompasses a hegemonical presence throughout the narrative in the author's process of transformation. Linguistically, the amount of its usage at this point also highlights the transformational stage he is in. The author tries to base his identity on being a mountaineer, but his lack of permanence of this identity is evident as he navigates through various stages of transformation.

The chronology and name of the chapter suggest the transformation through various stages. The narrative begins with a sense of incompleteness, attached with nostalgic recollections from his childhood, mountaineering days, and Everest climb in the following four chapters. These nostalgic glimpses reveal the stark contrast between his past vitality and his present vulnerability. The chapters subtly introduce the stage of retreat where the author's disconnection deepens. As he struggles to accommodate his impaired self within his former identity, he begins to withdraw. The author is not withdrawing from the expressions of ethnic traditions but rather from overall social expressions. This stage is shortly lived and overlaps with the stage of renegotiation, which is present in his description of the days in Stoke Mandeville hospital for treatment. The stage of renegotiation is very prominent in the following chapter that narrates his life after coming back to India. The three stages give way to the fourth stage of emergence, which is evident in the last three chapters of the narrative. The stages in the transformational process cannot be separated from one another. They often overlap with one another. Human mind often fails to think in a linear manner and feel only one emotion at a time. They can experience a wide range of events contemporaneously. The memoir breaks away from stereotypical depictions of persons with disabilities, shifting the focus away from victimhood and super heroism. The author is very much human, and not less or more human, whose identity keeps on overlapping and transforming in various stages of his narrative, finally emerging as a lifelong explorer and founder of the Indian Spinal Injury Center.

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