



GENDER AND DISABILITY: AN ANALYSIS OF THE FILMS FORREST GUMP AND JOHNNY BELINDA

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Abstract

We are living in a world of opportunities and competition. Regardless of gender discrimination, both men and women are exploring various fields. But those with disabilities are sometimes denied the same privileges as ordinary people enjoy. Although men and women with disabilities are subjected to exploitation because of their disabilities, women with disabilities are subjected to face double discrimination based on gender and also based on their disability. This paper is an attempt to analyse gender and disability with special reference to the American movies Forrest Gump and Johnny Belinda. Discrimination against women can be found in the disabled category also. Though Forrest Gump depicts the successful life of a disabled man after facing a lot of struggles, Johnny Belinda depicts the pathetic life of a young deaf-mute girl who is physically and mentally abused by society. This paper focuses on the different experiences and discrimination among disabled men and disabled women, with special concern for these two movies.

Keywords

Double marginalization, gender, disability, social segregation, discrimination.

Introduction

“Disability never holds anyone back, disability is not something that people need to overcome. The barriers that exist are created by society.”

-Haben Girma

All human beings are born with equal dignity and rights. However, the society in which we live creates certain categories and distinguishes between the people. Disability is one such category that distinguishes a special group of people from certain activities. Any condition that makes it more difficult for a person to engage in specific activities or enjoy equal access in a particular society is referred to as a disability. A combination of cognitive, developmental, intellectual, mental, physical, or sensory issues can all lead to disabilities. A person may be born with a disability or develop one over their lifetime.

Disability is common to any gender. However, the discrimination based on disability experienced by each gender is different. Both men and women with disability are considered ignored and powerless groups in society. But, women with disabilities are being double marginalised on account of their disability and their gender. The patriarchal society considers that men are more powerful and capable than women. Even if men have some kind of physical or mental malfunction, they are supposed to be more successful compared to women. Women are considered as the voiceless group by the patriarchal society. So when disabled men achieve success after severe struggles and discrimination, disabled women still strive hard for their existence. They are often subjected to poverty and social isolation, and may also have limited social, political and economic opportunities, and access to basic amenities. Disabled women are more vulnerable to physical and sexual abuse and violence also.

The objective of this paper is to analyse gender and disability in the movies *Forrest Gump* and *Johnny Belinda* through disability studies and feminism. Even though several laws granted gender equality and women empowerment, women are still at the walls of discrimination. In the case of disabled women, the condition is even worse. In the movie *Johnny Belinda*, the young deaf-mute girl was denied access to education; and depicted as a victim of sexual abuse. But on the other side, *Forrest Gump* depicted a disabled man achieving success in whatever things he do. Everything in the life of Gump shows how easy it is to be successful – the main thing to achieve success is to be perseverant and to do what you consider appropriate without thinking about yourself. But, on the other side, *Belinda* struggles hard even for her existence. Moreover, her motherhood is also questioned in the movie. This paper is surely helpful for disabled women who confront social isolation and sexual abuse, and who fight for rights and equality in the patriarchal society.

Through this paper, we will be able to understand this discrimination based on gender with people having certain kinds of disabilities. Both men and women, who are mentally or physically disabled are treated differently by society. But, in the case of women, they are considered not only as a socially invisible group, but their situation is also worse than that of other non-disabled women and men with impairments. So they are subjected to double discrimination in the society due to their gender and also because of their disability. When *Belinda MacDonald* tries to climb up certain ladders of empowerment by attaining basic education and freedom, she has been pulled down from achieving success through rape and subsequent pregnancy. On the other hand, *Forrest Gump's* mother insisted to make him study in public school rather than attending a special school even if he has low IQ than other children. Even though he is not intelligent as *Belinda MacDonald*, he is depicted as a rich and successful man in the society.

This paper is a close reading of the gender discrimination against disabled people with special reference to the American movies *Forrest Gump* and *Johnny Belinda*, based on the theory of disability studies and feminism. The study focuses on how disabled woman is treated differently, and how they are subjected to marginalization and exploitation in society.

