

# Disability and Feminism: An Intersectional Reading of *Skin Stories*

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## Abstract

In this article, I intend to examine how Feminism despite its mammoth contribution could not accommodate the issue of disability in the first instance, thereby, finally leading to the emergence of Feminist Disability Theory which integrated disability issue into feminist concerns and transformed Feminist theory. This intersectional approach explains how disability is inextricably linked to other categories of identity such as gender, sexual orientation, ethnicity, age and class. Based on the analysis of the necessity for intersectionality between disability and feminism, I would discuss the tenets of Feminist Disability theory, and highlight how notions of ideal beauty, perfect body, sexuality and identity are culturally constructed which in turn evoke the disabled beings as minor and inferior. It is through the lens of Feminist Disability theory that I intend to interpret the personal narratives of women having different kinds of bodily variations, anthologized in the collection *Skin Stories* (2019), and unravel the need to re-imagine disability. These first-hand life narratives attempt to convey ‘disabled women’s distinct perspectives on sexuality, reproductive issues, appearance biases, and other shared struggle.’<sup>1</sup>

**Keywords :** *Feminist Disability Theory, intersectional approach, ideal beauty, perfect body, sexuality and identity.*

Intersectionality as a theoretical framework investigates the workings of different systems of oppression that operate in conjunction with each other. However, the notion of intersectionality emerged specifically with Kimberle Crenshaw’s seminal essay ‘Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence Against Women of Color’ (1991) where she took the instance of black women to display how the single-axis framework, often chosen by both feminist and anti-racist scholars, was rejected by intersectionality. For her, intersectionality is an effective means to analyze ‘the various ways in which race and gender interact to shape the multiple dimensions of Black women’s employment experiences.’<sup>2</sup> What therefore originated was Black Feminism that located

## Disability and Feminism: An Intersectional Reading of *Skin Stories*

black women at the intersection of race and gender and exposed both racist and sexual oppression on them. Intersectionality proves vital in challenging the homogenizing nature of feminist as well as anti-racist discourses in the case of Black Feminism. Similarly, intersection of ability and gender systems formulate and inform feminist disability politics that expose the doubly marginalized position of disabled women in society.

### **Need for intersection of Feminist and Disability approaches**

‘No matter how attentive the scholar is to the axes that constitute social identity, some of the axes will be ignored and some selected.’<sup>3</sup>

Feminist scholars and theorists have previously ‘ignored’ the axis of disability oppression while taking into consideration other axes of discrimination based on class, race, gender and sexual orientation. This has been pointed out well by Nancy Hirschmann in ‘Disability as a New Frontier for Feminist Intersectionality Research’ where she draws on scholars like Samuels, Young, Asch and Fine to accentuate the exclusionary attitude of feminism towards disability:

Lesbian feminism, transgender theory, as well as post-modern theory have challenged feminism on these assumptions to some degree, raising the question of what ‘woman’ means, of who ‘counts’ as a woman and the potential oppressiveness of the boundaries of identity. But even these feminists have excluded disability from the categories in need of inclusion. (Samuels 2002) And feminists have even used disability as a pejorative term to describe what patriarchy has done to women, ‘crippling’ our abilities and imaginations (Young 1980). Asch and Fine (1988, 4) mention that some feminists exclude disabled women from fear that they will reinforce stereotypes of women as dependent.<sup>4</sup>

Previously both feminist and disability movements tended to show a compacted and undiversified discourse but lately they realized the necessity for intersectionality. Fawcett draws attention to this fact:

Disability rights movements and feminism(s) in the past have often been presented as homogenous and unified movements, with feminism appearing to speak for all women, and disability rights movements, based on the social model of disability, appearing to speak for all disabled people.<sup>5</sup>

In the due course, what happened was feminism as a ‘movement that originated essentially as a response to oppression experienced by women excluded disabled women.’<sup>6</sup> Women with disabilities found that their needs,

## TRIVIUM

concerns and experiences were neither addressed by feminist nor mainstream disability theories.<sup>7</sup> With this, the exigency for integrating the cause of the disabled women in feminism got surfaced. In the words of Nasa Begum:

