

Disabled or Differently-Abled: A Reading on Disability in A Song of ICE and Fire



Hudha Ahmed Kutty K V

Abstract: To analyze if the inclusion and exclusion system in our society is fair. A few bodies born with a different design, unlike the majority are brought under the category of the 'disabled.' It has been a human tendency from time immemorial to keep such people hidden or shied away. Such individuals are devoid of the daily lifestyle of the ordinary people. This isolation leaves a great impact on the physical and mental growth of the individual resulting in further damages in the personality. Socialization becomes lesser or completely barred. Hence such individuals are born, live and die in seclusion. The human inclination of stereotyping them has always resulted in the denial of their rights. Martin creates a reflection of society with many disabled characters and how they are treated. The central characters like Bran, Tyrion and Jamie and others as Varys, Hodor, Maester Aemon, Shireen, Patch face, Ghost etc. all are with limited biological functions and are treated differently. In the present paper, the researcher makes a study on this attitude of the society and weigh the justification for the same. Ironically, almost all these characters prove to have their own ingenuity in their lives. Some even prove to be abler than their respective counterparts. So, the question is "should they be kept in seclusion?" Can the inclination of the world to isolate them be justified? Does the world belong only to the majority "Normals?" This paper concludes that it is not. The world cannot be complete without them as it possesses a heterogeneous population demanding equal inclusion of every category.

Keywords: Disability, Inclusion, Rights, Seclusion, Socialization

I. INTRODUCTION

Amidst the pandemic, the word 'Normal' has found itself in different dimensions. The emergence of the term 'New-normal' itself drives home, the oscillating nature of the term. 'Normal' in general, refers to what is usual, standard, typical or expected. Anything different from the set standards are often peripheralized. When it comes to people, they are often marginalized in the name of race, caste, creed, social status, gender, and various disabilities. Disabilities may refer to a difference in the physical or mental state of an individual, which categorize them as socially incapacitated. The missing or deformation of any body part, a brain with a limited or different function, all brings people under the said term. Often, such people both in our living society and in literature are considered as oddities, who are looked down, either with sympathy or terror. They are socially excluded from every conventional sector. They are referred always as 'the other' or as 'them.'

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George R.R Martin in his novel series *A Song of Ice and Fire* narrates, a tremendous story of people engaging in the play of power, relationships, and various human emotions. Among the many characters he has included a few with the so-called 'disabilities' who, as mentioned earlier deviate from the 'standard' humans. The journey of these characters, but makes the reader rethink about the idea of isolating them as 'disabled' as they play inevitable roles in the development of the plot. It is said that there are one million disabled in the world comprising about fifteen percentage of our population. [1],[2]. People born with or acquired such conditions are often removed from the forefront forming their own 'other' world. Although today we can say that many a political and literary movements have brought the 'disabled' into the mainstream, but it is not satisfactory. The question of inclusion is often faced with 'how' and 'why' in the so-called 'normal' society, which itself is an embarrassing situation.

II. THE RESEARCH PROBLEM

The term 'disabled' on the other hand has been rejected as a pejorative one, substituting it with the more inclusive term 'differently-abled.' A woman without hands if draws a picture with her toes, should she be called 'disabled' or 'differently-abled'? Just because she does not do it with hands, like the majority, should she be shunned into the descending sector? Hasn't she acquired a skill, which the 'normals' have not? So, does not she become more 'able' than them? The tendency of labeling such a skilled person with disability discloses the idea of 'Ableism.' 'Ableism' is "Discrimination against people who are not able-bodied, or an assumption that is necessary to cater only for able-bodied people." [3]. The disabled people are often treated with the standard of the abled people. From the point of view of the abled, people with difference are tagged 'abnormal.' Martin in his novels forces the readers to rethink the idea of ableism. The way the differently-abled characters being treated by the 'normal' characters is surely to be questioned. The regularizing of the able characters and the shunning of the disabled arises question of belongingness and worth of a person.