Disabled feminists have claimed that disability studies have ignored the experience of disabled women. Numerous studies have been conducted on the different ways in which disability and gender are approached, studied and analysed by scholars internationally. Vigdis Mathisen Olsvik provided a study of violence and abuse against Norwegian women with physical disabilities in “Vulnerable, Exposed and Invisible: A Study of Violence and Abuse against Women with Physical Disabilities”. The purpose of the study was to develop a typology of violence, analyse the context of abuse, and determine the effects of violence and abuse on the lives of disabled women. US scholar Cheryl G. Najarian investigated the mothering experiences of college-educated Deaf mothers and the relationship between this experience and their identities as Deaf in “Deaf Mothers, Maternal Thinking and Intersections of Gender and Ability”. Rachel Mayes, Gwynnyth Llewellyn and David McConnell presented a phenomenological study of the experience of pregnancy for women with intellectual disabilities in “Misconception: The Experience of Pregnancy for Women with Intellectual Disabilities”. This research is the first of its kind in Australia as well as internationally. A US scholar, Rachel E. Lovell, conducted a study in 2006

in Sweden, in which she analysed gender differences in the effects that long-term illness has on occupational careers. Another study has explored the experiences of disabled women in relation to preventative health; this paper, “Screened Out: Women with Disabilities and Preventive Health” by Kelley Johnson, Ria Strong, Lynne Hillier and Marian Pitts, brings attention to the numerous barriers that disabled women confront in order to get healthcare. Helen Meekosha examines the intersection between race, ethnicity, class, gender and disability in the Australian Body Politic. Apart from all these studies that have been conducted earlier, this paper attempts to analyse the differences in the treatment of disabled women compared to disabled men in society with special reference to two American movies Forrest Gump and Johnny Belinda.

Analysis

“Prejudice is a far greater problem than any impairment; discrimination is a bigger obstacle to overcome than any disability”

– Paul K. Longmore

Disability is any condition that makes it more difficult for a person to engage in specific activities or enjoy equal access within a given society. However, it is not a tool to measure and discriminate against any person’s abilities. Discrimination faced by women in each field is increasing day by day. Although women have achieved success in many fields and proved equivalent to men, they are being discriminated against in some way or another. Of these, the case of women with disability is worth mentioning. They are subjected to violence, abuse, inequality and exploitation both from their family and also from society. They are considered as the powerless and marginalized groups in society. The problematic depiction of disabled women with specific traits of sacrifice, revenge and villainy can be traced back from history onwards. Whether they are maidservants like Manthara (who was born disabled), princesses like Surpnakha (who was made disabled), or queens like Gandhari (who chose to be disabled), women with disabilities often receive a rough deal in the Mahabharata and the Ramayana. For instance, in the case of characters like Gandhari, Surpnakha and Manthara, they are not only double marginalized for being female and disabled, but also depicted negatively, and their stories reflected different types of biases and prejudices that are prevalent to this day.

Movies frequently try to give us a little glimpse of the vivid reality, either to alter our vision; or to enlighten us by giving some message. Though the movies Forrest Gump and Johnny Belinda portrays the story of disabled people, they both differ from each other in various ways. Though the disabled characters of both movies face some kind of problems in their life because of their disability, Forrest Gump gives us the message that no matter what disabilities you have, you would be able to become successful if you are ready to take challenges with a great amount of courage and hard work. But on the other side, Johnny Belinda depicts the difficulties a woman faces in society due to her physical malfunction. When comparing both movies, we can find that the intelligence power of Belinda is far better than Forrest Gump. Forrest Gump (played by Tom Hanks), having an IQ of 75 and physically malfunctioning, so-called idiot, becomes successful after going through his traumatic childhood by becoming a brilliant football career at college, and heroic military service as well as a fortune in his shrimping business. Even though he had the hardest times during his childhood days by confronting avoidance and mistreatment from other children, and also from society, he had his mother and girlfriend as the ever-supporting pillars throughout his life. Mrs Gump (Forrest’s mother) encourages Forrest to develop into a normal and self-assured adult by saying that "stupid is as stupid does." However, she truly understands that life has its ups and downs, imparting wisdom to Forrest by teaching lessons like "life was like a box of chocolates. You never know what you're gonna get". Forrest’s mother even sacrifices her body to the principal of a public school, in order to get an admission for Forrest, and thereby encouraging him by treating him as equal to other children. Here, Forrest’s mother wants her son to become a well-educated and successful man like normal people. She treats him without any discrimination or inequality. She gives him a proper education and encourages him by giving him many life lessons, which he feels are very useful for his entire life. Thus, Forrest always looks to his mother as a great role model. The director of this movie depicted Forrest as a disabled man, but with an eventually successful and rich life after much suffering and struggling. In this movie, we can find that his own parent becomes an ever-motivational and inspiring pillar to him.

