

# Defying Ableism, Countering Normalcy: An Intersectional Analysis of Malini Chib's *One Little Finger*

**T. R. Devika and P. Boopathi**

## **Abstract**

Disabled women in India face more significant social stigma and discrimination than their male counterparts due to their intersectional identity of gender and impairment. The genre of life writing allows them to exercise greater agency and self-determination. This article analyzes Malini Chib's life narrative titled *One Little Finger* (2011), with a particular focus on how the author, as a disabled woman, negotiates the ableist norms prevalent in gendered society. The article elucidates the ways in which societal and cultural constructs contribute to the exclusion of disabled women in various spheres of life. Additionally, the study investigates the influence of the medical and charity models of disability in intensifying the stigma and discrimination experienced by disabled women in Indian society focused on the life experience of Malini Chib. To contextualize the varied experience of Malini Chib in the collective struggle of Indian disabled women, the article draws on the Disability Studies theories of ableism and normalcy for the analysis.

**Keywords:** Disability Life Writing, Ableist Society, Stigma, Gendered Society, Malini Chib.

## **Introduction**

The representation of disabled individuals in literature, culture, and religion is often misrepresentation. Disability is frequently used as a mere trope or metaphor, particularly in film and literature. The portrayal of disabled characters in Indian literature and American or European literature typically excludes them from the main cast. Instead, they are either portrayed as pitiable side characters like Tiny Tom in *A Christmas Carol* or demonized characters like Captain Hook in *Peter Pan*, where they are utilized to enhance the entire plot. In all such instances, readers tend to either feel sympathy or fear towards the disabled characters, and they are often devoid of an individualistic identity of their own. As Garland Thomson observes, "literary texts necessarily make disabled characters into freaks stripped of normalising contexts engulfed by a single stigmatic trait."<sup>1</sup>

The misrepresentation of disabled individuals in literature has been significantly challenged with the advent of disability autobiography. As Thomas Couser posits:

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<sup>1</sup> Rosemarie Garland Thomson, *Extraordinary Bodies: Figuring Physical Disability in American Culture and Literature* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997), p.11.

Autobiography is a precious and liberatory medium for the representation of disability because, by definition itself, it involves self-representation. Autobiographical narratives are increasingly living up to their potential as the most democratic, most inclusive, and most accessible of literary genres.<sup>2</sup>

Disability life writing allows disabled individuals to assert their own lived experiences, unlike in literature or movies, where they are often reduced to mere tropes. Disability life writing acts as a counter-discourse and provides disabled people with the agency to redefine their life stories, which have been unheard of or misrepresented in their absence.

Disabled women in Indian society are often subjected to extreme marginalisation, resulting from their gender, impairment, and social status. The mainstream feminist movement often neglects them, and even those who care about their lives tend to overlook their subjective experiences.<sup>3</sup> Disabled women are frequently viewed as unfit, dependent, and incapable, unlike their counterparts able-bodied women. Comparisons between disabled men and women are challenging to draw, as Fine and Asch note, “the disabled male possesses a relatively positive self-image and is more likely to identify as male rather than as disabled.”<sup>4</sup> In such a scenario, disabled women's life writing becomes even more powerful as it provides them with agency and representation they have been denied for ages. The life narratives of disabled women pave the way for reinterpreting and reimagining the existing ableist representation.

This article will analyze Malini Chib's *One Little Finger* (2010) and explore how she, as a disabled woman, navigates the ableist norms prevail in our gendered society. It investigates how specific social and cultural constructs contribute to a lack of inclusivity in our society. Additionally, this paper sheds light on how Indian society has perpetuated the stigmatization of disabled individuals' lives by embracing the medical and charity models of disability. Malini Chib is a prominent disability rights activist and the founder of ADAPT (Able Disabled all people together).<sup>5</sup> She was born with cerebral palsy, resulting in significant difficulties with her body movement, speech, coordination, and balance. In her autobiographical text, she shares her life experiences in India and the Global North, highlighting the stigma and oppression she endured due to ableist societal practices. Despite facing such challenges, she remained committed to achieving her dreams and fighting against unjust practices directed towards disabled individuals.

