



From Marginalization to Empowerment: The Resilient Voice of Naseema Huzruk

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Abstract

A feminist disability approach posits a complex understanding of the cultural history of the body. By integrating feminism and disability studies in academia, the study goes beyond the explicit disability topics such as beauty, health, illness, aging, reproduction, and eugenics. It talks about the lived experience of oppression and suppression faced by a woman with a disability within a societal context. To prove the oppression and denial of human rights to a disabled woman, the memoir selected for study is Naseema Huzruk's The Incredible Story. It shows the powerful connection between class, gender, disability, and resilience. It talks about her frustration, anxiety, and stress, as she was not a person with a congenital disability; rather, hers is an acquired disability. The sudden state of becoming disabled, either by accident or by some biological condition, can lead to anxiety, which in turn produces obsessive-compulsive behavior. The excessive, senseless, and uncontrollable behaviors are compulsions; rather, excessive, useless, invasive thoughts are obsessions. Both obsession and compulsion seem to be the results of anxiety. With the sudden onset of disability, the human psyche undergoes disequilibrium and moves to various states such as shock and denial, grief and loss, sadness and depression, and physical discomfort and pain. However, the human mind will try to forget the unpleasant memories and avoid mental distress. It will eventually find ways to adapt and adjust, and later it will seek pride in one's identity as a person with a disability in an inclusive environment.

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The fields of disability studies and feminist theory have recently merged to provide a more profound understanding of the body, identity, and the marginalization of disabled people. Disability theorists posit that disability is not something to be labeled as a disorder, dysfunction, diminishment, deficiency, or inability; rather, it is a complex interplay between individual impairments and societal barriers. In spite of viewing disability as a medical condition or a personal issue, the intersection of feminist theory with disability studies focuses on how disabled women experience the world and, crucially, how society treats them. This article delves into how a woman, who became disabled accidentally, survives in this society, highlighting

her resilience and societal constraints of Naseema Huzruk in her memoir, *The Incredible Story* (2005). As a woman, she not only encompasses physical struggle but also the deeply rooted social stigma. She delves into the psychological and emotional impact of her physical condition, including how her family, community, and various institutions react to her new crucial condition she had to face.

Naseema Huzruk, in her memoir, reminisces not only about her stories of individual sorrow and loss but also about being a prominent voice against injustice towards disabled women. Her memoir reveals how disabled individuals face challenges and obstacles due to the intensifying effect of gendered cultural expectations, particularly women



whose worth is deeply rooted in physical structure, domestic chores, and economic dependence. Hazruk's experience elucidates how sympathetic gaze, the trope of burden, and institutional apathy are not random occurrences but embedded patterns of oppression. Through her self-determination and resilience, she resumes her identity beyond the label of "disabled," challenging social conventions and standing up for more accessible, compassionate, supportive, and equitable settings for women with disabilities.

The Social Model of Disability

The perspective of disability has progressed remarkably from being observed primarily through a disorder to a normative system. Historically, disability was seen as an individual concern, often associated with empathy, subservience, and deformity. The approach known as the medical model of disability focuses on fixing impairments within individuals, thereby fortifying the perception that the problem lies in the body or mind of the person. However, this approach fails to consider the social framework and historical accounts that exclude people with disabilities.

The social model of disability, developed in the late 20th century, viewed disability as a social oppression rather than the medical condition of a human being. The phrase 'social model of disability' was coined by Mike Oliver in his book article entitled, *The Handicapped Person: A New Perspective for Social Workers*. The perspective of this model is to draw attention to their limitations in terms of people's empowerment. The model also made a shift from the functional limitations of individuals caused by disabling environments, barriers, and cultures. In *Stigma: The Experience of Disability* (1966), Paul Hunt says, "Disabled people are set apart from the ordinary in ways that see them as posing a direct challenge to commonly held social values by appearing unfortunate, useless, different, oppressed, and sick" (146). The disabled people are considered sick, and most commonly they are secluded from the social duties and treated as useless human beings in the society.