The feminist movement needs to engage in open dialogues with disabled women to learn from our experiences and develop a movement which reflects the diversity of the sisterhood. It is crucial that non-disabled feminists acknowledge our experiences and recognize our needs, wishes and aspirations as being a fundamental part of feminist experience and a key component of the feminist movement.<sup>8</sup>

As contemporary feminist theory has become ‘porous, diffuse, and perhaps – most significant – self-critical,’<sup>9</sup> intersectionality between the two movements – feminist and disability– becomes achievable. Finding both the theories at the crossroads gives rise to a new paradigm which aims ‘to disentangle the complex interweaving of misrepresentations, invisibility, and the multiple oppressions of being female and disabled.’<sup>10</sup>

### **Emergence of the Feminist Disability Theory<sup>11</sup>**

Feminist Disability Theory emerges with Rosemarie Garland-Thomson’s unprecedented essay ‘Integrating Disability, Transforming Feminist Theory’ (2002). As both disability studies scholars and feminist scholars have previously seemed to be not deeply aware of each other’s concerns, Thomson’s intention behind invoking and linking the notions of feminism and disability studies is to introduce ‘the ability /disability system as a category of analysis into this diverse and diffuse enterprise. It aims to extend current notions of cultural diversity and to more fully integrate the academy and the larger world it helps shape.’<sup>12</sup> The obligation for ‘integration’ of the two theories into one generates from the urgency to achieve parity by fully including that which has been excluded and subordinated’ and that of ‘transformation’ from the prerequisite to re-imagine established knowledge and the order of things<sup>13</sup>

Studying disability in a feminist context entails the dual tests of ‘unmasking and re-imagining disability ‘which in turn serves as ‘a prism’, as Simi Linton puts it, to ‘gain a broader understanding of society and human experience.’<sup>14</sup> Assumptions about disability as a flaw, a lack or an excess is challenged by feminist disability theory that argues how disability

## Disability and Feminism: An Intersectional Reading of *Skin Stories*

is a cultural interpretation of human variation rather than an inherent inferiority, a pathology to cure, or an undesirable trait to eliminate. By probing how cultural meanings are attributed to bodies, this theory propagates the following assumptions as Garland-Thomson writes in *Feminist Disability Studies* :

First, it understands disability as a system of exclusion that stigmatize human differences. Second, it uncovers communities and identities that the bodies we consider disabled have produced. Third, it reveals discriminatory attitudes and practices directed at those bodies. Fourth, it exposes disability as a social category of analysis. Fifth, it frames disability as an effect of power relations.<sup>15</sup>

Creation of the disability / ability system in terms of comparing bodies is ‘ideological rather than biological.’<sup>16</sup> The basis for the inception of this system lies in the ‘the formation of culture, (for) legitimating an unequal distribution of resources, status, and power within a biased social and architectural environment’ and also, to ‘preserve and validate such privileged designations as beautiful, healthy, normal, fit, competent, intelligent.’<sup>17</sup>

### **Self–representation as a mode of resistance**

Representation, however simple it may appear, does involve an intriguing process as it is ‘an essential part of the process by which meaning is produced and exchanged between members of a culture.’<sup>18</sup> Representation, therefore, takes into account the use of language and also the signs and images that are associated with the things represented in order to convey ‘the same “cultural codes”’ so that people of the same cultural community may ‘share sets of concepts, images and ideas which enable them to think and feel, about the world, and thus to interpret the world, in roughly similar ways.’<sup>19</sup>

Creation of all sorts of binaries that exist in culture is likely to be generated from the assignment of meaning upon everything on the basis of representation. Similarly, bodily differences are represented from the same vein of thoughts. Tobin Siebers marks this inherent irony underlying such a thought in ‘Disability and the Theory of Complex Embodiment: For Identity Politics in a New Register’ where he says: ‘It is not the fact of physical difference that matters, then, but the representation attached to difference – what makes the difference identifiable. Representation is the difference that makes a difference.’<sup>20</sup> It is against this narrowed-down

## TRIVIUM

representation of disability in literature that disabled women placate themselves by taking up the onus of self-representation through their life narratives as in *Skin Stories*. These personal outbursts, in the form of story, aid them to be in control of their own images which are otherwise fractured and made invisible just like their disability.