In India, disability is often interpreted through the lens of the charity model, which perceives disability as a personal tragedy and a sign of failure.<sup>6</sup> According to Malini Chib's account, the doctors who treated her at birth informed her parents that she was like a vegetable and that nothing could be done for her. The medical model frequently views disability as a physical impairment. It is assumed that the disabled person is entirely responsible for the impairment, with no further investigation into the cause. In “*Towards a Feminist Theory of Disability*,” Susan Wendell critiques the medical model of disability, arguing that medical

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<sup>2</sup> G. Thomas Couser, ‘Disability and Autobiography: Enabling Discourses’, *Disability Studies Quarterly*, vol. 17, no. 4 (1997), p. 292.

<sup>3</sup> Jenny Morris, ‘Feminism and Disability’, *Feminist Review*, vol. 43, no.1 (1993), pp. 57-70.

<sup>4</sup> Michelle Fine and Adrienne Asch, ‘Disabled Women: Sexism Without the Pedestal’, *The Journal of Sociology and Social Welfare*, vol. 8, no. 2 (1981), p. 235.

<sup>5</sup> Malini Chib, *One Little Finger* (Delhi: Sage Publication, 2010).

<sup>6</sup> Anita Ghai, *Rethinking Disability in India* (Delhi: Routledge, 2015), p. xx.

professionals have the power to validate or invalidate an individual's bodily experience.<sup>7</sup> However, despite the Indian doctors' prognosis that Malini was mentally disabled and that her brain damage was irreversible, her parents refused to give up on her.

During her childhood, Malini Chib experienced constant isolation and felt conscious of the stares directed towards her due to her disability. The interaction between disabled and non-disabled individuals is often strained, with the latter experiencing feelings such as fear, pity, fascination, and surprise, as noted by Thomson.<sup>8</sup> The misrepresentation of disability in various aspects of culture, media, and literature has contributed to this awkwardness and reinforced the existing stigma surrounding disabled individuals. Along with that, as Abby Wilkerson rightly points out, medical discourse has got an active role in shaping the "cultural perception of disability identity itself, which thereby structures how the non-disabled people interact with people with disabilities."<sup>9</sup>

### The Ableist Notion of Normalcy

Malini Chib recounts an incident where she was treated rudely by paramedical staff during a hospital visit. She describes how they treated her as if she were incapable of thought or understanding, simply a passive object in need of "fixing" to conform to societal norms of normalcy. In her words: "the paramedical staff treated me as if I did not have ears or could not understand. To them, I was a non-thinking person who needed fixing and fitting into the mould of being normal."<sup>10</sup> This reflects a broader pattern of ableism and ignorance among medical professionals, who often fail to recognize the subjective experiences of disabled individuals. As Anita Ghai notes in her article "Disabled Women: An Excluded Agenda of Indian Feminism," there is a pervasive belief that biological impairment necessarily limits individuals' ability to fully participate in social, psychological, and political realms of life.<sup>11</sup>

In an ableist society, disabled women are often subjected to oppression by various dominant institutions such as social, medical and educational systems. This oppression arises from the inferior status attributed to them by the society that views anything that deviates from the norm as inferior. In order to be accepted into mainstream ableist society, disabled individuals are expected to "cure themselves" and become normal through medical intervention or they must endure various forms of persecution, such as institutionalisation, forced sterilisation, or other forms of stigmatisation. David Mitchell and Sharon Snyder, in their text *Narrative Prosthesis: Disability and the Dependencies of Discourse* (2001), have observed that across cultures, disability is often viewed as a problem that requires a solution.<sup>12</sup> In the Indian context, Anita Ghai shares her experience of how she and her family not only faced stigma or pain, at the same time, they were also in the constant quest to cure her disability. In her text *Rethinking Disability in India* (2015), she recollects those traumatic memories, "across the 56

<sup>7</sup> Susan Wendell, 'Towards a Feminist Theory of Disability,' *Hypatia*, vol. 4, no. 2 (1989), pp. 104-124.

<sup>8</sup> Thomson, *Extraordinary Bodies: Figuring Physical Disability in American Culture and Literature*, p. 12.

<sup>9</sup> Abby Wilkerson, 'Disability, Sex Radicalism and Political Agency', in *Feminist Disability Studies*, ed. Kim. Q. Hall (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1992), p. 210.

<sup>10</sup> Chib, *One Little Finger*, p. 16.