This model has emphasized disability as a social condition. This model views disability as a form of

social inequality and considers disabled people as a distinct minority group, excluded from mainstream society. The other aspect of this model distinguishes between the terms 'impairment' and 'disability.' It is not the human impairment that leads to disability, but the societal practices of discrimination and marginalization that impose disability upon the affected individuals. The representation of disability in literature often serves as a tool to study the experiences of disabled individuals, revealing the complex web of discrimination and marginalization the disabled face. This perspective marked a dramatic shift from the medical model, which focuses on prognosis, cure, and rehabilitation. The social model instead demands structural change; it calls for accessible public spaces, equitable policies, and societal change in which disabled people are recognized and portrayed positively.

Representation of Disability in Literature

Disability, for a considerable time, remained absent from popular literature, especially from autobiographies. Stephen Kuusisto, in his memoir *Planet of the Blind* (1998), laments the lack of disability life writing during his childhood. He says, "In our town there are no discernible men or women with disabilities, with the exception of World War II veterans. There are no books about blind children or how to bring them up, no association of parents, or support materials" (13). But then, after many years, Anne Finger's autobiography, *Elegy for a Disease: A Personal and Cultural History of Polio* (2006), also suggests that a lack of disability life writing in childhood is a reason for her isolation. She says, "I had a sense that my problem was a social one, not an individual one... I lacked both a history and community" (236). This shows that writing about their own disability was limited in the past, and nobody felt very enthusiastic about telling the world about their disability; rather, they wanted to hide it from society. The fear of marginalization and the treatment as "other" stopped them from writing about their disability. But in the late 21st century, there has been an explosion of life writing and writing about disabilities. For example, 'autobiography' had the account of an autistic persona. Labeling such literary works as 'misery literature' or 'nobody



memoir' has created an atmosphere of inclusivity, openness, and acceptance of the disabled in the midst of a community and an empathetic view of their sufferings, trauma, impairment, abuse, etc. Then a change in terrain occurred when the writers of memoir began to recognize their power of writing, and they wanted to use it to establish their rights or to start an organization or to use it as a key to protest against societal inequity. Quite soon it came to be recognized as a form of protest literature.

Emergence of Disability Memoirs

The late 20th century and early 21st centuries witnessed a significant change in how disability was narrated. The rise of disability life writing, especially from the 1990s onward, brought autobiographical accounts to the forefront. Works like Temple Grandin's *Thinking in Pictures* (1995) and Donna Williams' *Nobody Nowhere* (1992) personalized neurodiverse experiences and helped to shift public perceptions. These narratives invited shared humanity over pity, emphasizing strengths, prioritizing capacity, and valuing ability. They disarticulated stereotypical depictions and acknowledged disability as a part of human diversity. As disability memoirs gained popularity, they evolved from strong personal confessions into compelling tools for protest. These stories created and gave disabled individuals a forum to question and normalize disparities, cultural marginalization, and embedded exclusion. Writers like Harriet McBryde Johnson, Eli Clare, and Judy Heumann used memoirs to advocate disability justice while also celebrating complexity and embracing multiplicity. Life writing fueled activism—challenging biased perspectives, redefining representations, and building community cohesion among disabled communities.

An Indian Voice in Disability Life Writing: Naseema Huzruk's Memoir

Naseema Huzruk's *The Incredible Story* is an autobiography of a disabled woman from Maharashtra. The text was originally written in Marathi by Naseema; later it was translated into English by Aasha Deodhar in 2005. In her autobiography, she talks about so many issues, such as the lack of accessible environments for the

disabled, the double marginalization faced by her as a woman and especially as a disabled woman, her plan for a rehabilitation center to help the afflicted, their poverty, and the employability issues for the disabled. In particular, she claims how she has been pushed into victimhood for being a disabled Muslim woman and denied the job despite being the most qualified candidate. As Simi Linton in her work, *Claiming Disability: Knowledge and Identity* (1998), says, "Studying disability is a prism through which one can gain broader understanding of society and human experience" (118). Similarly, the writing of Naseema helps us to understand the most difficult scenario faced by disabled people before the 1995 Disability Legislation Act (PWD) in India.