Malini Chib exposes the social taboo associated with sexual desires of disabled women in her story, 'Think that sex and disability don't mix? Think again.' She narrates how sex talk among close female friends is absolutely natural but turns to be quite uneasy if it is to be thought in case of a disabled girl:

But, if, God forbid, a woman in a wheelchair were to express an interest in any sexual talk, the quick retort she would get, wither through looks or words, would be: Sex? You? But you are a disabled!<sup>21</sup>

What Chib utters from her personal experience is corroborated by Tom Shakespeare. He too finds how 'disabled people are desexualised' by propagating the 'myth of asexuality' or 'the disability sexuality taboo.'<sup>22</sup> But this cultural bias gets multiplied several times when it comes to disabled women in comparison to disabled men for, they do not require to prove themselves as feminine, that is to say, the ability to uphold ideals of beauty, and care. Chib draws attention to this factual truth while tearing up the 'great hypocrisy' that lies in the Indian society :

In India, sex as a topic is mostly out of bounds, particularly for women. Schools do not have proper sex education. Most marriages are still arranged, so there is the expectation that sex comes with marriage.

In this scenario, people with disabilities who live in India can forget about sex. Even the connection of disability with sex is taboo. Yet, studies show that women and girls with disabilities are highly vulnerable to sexual assault. So, if you're disabled you are not even allowed to think about sex, but others have the license to assault you. That's our great hypocrisy.

When it comes to marriage, women with disabilities fare badly because women are still expected to take care of their husband's every need, and no matter how independent they are, women with disabilities are not seen as capable enough to do so. Usually, disabled men are better off- many more able to get married because they don't have to deal with the same stigma that women with

## Disability and Feminism: An Intersectional Reading of *Skin Stories*

disabilities do.<sup>23</sup>

The disabled female, as the Feminist Disability theory argues, is represented as ‘pure body, unredeemed by mind or spirit’ who is supposed to be ‘dependent, incomplete, vulnerable and incompetent.’<sup>24</sup> Such representation, thus, inscribes meaning upon disabled female bodies that in turn gets culturally validated and practised. This kind of ‘redundant and expendable’<sup>25</sup> perspective pervades all creative domains and brings out the representation of disability as ‘a spectacle of embodied otherness’<sup>26</sup> that must be shunned at all cost. Chib voices this while contending over the notion of ‘perfection’:

Romantic love, sex, and sexual intimacy is a celebration of ‘perfection’. In film after film, ad after ad, image after image, you are subjected to beautiful people falling in love, lusty for one another, getting intimate, having sex. Think hard and tell me, do you remember even a single image where a disabled person got intimate with someone? Forget intimacy; have you ever seen in an advertisement, film, or any other such medium anybody whose body deviates from the ‘ideal’ even fascinating about sex?<sup>27</sup>

Stereotypes about disability relegate real disabled people into a realm of invisibility— their representation is a deliberate attempt to show how ‘disability is located solely in biology,’<sup>28</sup> and thus ‘sexual disenfranchisement’<sup>29</sup> of disabled people is undoubtedly justified. Chib interrogates such stigmatized notion of the ableist culture which is far from acknowledging a disabled person as ‘partnered or sexually active’.<sup>30</sup>

In the real world, sex and a disabled body apparently do not mix. We disabled folk have other important things to think about, don’t we? Like how do I stop spontaneous drooling? How do I say one word without slurring? How do I relieve myself in a restaurant that not only has cramped toilet but where the toilet is inaccessible....

Where is the time to think of sex or intimacy? Right? Wrong.