A few approaches we see throughout the novel series towards the disabled by the able are:

1. The disabled ones are incomplete creations.
2. They do not deserve the privileges of their able counterpart.
3. Their appearances are something attributed to monstrosity and hence rejected from the general society as they are 'unpleasant' to be looked at.

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4. Even if they are included in the general society, they are presented as someone 'different.' i.e., 'weaker' to be pitied or a 'freak' to be amusing.
5. Physical deformity precedes intelligence.

III. METHODOLOGY

The researcher mainly uses the Close Reading method. The text itself is well read to locate for specific details in the passages. Qualitative analysis of the details is done based on the readings. Examples and passages are quoted from the text itself as proof. External references are seldom except for a few mentions for supporting the argument. A table has been designed including various characters traits.

IV. LITERATURE REVIEW

Let us examine how each of the characters are depicted in the novel. The novel opens with the point of view of Brandon Stark, aka Bran. He is a seven-year-old boy who is allowed to witness the political affairs of his father, Lord Eddard Stark aka Ned of Winterfell. Bran is treated with love and respect by all for being the lord's son. He aspires to become a knight, and is being trained for the same. His greatest amusement is climbing the walls of the huge castles by which he often gets scolded by his Lord mother, Lady Catelyn as well as his father. Climbing without falling becomes his strength and eventually his father gives up scolding him, calling him a 'squirrel' for his hobby. The fate of the boy changes when he is thrown away from the Broken Tower by Jaime Lannister on witnessing his incestuous relationship with the queen Cersei. Bran gains consciousness after a few weeks with no memory of the incident, but paralyzed below the waist. He realizes that he is a 'Warg' whose mind can enter other weaker people or animals. He can 'warg' into his pet direwolf Summer and runs in his skin. He also enters the mind of the stable boy Hodor. But Bran's destiny takes him to a very unexpected journey. After seeking The Three-Eyed Raven or the greenseer for a long time in hope of getting a cure for his disability, he is turned down with the reply "You will never walk again, Bran... but you will fly." (ADwD, 207) And then Bran is taught to be a 'greenseer' who can see any past events through the weirwood trees. Hodor is another disabled character in the series. He is the stable boy of the Starks and the grandson of Old Nan, The Nanny. Hodor is a huge boy of seven feet with relative strength. After Bran's fall he carries him everywhere. Hodor becomes the legs of Bran. He is a simpleton or a half-wit person who can speak the only word 'hodor' at every situation, giving himself the name. Though physically strong and tall, he lacks courage and is even frightened by any commotions like thunder and lightning. Martin's novels stand out for his choice of inevitable characters to keep the wheel of plot moving, such as Tyrion. Tyrion Lannister is born a dwarf whose mother died in his birth. But luckily, being born as the son of Tywin Lannister of Casterly Rock, the most powerful man in Westeros, gets him a luxurious life and ensures his survival. Tyrion is 'hideous' to look at with his large head and small hands and legs. He is called names like 'the Imp,' 'Half-man,' 'dwarf' etc. His sister Cersei makes a show of him as a monster to the Martells when he was a baby. In the Battle of the Blackwater Tyrion loses his nose which makes him uglier to be looked at. But Tyrion is one of the most