Naseema's autobiography not only sheds light on her personal experiences, struggles, and abuses she faced but also discusses the structural barriers, a reminder of the need for accessible environments, disability sports, and inclusive education. By the term "inclusive education," she means education to disabled people along with those non-disabled children. After so many hardships, she started an organization called "Helpers of the Handicapped" in Maharashtra, which happens to be one of the pioneering rehabilitation centers for the disabled. Tobin Siebers, in the book *Disability Theory* (2008), emphasizes that disability is not a personal or individual defect but rather a consequence of a disabling social and built environment. He avers, "Disability studies as a minority identity that must be addressed not as personal misfortune or individual defect but as the product of a disabling social and built environment" (3).

Born in 1950, Naseema is one of the eight siblings to her father, the superintendent of the Central Exercise Department, and a homemaker mother. As an enthusiastic child, she excelled in her studies, sports, and extracurricular activities. Later the shift in her life and also in her parents' life came when she had injured her spine at a point in time, and that set her position in her wheelchair. The extreme back pain, cramps, and the doctors giving good remarks on all the reports of her scan, the relentless and unbearable pain continued to exacerbate her frustration, stress, and anxiety. As a compelling story about her unique personal experience, or usually



writing a memoir, it typically requires a writer to delve into the past to recall the events. Naseema says, "Today, even recalling all this in order to write a book, I feel an uneasy stress. I remember my days at the Wanless Hospital, where I went through heaps and heaps of pain" (Huzruk 22).

The human mind is frustrated if it faces many obstacles or stumbling blocks during the course of everyday life. It is a natural response to unmet needs. If the obstacle gets prolonged in the future too, it becomes an existential threat. The needs and expectations to overcome barriers will push the human psyche in many directions, which leads to conflict. Marschark, in his book *Psychological Development of Deaf Children* (1993), talks about a strong relationship between physical and mental functioning in a human body. He insists that any physical deficiency will disturb the overall psychological well-being, and it will disturb the natural and smooth functioning of the psyche.

Education, Empowerment, and Everyday Acts of Resistance

As a disabled woman, she faces various bodily restrictions that impact her daily life and engagements. Naseema grapples with her new identity as a paraplegic. The inner turmoil is further fueled by the societal stigma and discrimination that perpetuates ableism, leaving her feeling isolated and marginalized. The disability culture legitimizes an unequal distribution of resources and power within a biased social and cultural environment. Taking into account these criteria, disability can be broadly viewed in four aspects. The first is the system of interpreting and disciplining bodily variations, the second is the relationship between the disability and the environment, the third is the set of practices that distinguish the able-bodied and the disabled, and the fourth is describing the inherent instability of the embodied self. Naseema, in her memoir, claims, "Since my childhood days, I secretly nurtured an inferiority complex, which could have become monstrous after I became physically disabled" (Huzruk 32).

The internalized shame and self-doubt easily consume her, but still, with the support of her family members, she manages to survive along with her

profound thoughts of death. After the death of her father, the family's financial condition worsened, and Naseema considered herself a burden to her family. "Either way I was a burden, and I wished every day that I was dead" (33). As she was struggling to adjust to and adapt to her new identity as a wheelchair user, she met a gentle man by the name of Babu Kaka, a wheelchair user but full of josh and happiness, which is not expected from a physically challenged man. Babu Kaka embodied a sense of freedom and liberation that Naseema had yet to discover. "I don't remember what he said, but I do remember being overwhelmed at seeing a man in a wheelchair smile so happily and talk" (38). This person motivated Naseema and also insisted that she should also participate in sports and also help disabled people in Kolhapur to excel in their studies and other activities. Naseema almost forgot the fact that she was in a wheelchair as she was listening to Babu Kaka. With the help of this man, Naseema got admission to Gokhale College, and she graduated with a BA honors degree. She felt a kind of enthusiasm and encouragement that helped her to discover the world beyond her physical limitations. Not only had she excelled in her academic endeavors, but also in her cooking skills. She helped her siblings by sitting in a wheelchair and starting to cook. "Finally I was some use and able to shoulder a part of the household responsibility. I could even wash the dishes" (40). In 1996, she was even invited by an organization in Mumbai to give a talk on "How a Paraplegic Woman Should Live," so she readily accepted the invitation. Slowly Naseema turned out to be an inspiration for many wheelchair-bound persons.