If you are a sexual person, craving intimacy is something that’s part of you. You don’t have to consciously think about it. Do you need to be told to think about sex? Well, neither do we. So, what if our hands and legs don’t move as yours do, or we can’t see, or we use wheelchairs, or we can’t hold a hand even if we do get a hand to hold? You see, people forget that the most sexual organ in the human body

## TRIVIUM

is the brain. If it is intact, I believe that we will think of sex, whether we want to or not. But that is not how the world sees us.<sup>31</sup>

The underrepresented perspective of disabled women thus finds expression through their personal narratives – their self-representation truly poses a resistance, ‘a form of self-advocacy, role modelling and (a display of) disability pride.’<sup>32</sup>

### **Disabled Female body/mind as a ‘misfit’**

The body, particularly physical, always remains in a state of flux and undergoes transformation during its interaction with the world. This dynamic encounter between the flesh and the environment produces the notions of ‘fitting and misfitting.’<sup>33</sup> As socio-cultural meanings are thought to be inscribed on the body as a deviation from cultural values, they are meant to classify the bodies by marking them as either normal or ‘medically abnormal.’<sup>34</sup> Thus, bodies that do not conform to the norm of the ideal beauty are designated as deviants or ‘outcasts’ or ‘misfits’ as Garland-Thomson suggests. This concept of ‘misfit’ and the situation of ‘misfitting’ seek to ‘elaborate a materialist feminist understanding of disability’<sup>35</sup> that in turn explains how the body of the disabled woman is ‘a product of a conceptual triangulation’<sup>36</sup> For Garland-Thomson, as she states in *Extraordinary Bodies*, the disabled woman’s body

is a cultural third term, defined by the original of the masculine figure and the feminine figure. Seen as the opposite of the masculine figure, but also imagined as the antithesis of the normal woman, the figure (or the body) of the disabled female is thus ambiguously positioned both inside and outside the category of woman.<sup>37</sup>

Disabled women writers of *Skin Stories* attempt to defamiliarize the predominant notions about the disabled body which is then viewed in contrast to both the male and the female able-body. Being female on one hand and disabled on the other, the disabled women are supposed to play the role of the ‘quintessential sick ones.’<sup>38</sup> They can therefore be pitied, admonished, criticized and taunted as the disabled female body falls short of the standards of being normal and beautiful. Such an experience is narrated by Parvathy Gopakumar in her story ‘Fake it till you make it: Surviving the terrifying loneliness of being a young person with an amputation.’ Her sudden change in life from being a ‘normal’ girl to that of an amputee makes her face the reality of her existence as a disabled girl.

## Disability and Feminism: An Intersectional Reading of *Skin Stories*

The very moment she has attempted to re-enter the realm of the able-bodied, she is reminded of her new disabled identity:

On my first day back, during break, my friends sat me and were updating me about the stuff that I had missed- who had a crush on whom, which classmates were fighting with each other. The conversation somehow reached the topic of what their families thought about my amputation. 'So, my father was telling my mother how it would've been better if Paru just died rather than go through all of this.' my friends said. 'You know what? My parents were saying the same. My mother was saying that death would've been better than living as a woman with one hand,' said another friend.<sup>39</sup>

The notion of ideal womanhood is another imposition on the disabled women who are expected to conform to the feminine roles. Nandini Ghosh points out this disciplining nature of society in her essay, 'Experiencing the Body: Femininity, Sexuality and Disabled Women in India':

Disabled girls are socialized, like all other girls around them, into learning the ideals of physical appearance, appropriate feminine compartment, acceptable behavioral and other qualities and social expectations of their present and future roles.

These ideological constructs are further concretized through the social interactions within families and communities. While families silently but subtly direct disabled girls towards more of conservative modes of living, the larger community outside generally expresses its pity and disgust openly.<sup>40</sup>

Parvathy Gopakumar too encounters such socializing process with her identity as a 'brand new disabled person in town' that fetched her more attention which was meant to inspire her for becoming 'the ideal bharatiya naari with one hand.'<sup>41</sup> She recapitulates her reception everywhere and how everyone tried to prepare her to do her future gender roles by overcoming her flaw:

Wherever I went, people used to point at my hand and talk in hushed tones. Some had the courage to come up and talked to me about 'condition', some couldn't contain their amusement at the sight of a child amputee and, on top of that, would speculate about the body part I had just lost. Everyone had some advice or the other for making my life easy, none of which helped me at all. In fact, all of them left me feeling more confused than ever.