But on the other hand, the depiction of Belinda MacDonald in the movie “Johnny Belinda” is quite different. Though both Belinda and Forrest are having single parents, Belinda’s father’s attitude is far away different from

Forrest's mother's. Belinda is portrayed as a deaf and dumb girl. It is from the family itself that a person would receive the first and best motivation. But in the case of Belinda, her father says "She's deaf and dumb man... There is no teaching her nothing." And the society even calls her a "dummy." Actually, Belinda is a girl with high intelligence and efficiency. But the society in which she lives marginalizes her and mocks her. She has been discriminated against not only as a woman but also as a disabled woman, thus confronting double marginalization. Belinda is from a remote farming and fishing community northwest of Nova Scotia which is occupied by a great scandal society. When a newly arrived doctor takes the initiative of educating Belinda, her father at first refuses, but later agrees to the idea. Here, we can find that, her father, who was supposed to be her greatest strength, treats her as a person with no qualities. He has no confidence and interest in raising her. It was the doctor that identifies her potential and begins teaching her sign language. Her personality along with her appearance then changes. Thus she starts to climb the ladders of success, after facing many struggles from her family and society. But at last, the stereotypical portrayal happens, in which she was subjected to rape by a local lad and becomes a mother by giving birth to a son. The scandal society gossips her about having an illicit relationship with the doctor, and they even question her motherhood. The community shuns the doctor and Belinda's family in moral outrage. The society also criticizes her and tries to detach her from her baby as she is a disabled woman. The society was very sure that the baby wouldn't be safe in Belinda's hands, and tries to take the child away. Thus they are questioning her motherhood. When the biological father tries to take away the baby by force, Belinda had to kill him as a means of self-defence.

In the movie "Johnny Belinda", the disabled woman Belinda was subjected to rape, murder, criticism, gossip, exploitation etc. She has been placed in a position far away from the disabled man Forrest Gump. Before the arrival of the doctor, Belinda was marginalized not only from the society; but also even from her own family. She is depicted as a voiceless and powerless woman, and there was no supporting pillars for her. Nobody was interested to recognize her potential and even tried to educate her. She was very much alienated from the outside world. She led a silent life by doing menial jobs and helping her father. But when she got a supporting figure, she learnt and acquired knowledge very fastly, and her whole personality developed. However, the lifespan towards acquiring success and empowerment was very short, and before becoming successful, she was pulled down to the ground by the society. The struggles she had to face in her life were so painful, and being a woman with disability, she was considered as a marginalised and voiceless woman. The stereotypical representation of women by the patriarchal society is imaginable, but those discrimination existing among disabled people also is a little bit difficult to digest. The experiences of both men and women having disabilities are very different, and the treatment of the society against them is very unbearable.

Conclusion

Discrimination based on gender is very crucial, but along with that, discrimination among disabled people is worse than anything. Both men and women with disabilities would receive many problems from the society. But the women with disabilities are subjected to double marginalization. The position of handicapped or disabled people in the normal world is heavily influenced by the vision created by people without disabilities and is based on the socially constructed statement that handicapped people are inferior, incomplete and unable to perform their functions in society. But with the depiction of Forrest Gump who has fought for recognition and for his place in the world for his whole life, thus achieving success was far unachievable for any other person in the world. It clearly shows how hard it may be for a handicapped person to exist in a world of stereotypes and segregation. The movie is a kind of motivation also because it shows that a person with a very low IQ manages to receive everything in his life so many people ever wanted, and it makes us realise that how well, disabled people can act in a society even if they are taken seriously and their handicap is neglected. But on the other side, the life of a disabled woman depicted in "Johnny Belinda" is pathetic. She was struggling very hard for her existence. She was subjected to rape and exploitation, and her motherhood was also questioned. She was denied the right to take care of her baby by the society. The patriarchy along with the scandal society neglected and marginalized her. She was given no voice and no rights.

Disabled people are also equal members of society and can contribute greatly to the world even if they are perceived and treated properly. They should be given opportunities for self-realization and should not be isolated for their disability. It is the right way for the unification of disabled and normal people and thus can change the society to an absolutely different level of its existence. Social segregation is the main enemy of disabled people that can worsen their life even more than the disability themselves, and for women, it is definitely a challenge to fight against the stereotypes.

It is the social stigmatization and the fixed stereotypes and classification of people on the basis of their gender, class, superiority and inferiority that acts as the main barrier to disabled people.

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