In addition to her advocacy work, her interest in sports shaped her perspective on inclusivity and accessibility. In the year 1973, Naseema was invited to the Paraplegic Foundation sports meet. She says with a sense of pride, "I was a star in Mumbai, standing first and winning several medals and shields" (45). Soon after the meet, she got a letter from the secretary of the Paraplegic Foundation saying that she had been chosen for the International Stoke Mandeville Games in England. The foundation took care of her travel expenses and appointed Reena, a physiotherapist, to assist and accompany Naseema. Despite the promise of a life-changing experience,



a milestone in the history of disabled sports was tainted by the shocking mistreatment at the hands of Reena. Naseema writes with a sense of despair:

“I asked Reena for help to go to the toilet. As usual, she was rude: “All my patients are self-reliant. You should learn to manage on your own.” She treated me to come to the dining hall when I was ready and then left me alone to fend for myself” (50).

Sports play a significant role in uplifting individuals with disabilities. In India, despite the challenges faced by disabled people, various inclusive campaigns have been undertaken to promote their involvement in sports. Schemes like the ‘Scheme of Assistance to National Sports Federation’ aim to enhance active engagement of disabled people in sports by providing them training, tools, and tournaments. In 1992, the Government of India established the ‘Physically Handicapped Sports Federation of India’ to support and enhance opportunities for disabled athletes for their contribution to various sports events. While the government endorses the inclusion of disabled people in sports, Naseema’s narrative sheds light on the deep-rooted shifts in societal and cultural structures, especially for a disabled Muslim woman. However, Naseema’s passion got her involved in sports. She became a powerful motivator for people with disabilities in Kolhapur to participate in the events organized by the All India Federation of Sports and Rehabilitation for Paraplegics. The irony of Naseema’s situation lies in the fact that she was denied the position of secretary to the organization because of her communal identity. “Whether I’m in the committee or not? He said, not letting go, “Is it because you are not a Brahmin?” (66).

Naseema’s tireless efforts ultimately gave birth to Apand Punarvasan Sanstha, a groundbreaking training center that has been ultimately transforming the lives of individuals with disabilities in India. Under Naseema’s leadership, the center made a tangible difference in the lives of many disabled individuals. The organization, “Helpers for the Handicapped,” established by Naseem as a rehabilitation center, remains one of the leading organizations to help disabled people. The concluding lines of this memoir show us her vision of an accessible environment and inclusivity.

“Despite all the setbacks, I still dream. In my dreams I see the able and the disabled attending the same educational institutions and helping each other. I see more compassionate homes for the destitute disabled. I see disabled people forming a commune of fortitude where he or she can find a life partner and lead a fulfilled life” (123).

Conclusion

Naseema Huzruk’s *The Incredible Story* is not simply a narrative of inner turmoil but a powerful witness that reframes how disability should be apprehended. Her life challenges the mainstream discourse that has traditionally portrayed disabled individuals as objects of pity or distress. Instead, Naseema emerges as an activist who, despite environmental barriers, constructs a lasting impact. Her story invites readers to shatter misconceptions and recognize self-advocacy and self-determination of people with disabilities to shape their future and contribute significantly to society. Through her academic accomplishments, lecturing, and athletic involvement, Naseema reclaims power in many dimensions of life. Her efforts to start “Helpers of the Handicapped” marked a notable difference from the dependency model, which is associated with disability. Naseema’s journey also reveals complex relationships of disability with gender, religion, and financial background. In conclusion, Naseema’s story serves as a powerful reminder to all of us. Those individuals with disabilities are not human beings meant to be pitied but to be respected as change agents deserving power, respect, and empowerment. The society should work hard to create an equitable and inclusive society for all.

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