I remember being bombard with motivational videos all sides. "That video I sent to you last week? Did you see that woman doing all the



## TRIVIUM

household chores with one hand? Told you, all is well or X person's relative Y doesn't have a hand but she manages to drape a saree beautifully, you have nothing to worry about."<sup>42</sup>

There is no denial that physical disability entails the dimension of gender in it as cited by D. Das and S.B. Agnihotri in the essay, 'Physical Disability: Is there a Gender Dimension'. On analyzing the rehabilitation policies for the disabled with particular emphasis on visual, hearing, speech and locomotor disabilities, Das and Agnihotri state that:

If male and the female population were 'identical in all respects', the incidence of female and male disability would be equal, i.e., the sex differentials in the incidence of disability would be zero... But male and female segments are not 'identical in all respects. They are differentiated both socially and physiologically and incidence of disability are associated with both physiological and social factors.'<sup>43</sup>

Prevalence of a gender dimension to disability becomes glaring as 'ideologies of feminine attractiveness represent impaired bodies and disabled women as undesirable, unfit ... to assume roles of wife and mother.'<sup>44</sup> This is the reason why accepting a disabled daughter-in-law is nightmarish. Viral Modi exemplifies this social taboo about disabled female body through her tale, 'My abusive ex made me believe that no one else would want a woman who uses a wheelchair.' The reaction of the boy's mother to her proposal of marrying him clarifies the socio-cultural discrimination quite blatantly:

Are you serious? Look at yourself, Kavita. You're on a wheelchair. Do you think that I want a daughter-in-law who cannot do things by herself and that I have to help her, when she should be taking care of me? When Nayan told me that he's dating someone in a wheelchair, I told him to do whatever he wants, but just don't escalate this to marriage. I do not want a daughter-in-law in a wheelchair.'<sup>45</sup>

It also raises the issue of ethics of care which is majorly suggested as the sole responsibility of women and hence cast disabled women as the objects of care<sup>46</sup> thereby justifying their rejection.

The disabled female body when interpreted from Butlerian perspective cannot be viewed merely as a 'mute facticity',<sup>47</sup> i.e. a fact of nature. Rather like gender, it is produced by discourses and does not exist prior to its cultural inscription which means there is no 'natural (disabled female) body.'<sup>48</sup> In 'Critical Divides' Judith Butler's Body Theory and the

## Disability and Feminism: An Intersectional Reading of *Skin Stories*

Questioning of Disability’, Ellen Samuels engaged Butler’s insights into the central question of what constitutes the body as disabled. She writes:

Butler’s work in *Bodies That Matter* extends her concern with body performativity to focus upon a “domain of abjected bodies” as she repeatedly inquires which physical and discursive conditions render bodies legible and/or livable.<sup>49</sup>

Hence, it is the regulatory norms or conditions which determine bodies and, those who abide or fail to, are respectively labelled as abject or non-normative based on ‘the twin ideologies of normalcy and beauty.’<sup>50</sup> A feeling of ‘shame’ or ‘guilt’ is perpetuated on these bodies to engender the process of normalization. In her story ‘Navigating healthcare as a Dalit, non- binary person with debilitating social anxiety,’ Rachelle Bharati Chandra shares how her bodily variation – of being hairy and black – was treated with disgust. Being a non-binary person, as she identifies herself, her psyche and physical body were scarred by social stigmatization as her body did not conform to the normative:

Being compared to a cis boy and having more hair for a cis girl might be a way that my body expressed that I have aspects of both – boy and girl. But clearly, society does not want to hear about this. Gendered products to groom young boys and girls are rampant. Even Ayurvedic formulations of cosmetics include turmeric for girl babies because hair needs to be tamed out of our system. There is deep shame associated with being black and having hair, and non-binary bodies especially bear the brunt of this pain because society decides who we should be.<sup>51</sup>