intelligent characters in the novel. He is will read. And is smart enough to be appointed as the Hand of the King and later the Master of Coins. His war strategy brings victory to the land. Even when Joffrey, the young king flees the battlefield along with many troops, Tyrion stands up for the land. Tyrion is hated by his own father and sister for being born a monster and is often addressed as the killer of the mother. As Tywin says, "Men's laws give you the right to bear my name and display my colors, since I cannot prove that you are not mine. To teach me humility, the gods have condemned me to watch you waddle about wearing that proud lion that was my father's sigil and his father's before him." (ASoS,65) His wits on the other hand are unmatched by any other in the Kingdom. But because of his physical appearance, he is unconditionally hated and denied many things. The incessant denial and hatred, he had experienced throughout his life, makes him a person with a sharp tongue which often leads him to troubles. He is immune to the insults and the abuses he faces. He is a person who but accepts his limitations using them only to fuel his will for life. To Jon Snow, the illegitimate son of Ned he says, "Never forget what you are, for surely the world will not. Make it your strength. Then it can never be your weakness. Armor yourself in it, and it will never be used to hurt you." (AGoT, 54). Following the conversation "When he opened the door, the light from within threw his shadow clear across the yard, and for just a moment Tyrion Lannister stood tall as a king." (A GoT 54) His optimism is another quality to be looked for. When talked of giving death to the bed-ridden Bran as a mercy, he denies saying "Death is so terribly final, while life is full of possibilities." (AGoT,87) Tyrion's brother Jamie also falls into this category after a mishap. Born as the 'golden son' and knighted at a very young age, he is one of the most admirable persons in the kingdom, unlike his brother. His fate turns when his right palm is cut off by his captor. Bound with a lifetime oath he stays as the Lord Commander of the Kings guard, but he is looked down as ineligible. Disability for Jaime, but leads to the breaching of his arrogance and brings humility. Maester Aemon of the Nights Watch is blind, after living for over a century. He is a person with limitless experiences and immense knowledge. Despite born a royal, his sagacious life has made him a sensible person. Although moving around with support of younger people, his healing hands and his counsel are a blessing. Blindness has taken his eyes but never his visions. Ghost, the pet dire wolf of Jon Snow is mute. He is the counterpart of Jon himself, being the secluded among the six children. He is a white and fierce dire wolf who but seems to be cleverer than his siblings. Shireen, is the daughter of another self-proclaimed king Stannis Baratheon. She is a nine-year-old 'sweet' child who survived the fatal 'greyscale' in infancy but was left disfigured for her life. Although she is treated with kindness and respected as a princess, there are people whose her appearance to disgrace her. On her claim for royalty and marriage prospects she is rumored to be fathered by Patch face, the King's Fool, for her looks. She is even considered 'unclean' and 'dead' by the wildling woman Val, for fear of contamination. Patch face is the King's Fool. A former slave jester in Volantis, who was bought by Stannis's father to Westeros.

He survived the ship-wreck on the way to Westeros but lost his memory and wits. He speaks incoherent sentences and sometimes has flashing memories of the days under the sea. His obese appearance and unstable mind finally make him the court's Fool. As Davos observes, "The princess's fool was waiting outside the maester's door for her like a faithful hound. Dough-soft and slump-shouldered, his broad face tattooed in a motley pattern of red and green squares, Patchface wore a helm made of a rack of deer antlers strapped to a tin bucket. A dozen bells hung from the tines and rang when he moved . . . which meant constantly, since the fool seldom stood still. He jingled and jangled his way everywhere he went..." (ASoS, 161). Ser Illyn Payne is the king's executioner in King's Landing, the capital. His tongue was torn out by the mad king Aerys when he was heard stating supremacy of Tywin over Aerys. Payne's appearance is rather frightening with his hollow staring eyes and more than six feet height. He is the King's Justice who carries out execution so skillfully that Jamie thinks he lives only for killing. Sir Sandor Clegane called the Hound, is the 'sworn shield' of Prince Joffrey, later the king. Sandor had half of his face burned by his elder brother Gregor in their childhood. Though a fierce fighter he is afraid of fire and hated knighthood. Jinglebell or Aegon Frey is another half-wit man of fifty. He is one among the numberless Frey grandsons. When Robb and Catelyn meet, he was in "...costly garb of blue wool and grey satin was strangely