<sup>11</sup> Anita Ghai, 'Disabled Women: An Excluded Agenda of Indian Feminism,' *Hypatia*, vol.17, no. 3 (2002), p. 51

<sup>12</sup> David T. Mitchell and Sharon L. Snyder, *Narrative Prosthesis* (Detroit: The University of Michigan, 2000), p. 47.

years of my life, I have negotiated with shamans, gurus, ojhas, tantric priests, and faith healers as well as miracles cures- all to ensure that I could become an able-bodied person finally.”<sup>13</sup>

During her time in India, Malini Chib attended The Centre for Special Education in Bombay, where she believed the style of education impeded her intellectual growth. She identifies this period as the darkest period in her life and attributes her slow communication skills and intellectual development to the lack of exposure to the outside world. The lack of inclusivity in the Indian educational system is highlighted here, with education being a fundamental right denied to her because of her disability. In her words:

I strongly feel that if the child is exposed to a normal environment from a young age, then the child, however severely disabled he/she is, would have a chance to be included and perhaps accepted by his or her peers and would use his/her own intelligence and social networking skills to develop.<sup>14</sup>

Here, one can observe education, a fundamental right of every individual, was denied to her because of her disability.

The contrasting perception of disability in the West and India is evident in the transformation of Malini's life. The Western perspective towards Malini acknowledged her intellectual capacity despite her physical limitations. In England, she was recognised as “an intelligent mind with a disobedient body.”<sup>15</sup> Her school in England provided an environment for her mental and physical growth, aided by her parents' support. Malini felt a sense of comfort in England, as it offered her acceptance and love without judgment. She says, “I had learned to read, do well intellectually, and begun to walk. People here loved and accepted me for what I was.”<sup>16</sup> This starkly contrasts the treatment of disabled individuals in India, where they are often viewed with pity, stigma, and social exclusion.

Malini's experience in St Xavier's Junior College exemplifies the negative attitudes that disabled people face in academic institutions. When Malini requested extra time for exams, a faculty member of high authority dismissed her request, stating that exams for disabled students were a waste of time and that disabled students would be better off staying at home.<sup>17</sup> Such discriminatory behavior stems from ableist assumptions that portray disabled individuals as dependent, passive, and unable to contribute to society. These ableist attitudes are often based on:

A complex system of ideological beliefs that are widely shared and actively maintained through various practices and institutionalised policies. The same kind of practice is reflected in the practices of the eugenics movement, forced sterilisation, involuntary confinement, and school segregation and in the rationales for selective abortion and assisted suicide on the basis of disability.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Ghai, *Rethinking Disability in India*, p. 3.

<sup>14</sup> Chib, *One Little Finger*, p.25.

<sup>15</sup> Chib, *One Little Finger*, p.9.

<sup>16</sup> Chib, *One Little Finger*, p.15.

<sup>17</sup> Chib, *One Little Finger*, p.49.

<sup>18</sup> Michelle R. Nario Redmond, *Ableism: The Causes and Consequences of Disability Prejudice* (Hoboken: Wiley Blackwell, 1992), p. 210.

Malini's university education in India imported through the de facto inclusive education, which conspicuously operates with ableist notion in a country that has traditionally been hostile towards people with disabilities. Despite the inclusive setup, Malini still encountered obstacles in her college, as inclusivity was only nominal, and lack of adequate facilities made the environment inaccessible for her. Physical barriers were everywhere, and there was a lack of accessible buildings in the college. Despite having an electric wheelchair, the ledges at the end of each classroom blocked her movement. Additionally, she was constantly stared at, which was a painful experience. Malini tried to integrate into the 'normal' world, but the ableist world assumed everyone had a perfect ideal body without physical deviation and therefore tried to exclude her. Susan Wendell rightly argues that “the architecture and the entire physical and social organisation of life assume that we are either strong and healthy and able to do what the average able-bodied can do.”<sup>19</sup>

### **The Societal Construction of Normalcy**

The issue of disability largely pertains to the societal construction of normalcy and its role in the marginalisation of disabled individuals. According to Fiona Kumari Campbell, ableism refers to:

A network of beliefs, processes and practices that produces a particular kind of self and body (the corporeal standard) that is projected as the perfect, species-typical and therefore essential and fully human. Disability then is cast as a diminished state of being human.<sup>20</sup>