Normalizing dysfunctional bodies through the medicalization of appearance is a means to perpetuate the exclusionary cultural attitude as well as to justify ‘a eugenic undertaking.’<sup>52</sup> And this is why a woman with hairy and black body is deemed ugly and forced to undergo scrubbing which is akin to the concept of ‘aesthetic surgery’<sup>53</sup> as called by Sander L. Gilman for enforcing feminine standard of beauty. Rachelle Bharati Chandran relates her painful memories of scrubbing which acts as an instance of body shaming:

### **Grappling with and acceptance of Disability Identity**

Identity as a vantage point of the self is never, as Stuart Hall argues, ‘transparent’ or ‘unproblematic’ and not even ‘an already accomplished

## TRIVIUM

historical fact.’<sup>54</sup> It is rather ‘a production which is never complete, always in process, and always constituted within, not outside representation.’<sup>55</sup> What it therefore insinuates is how the power of representational politics operates in legitimating cultural dominance of stigmatizing bodies, based on ‘a consequence of social comparison’. This in turn controls as well as impacts formation of meaning about the identity of the self as ‘every regime of representation is a regime of power’<sup>56</sup> which cannot occur ‘without relations of difference’<sup>57</sup> Born from this ‘dilemma of difference stigma generates as ‘a form of social categorization’<sup>58</sup> for marking out and maintaining identity of one group as authentic over the other – just as male over female, able-bodied over disabled, heterosexual over homosexual or queer or bisexual and many such strands.

Prioritizing one identity over the other is ‘not an essence but a positioning.’<sup>59</sup> The disabled women writers coming to terms with culture’s essentialist view of the body and its discriminatory process of meaning-making about the self, have found expression through their life writings in *Skin Stories* (2019). In almost all the stories, they vocalize the reductionist purview of society which observes their bodily existence in the light of ability system and renders them as disabled. It is through their acceptance of their own body and illness that these women writers consolidate their disability identity and subvert the dominant identity politics.

Unmana Datta’s encounter with what she calls ‘temporary disability’ due to her ‘lazy’ body raises pertinent questions about the notion of able-bodiedness. Although without any apparent enervating physical or mental conditions, Unmana would feel tired very easily with frequent fever and stomach upsets. This has made her earn the status of being lazy as a mark of her identity:

Lazy. A word that has followed me throughout my life. It was said to me by my parents, by friends, until it became an incessant echo in my internal monologues. Until it became self-identification, a self-fulfilling prophecy.<sup>60</sup>

The word lazy is not just a description. As she grows up, Unmana understands this greater reality associated with the term ‘lazy’ and hence rectified her prior idea by telling: ‘I was wrong. “Lazy” is a value judgement, especially in a capitalist, materialist world that values productivity so highly.’<sup>61</sup>

Having internalized laziness as an essential part of herself, Unmana

## Disability and Feminism: An Intersectional Reading of *Skin Stories*

thought herself to be worthless and went from one doctor to another in the hope of better result. But no medical intervention could diagnose her correctly and so she continued having symptoms as a cause of food reaction for which she blamed herself:

Depression. Anxiety. Headaches. Restless leg syndrome. Backaches. Trembling in my hands and lips. Slurring words. The inability to concentrate. SO many things that I had thought were my flaws- clumsiness, laziness, irritability, weakness, low motivation- were actually symptoms.<sup>62</sup>

The growing assertion of negative self-image gets finally transformed for Unmana when she comes to learn about the ideas of ‘temporary disability’ and ‘invisible disability.’<sup>63</sup> What the ability system thus consciously perpetuated is the most pernicious consequence of bearing a stigma. It makes ‘stigmatized people develop the same perpetual problems that non-stigmatized people have. They being to see themselves and their life through the stigma.’<sup>64</sup> This too is voiced by Unmana as she writes:

I came across the term ‘temporary disability’. A disability you don’t always have, which doesn’t make it less real when it appears. Another term helped: ‘invisible disability’. A disability that others can’t see, and may therefore seem less real, even to yourself. In private, these terms helped me come to terms with my body, to stop blaming myself for not being able to do everything healthy people around me could.<sup>65</sup>

Her changed outlook towards her body has made her accept and trust her body and develop a sense of disability identity:

My body had never seemed really part of me. In the last few years, I have learnt to know it, to even love it instead of resenting its limitations.<sup>66</sup>

Sense of belongingness to her body has even led Unmana to the ‘idea that bodies cannot be conveniently categorized into abled and disabled. That abilities can ebb and flow, morph and disappear and reappear’<sup>67</sup> She thus creates her disability identity by shoving off the burden of trying to have an impervious body.