accented by a crown and collar ornamented with tiny brass bells," (ASoS,103). He has always been kept hidden but now he was all adorned along with a Fool's crown, which Catelyn thinks if it was to smite Robb. When Catelyn bargains with Jinglebell's life for her Rob's in the Red Wedding massacre, Lord Walder Frey gives her a cold response saying "But that's a grandson . . . and he never was much use." (ASoS,133) On seeing her son murdered a hysteric Catheryn slits Aegon's throat. The novel series always goes back to the story fourteen years prior to bring out the background. Jamie is called the 'Kingslayer' for killing the Mad-King Aerys Targaryen. The madness is said to be running in the Targaryen family as the flip side of the magic and the supernatural gifts. Aerys burns people with wildfire; demands Jamie the Kingsguard, to bring the head of Tywin, his father and the then Hand; rapes his queen; and decides to burn everyone around, believing himself to be reborn as a dragon. When his madness peaks Jamie slays him breaking the oath. Lord Varys is a eunuch whose manhood was cut off for black magic when he was a child. Left for dead on the streets young Varys but finds way of survival, through thievery and prostitution. Despite his lost manhood, he emerges as a powerful personality in the kingdom with an immense network of information and hence is always feared even by the mightiest in the realm. Varys becomes one of eminent characters in the series who keeps the plot moving.

Table (1) Characters and their traits

Character	Disability	Treatment received	Strength and weakness	Role in the plot development
Tyrian	Dwarf	Belittled	Strength: intelligence, high birth. Weakness: Physical deformity	One of the main characters. Excellent service in Battle of blackwater, as The Hand of the King and Master of Coins.
Bran	Paralysis	Pitied	Strength: Greensensing Weakness: dream of knighthood shattered	One of the main characters.
Jamie	Cut off sword hand	Considered unable to be the Kingsguard	Strength: Beauty, High Birth, Intelligence Weakness: loss of the sword hand and the fighting skills.	One of the main characters.
Varys	Castrated	Feared and respected	Strength: Knowledge and strong communication network Weakness: lost manhood	Influence in the politics of the realm
Hodor	Weak cognition	Isolated	Strength: Physically strong Weakness: dim-wit	Becomes Bran's legs and body.
Maester Aemon	Blind	Respected	Strength: Experience Weakness: Blindness and old age	Counsel
Princess Shireen	Greyscale affected	Pitied	Strength: innocence Weakness: ugliness	Innocence of a nine-year-old girl.
Patchface	Weak cognition	Appointed as the King's Fool	Strength: can say anything fearlessly as he never will be punished Weakness: dimwit, memory-loss	Keeps a happy company with Shireen.
Ghost	mute	Feared by all. Loved by Jon	Strength: fierce direwolf Weakness: Muteness	'Warg' of Jon.
Ser Illyn Payne	Mute	Feared	Strength: Clean Execution Weakness: Muteness	The King's Justice or Executioner.
Sir Sandor Clegane (The Hound)	Burned face	Feared	Strength: Excellent fighter Weakness: Ugliness	The Prince's, later the King's Personal Guard.
Jinglebell	Weak Cognition	Hidden away always. Presented as the Fool on the Starks's visit.	Strength: None known of Weakness: Dimwit	Becomes a scapegoat in the Red Wedding.
King Aerys II	The Mad King	Feared	Strength: Kingship Weakness: Madness	Executed leading to the fall of the House Targaryen.

V. DISCUSSIONS AND FINDINGS

The various disabled and abled characters play inevitable roles in the development of the plot.

Martin breaks the conventional writing techniques of creating the virtuous, perfect heroes and evil villains. Bringing a dwarf as one of the important characters of the plot, so convincingly, makes the novel unique. Moreover, crippling Bran, another main character, who further carries his journey heroically, is also another example. On the other hand, the 'goddess' like beautiful Cersei, the valiant Jaime and the most powerful Tywin are all attributed with evil.

As we can see the disabled characters in earlier literature has always been sidelined never playing anything heroic in the plot. Characters like Tiny Tim in *A Christmas Carol* [4], Hythloday in *Madame Bovary* [5], Benji in *The Sound and Fury* [6] are a few of them. There have been literatures with a disabled person as the protagonist such as the titular hero Richard III [7], Quasimodo in *The Hunchback of Notre-Dame* [8] which have always drawn the pathetic picture of the characters with tragic end. Philip Wakem of *Mill on the Floss* [9] though portrayed as intelligent and sensible is one facing the seclusion for being a hunchback. A trait of disability often affects the portrayal of a character as either weak or evil, arousing pity or hatred in the readers or the audience.