Using norms to stigmatize disabled individuals reflects an ableist society subscribing to a particular standard of normalcy. It is crucial to recognise that disability is not an individual problem but a societal construct perpetuated by negative attitudes towards disabled individuals as per the revolutionary Social Model. The Indian context, however, highlights the need to shift from a medical model that seeks to cure disability to a social model that acknowledges the role of negative attitudes and environments in creating dysfunctionality for disabled individuals. The medical model ignores the significance of obstructive environments in contributing to disabling condition and instead places the burden of adaptation solely on the disabled individual.<sup>21</sup>

Garland Thomson's concept of “normate” refers to the constructed identity of individuals, who, due to their bodily configurations and cultural capital, have the ability to assume positions of authority and exercise the power it confers upon them.<sup>22</sup> Mainstream society often rejects deviations from this normative identity, as illustrated in Malini's experiences of struggling with her speech and lack of physical accessibility. The failure of others to communicate with her

<sup>19</sup> Susan Wendell, *The Rejected Body: Feminist Philosophical Reflections on Disability* (New York: Routledge, 1996), p. 39.

<sup>20</sup> Fiona Kumari Campbell, *Contours of Ableism* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), p. 44.

<sup>21</sup> Tom Shakespeare, “The Social Model of Disability,” in *The Disability Studies Reader*, ed. Lennard. J. Davis (New York: Routledge, 2013), p. 198.

<sup>22</sup> Thomson, *Extraordinary Bodies: Figuring Physical Disability in American Culture and Literature*, p. 8.

reinforced feelings of marginalisation and raised questions about her own identity and personality. In her words:

I know that I was different and trapped in a dysfunctional, but did others realize I had a spirit and mind separate from this body? My body did not work like others, but did they realize that my, mind was normal? Did they consider thinking that my desires were just as same as theirs?<sup>23</sup>

Despite her physical differences, Malini's desire to be recognized as a person with a separate mind and spirit highlights the need for a more inclusive approach to disability that values diversity and individuality beyond narrow standards of normalcy.

### **The Idealization of the Perfect Body**

Malini's experiences of isolation and discrimination led her to question her self-worth. This is a result of society's glorification and idealization of the perfect body, which leads to the dismissal of anything that deviates from the norm. However, what is often overlooked is how the social and physical environment makes life much more challenging for disabled women than their disability itself. The oppressive attitude towards disabled individuals creates a sense of "otherness" for disabled women, which can devastate their self-image. Various studies have demonstrated how negative stereotypes about disabled women affect their position in society. Studies have shown that even if people do not believe in disability stereotypes, their mere awareness can affect their emotions and behaviors towards disabled individuals. Malini's experience of being looked down upon during her admission to a regular college can be attributed to the reinforcement of ableist perceptions through these stereotypes. Furthermore, the consequences of disability stereotypes are severe and result in limited job opportunities, increased incarceration rates, and discriminatory public policies concerning education, parenting, and child custody.<sup>24</sup> The inaccessibility of physical spaces during Malini's college education posed a significant challenge to her. Despite having the right to equal education and access to all college facilities, the lack of physical accessibility made her feel like an outsider. As Thomson rightly articulates, one of the fundamental principles of disability politics is that "it is the shape of the world that should be changed, and not the shape of the bodies."<sup>25</sup>

### **The Gender Roles of the Ableist Patriarchal Society**

Within the Indian patriarchal society, women's bodies are subjected to various socio-cultural and religious disciplinary practices. Gender roles in this society are often stereotypical, with women being expected to fulfil the role of nurturers, such as mothers or wives, while men are expected to provide for the family as wage earners. However, these gender norms are not applicable to disabled women. Instead, society views them as incapable of taking on traditional

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<sup>23</sup> Chib, *One Little Finger*, p. 54.

<sup>24</sup> Redmond, *Ableism: The Causes and Consequences of Disability Prejudice*, p. 152.

<sup>25</sup> Rosemarie Garland Thomson, "Misfit: A Feminist Materialist Disability Concept," *Hypatia*, vol. 26, no. 3 (2011), p. 597.

gender roles and treats them as unproductive and asexual beings. These attitudes towards disabled women contribute to their marginalisation within society. For Nasa Begum “disabled men could identify either with the negative role of disability, or they could strategically choose to identify with the powerful and advantageous male role. Both roles available to disabled women label us as inferior, passive and weak.”<sup>26</sup> In Malini's experience during her college years, she observed that even those few boys who engaged in superficial chatting with her did not make a proper conversation. She wondered if there would ever be a man in her life who would see beyond her body, put their arms around her, dance with her, kiss her passionately, and emotionally need her, or if she would always be regarded as a burden that someone must take care of.<sup>27</sup>