With the feminist disability theorists’ critique of the view that ‘identity is lodged in the body,’<sup>68</sup> the identity category of woman can no more be viewed from the perspective of a woman as ever only a woman. She is rather seen to occupy multiple subject positions on being marked by

## TRIVIUM

several cultural identity categories.<sup>69</sup> Disability of woman thus acts as ‘one such identity vector that disrupts the unity of the classification woman and challenges the primacy of gender as a monolithic category.’<sup>70</sup> On the one hand, disability ‘intensifies and attenuates cultural scripts of femininity’<sup>71</sup> and exposes ‘the fluidity of all identity’<sup>72</sup> on the other.

### **Literary Activism and Disability Culture**

Activism, that includes vigorous protests and marches to initiate changes in socio-political outlook towards marginalized groups, primarily centres round community-based actions. With growing awareness of the disabled people about their stigmatized social position, they tend to form a disability culture with the aim of challenging the individualization and medicalization of disability, the essentialist and determinist definitions of disability, the idolization of ‘normalcy’, and negative stereotyping and exclusion of the disabled for promoting a sense of common identity and uniting disabled people under one umbrella.<sup>73</sup> Steven E. Brown, co-founder of the Institute on Disability Culture, described the culture of disability in the following words:

People with disabilities have forged a group identity. We share a common bond of resilience. We generate art, music, literature, and other expression of our lives and our culture art, infused from our experience of disability. Most importantly, we are proud of ourselves as people with disabilities. We claim our disabilities pride as part of our identity(...), we are who we are: We are people with disabilities.<sup>74</sup>

Forming the disability culture is an expression of accepting disability identity by people with disabilities. This also provides them with a sense of consolidation and togetherness against larger social odds. The arenas which the feminist disability theory has included in the activism are marches, protests, the breast cancer Fund poster campaign, actions groups.<sup>75</sup> Rosemarie Garland-Thomson even gives two less popular suggestions for activism. They are: ‘One practice is the use of disabled fashion models, and the other is academic tolerance.’<sup>76</sup> For her, the first practice is much controversial as its critique of the consumer culture is complex, while the second one is subtler and more effective as it acts as a medium for ‘integrating education, in the very broadest sense of the term.’<sup>77</sup>

## Disability and Feminism: An Intersectional Reading of *Skin Stories*

Modelled on the concept of academic activism, as suggested by Garland-Thomson, this study proposes a similar concept of literary activism, a form of activism in the literary domain and mental health variations irrespective of caste, class, gender, religion, sex, nationality, and other factors to form a literary disability culture. By literary activism, is meant the literary endeavours of the women writers of *Skin Stories* who have put their lived experiences of disability and illness, their treatment of their family and society, their fighting back in dark days of life, their acceptance of this disability identity by declining the shame and guilt imposed upon them for their condition, their participation in real life activism in a brave and powerful manner. Their articulation in the form of personal stories acts as a life-sustaining method of literary activism. It broadens their domain of political or legal activism so as to include a larger audience who will be able to relate with them and become aware of their perspective without being misrepresented. Literary activism may be thus seen as a literary resistance put up against the cultural misrepresentation in literature by making the slogan 'personal is political' indeed true.