Such characters are also seen in this novel series. Patchface and Jinglebell are court fools owing to their lack of wits. Jinglebell is used more as a paraded item to smite Robb. For Catelyn, he becomes an asset for ransom for Robb's life, but to her shock he is just 'another' unwanted offspring of the Freys, readily sacrificed as valueless. The naive Jinglebell, hence becomes a collateral damage in the clash of the kings. Patchface, on the other hand remains the only person making Shireen happy. His 'lack of wit' is the only source of the bliss to the little girl, while the 'normals' around just pity or hate her. Here two disabled and secluded people build their own world of amusement.

Though he does not play the main role like Tyrion and Bran, Varys remains as an inevitable factor in the plot development. His actions in the background create huge ripples in the life of those in the foreground. Varys's art of disguise and his endless network of 'little birds' makes him the omniscient in the kingdom giving him the name 'The Spider.' The escape of Gendry, smuggling of Shae to Tyrion, the execution of Kevan Lannister and Maester Pycelle are a few of his discreet endeavors. His reach beyond the kingdom too is remarkable which designs the escape of Tyrion and planning for the arrival of Aegon Targaryen. He emerges as a unique person with not only as a survivor with undying determination and skills, but also using those skills for the welfare of the realm fearlessly. Varys breaks down the concept of gender and power; as a person with 'lost manhood,' he but owns a clear sense of judgement.

There have been exceptional writings in the late twentieth century like *Nights at The Circus* [10] by Angela Carter, published in 1984. Many disabled characters including Sophie Fevvers are used as exhibits in a circus as 'freaks.' The novel presents the characters but in a happy light with a happy ending. Though born different Sophie is loved and

adored by people as the 'Winged Victory' so are other disabled characters. She is one of the female characters who heralds hope and freedom for the disabled. They are admired for their different built which is a rare response seen in the disabled narrative. The novel is one among the best 100 most influential ones and falls into the Postmodern category [11].

In many contexts even femininity is considered as a disability. Patriarchal culture is not unfamiliar to any citizen of the world in any era. Being a woman makes one physically 'weaker,' socially excluded and even intellectually lesser in many cultures. Surely, there are many feminist movements addressing this issue and resulting in the evolution, which still goes on. The characters in *A Song of Ice and Fire* are no different. As Simone de Beauvoir said, "one is not born a woman, but becomes one." [12] Daenerys, Sansa, Catelyn, all are women brought up to be the 'ladies.' Even the all-powerful Queen Cersei, must face the gender discrimination as she was trained to be presentable while her twin brother was trained in swordfights. Arya is a young girl who but defies the conformism by indulging in the armaments. Brienne is a woman who chooses to become a skilled warrior to survive the torment she faced on being 'ugly.' Daenerys Targaryen too is ill-treated by her brother Viserys and sold for power, but she is the one who carries the magical legacy. Maester Aemon in his death bed realizes that Daenerys will be the savior of the realm as per the prophesy. "No one ever looked for a girl," (AFC, 589) as the prophesy referred to a gender-neutral 'savior'.

As mentioned earlier Martin forces the readers to rethink on the attitude towards the 'disabled' community. Mirroring the real world, Martin draws the heterogeneity of humans which questions the border lines of inclusion. The evolution of the term 'disabled' to 'differently-abled' is being justified to a certain length in the novel series. As a part of the supernatural genre, 'the wights' or the 'walking dead people' appearing in the narrative drives home the notion of labelling 'the Other.'

VI. CONCLUSIONS

Being a widely read novel series, supplemented by the TV adaptation *Game of Thrones* [13], *A Song of Ice and Fire* leaves its impact in the modern readers. Though set in an imaginary Medieval world the story is much relatable to the modern readers for its universality. Themes like disability is well treated in the novel and ends up to be a thought-provoking one.

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