What is undoubtedly significant about this kind of literary activism is that it gives scope to these disabled women writers to challenge their portrayal as inspirational objects just because they can successfully partake in all things that ableist culture thinks impossible for them to do. In her story, "I'm a woman traveler with a disability, and my Travel Goals don't exist to inspire you", Antara Telang voices how social taboo is always forced upon women travelers and how it gets accelerated for a woman with prosthesis:

When any young woman sets out to travel alone or with a female companion, she's subjected to a bunch of- usually unwarranted-comments. These range from safety related (I'd hope you're not taking late night buses!), from words of caution (Don't talk to random men!) to words that put on a pedestal (That's inspirational! I wish I had the guts to do it too!). When one is a disabled woman travelling on a budget, you can only imagine how much these comments are amplified.<sup>78</sup>

Portrayal of women with disabilities has always been in binaries-either in terms of heroism or helplessness. Preeti Singh backlashes against these two dehumanizing lenses through her story entitled 'As a woman with a disability, I'm either seen as helpless or heroic.' Her outcry 'I am neither an object of pity nor heroism'<sup>79</sup> gives testimony to her exposure to varying

## TRIVIUM

degree of comments that have impacted her over the years. Having grown up with cerebral palsy, a congenital disease, she writes about people's outlook towards her. The paradoxes of bravery or pity thus associated with a disabled person are a means of objectification, i.e. a tool to differentiate and exclude them from the discourse of normalcy. Preeti highlights how both these aspects proved to be a pernicious influence upon her:

People with disabilities are paraded around with thoughts like:

“What’s your excuse?” and “If they can, you can.” I simply don’t relate to this approach. As a person with a disability, I don’t want to be a figure of bravery. I want to simply be accepted as I am. The lens of bravery prevents people from really seeing me- the person who might be dealing with difficult mental health, experiencing heartbreak, or simply having a bad day. If people want to talk to me about the work, I do to make my country more accessible and accepting. I’m happy to talk about this. But if my achievement is simply waking up in the morning, this makes me feel discriminated against, not celebrated.

Having disabilities has its challenges, but it’s not bad, and it’s certainly not sad. Like the rest of the society, people with disabilities are simply carrying on with their lives. Whatever we are being pushed away because we are pitied or pushed forward because we are used as objects of ‘inspiration’, both ways, our common humanity is denied. Let us be who we are: complex, capable of many things, both good and bad. Realize that the most extraordinary thing about us is that we are ordinary.<sup>80</sup>

*Skin Stories* truly becomes the ‘River of Story’<sup>81</sup> carrying stories of those who are labelled as the Other and left out from everyday sphere. These narratives being written from the insider’s perspective resist all prevalent notions about women with disabilities, chronic pain and illnesses. This collection of personal essays reflects the intersection of disability and feminism in order to demystify assumptions about sexuality and ability of disabled women who are often denied both the full status of women and of human beings by an ableist, patriarchal culture.

### Endnotes :

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- <sup>3</sup> Susan Bordo, 'Feminism, postmodernism, and gender skepticism' *Feminism/Postmodernism* ed. Linda Nicholson (New York: Routledge, 1990), pp. 133-156.
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- <sup>7</sup> Alexa Schriempf, '(Re)fusing the Amputated Body: An Interactionist Bridge for Feminism and Disability', *Hypatia* 16.4(2001): 53-79. JSTOR, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/3810783>. Accessed 16.03.2021.
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- <sup>10</sup> Schriempf, '(Re)fusing the Amputated Body.'
- <sup>11</sup> The need to incorporate disability experience in Feminism gives rise to Feminist Disability Theory. For more inclusive understanding of it, see J. Morris ed. *Encounters with Strangers: Feminism and Disability* (The Women's Press Ltd. 1999).
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- <sup>17</sup> Garland-Thomson. 'Integrating Disability, Transforming Feminist Theory.'
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## TRIVIUM

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- <sup>38</sup> Garland-Thomson, 'Integrating Disability, Transforming Feminist Theory.'
- <sup>39</sup> Parvathy Gopakumar, 'Fake it till you make it: Surviving the terrifying loneliness of being a young person with an amputation', *Skin Stories*. Shreyalla Anasuya ed. (Point of View: New Delhi, 2019), pp.87-89.
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## Disability and Feminism: An Intersectional Reading of *Skin Stories*

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