Malini was confronted with the stigma attached to the disabled female body when trying to socialise with her friends. The deeply ingrained patriarchal culture coupled with ableism denies disabled women sexuality, femininity, and desire. Disabled women are often considered unproductive members of society, making them unattractive as marriage partners. In her article, “*Experiencing the Body: Femininity, Sexuality and Disabled Women in India*,” Nandini Ghosh explains that the ability to perform household labour is crucial in determining a woman's suitability for marriage.<sup>28</sup> Disabled women are often stigmatised as ugly and asexual, making them “unmarriageable” due to their inability to perform household tasks. Malini, as she aged, came to the realisation that her body was considered asexual by men due to not meeting the expectations of ideal feminine beauty. In an effort to challenge this stereotype, Malini openly discusses the sexual taboo associated with disabled women in her article “No Sex Please... You are disabled.” Through her writing, she aims to debunk the notion that people with disabilities cannot have adult thoughts, desires, feelings, passions, and expectations, similar to non-disabled individuals.<sup>29</sup>

Malini experienced a significant improvement in her life after pursuing a publishing course in the UK, where she found the physical environment to be highly accessible. The newfound accessible environment gave her a sense of independence, bolstering her confidence. This is a notable difference from the stereotypical Indian perspective that perceives disabled women as incapable of doing domestic or productive work. The wheelchair accessibility and the non-judgmental attitude of people in England allowed Malini to carry out tasks independently like any other able-bodied individual. Malini expressed her admiration at the helpfulness of the people in England. In her words:

It was unbelievable how helpful people were. Nobody stared. Nobody asked me rude questions. If I could not reach for things, other shoppers would pass me an item. It was so different from India, where they would have come up to me and asked me a million questions, apart from staring me.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Nasa Begum, “Disabled Women and the Feminist Agenda,” *Feminist Review*, no. 40 (1992), p. 72.

<sup>27</sup> Chib, *One Little Finger*, p. 65.

<sup>28</sup> Nandhini Ghosh, “Experiencing the Body: Femininity, Sexuality and Disabled Women in India,” in *Disability in South Asia*, ed. Anita Ghai (Delhi: Sage Publication, 2018), p. 120.

<sup>29</sup> Chib, *One Little Finger*, p. 147.

<sup>30</sup> Chib, *One Little Finger*, p. 12.

Malini's experiences of physical and attitudinal barriers, stigma, and oppression in India reflect the stereotypical assumptions about disability prevalent in Indian society. In contrast, her experiences in the UK, where the physical environment was more accessible, and people were more accepting, gave her newfound independence and confidence. The contrast between the two societies highlights the social and cultural construction of disability and its impact on the lives of disabled individuals largely.

Malini challenges the notion of independence, arguing that it is a societal construct and every individual is interdependent, regardless of disability status. She suggests that dependence is not stigmatising and that everyone relies on others for social, emotional, physical, and intellectual support, citing the example of the plumber, electrician, and computer technician.<sup>31</sup> The cultural fixation on independence can lead to the marginalisation of individuals who require assistance. Similarly Wendell also highlights the importance of interdependence in creating an inclusive society that recognises and respects the needs and experiences of all individuals. In her words:

If all the disabled are to be fully integrated into society without symbolising failure, we must change social values to recognise the value of depending on others and being dependent on others. This would also reduce the fear and shame associated with dependency in old age, a condition most of us will reach.<sup>32</sup>

Malini encountered a few incidents that profoundly impacted her despite living in an environment that was relatively accommodating. On one occasion, she went to a shop, but the shopkeeper refused to allow her wheelchair inside, citing the narrowness of the shop. This incident was a significant humiliation for Malini. As a result, 50 wheelchair users organized a protest outside the shop in the following days. The shopkeeper eventually apologized after the demonstration. The shopkeeper's behavior reflects the cultural attitude towards disability, which the ideology of normalcy has shaped. According to Lennard Davis, "the problem is not with individuals with disabilities. The problem is how normalcy is constructed to create the problem of the disabled person."<sup>33</sup> Malini questions the idea of normalcy itself, asking, "Does society condition us in the definition of what is normal? Do we only see it from society's perspective of normalisation? Or can the definitions evolve as time goes by to include everyone? Is everyone perfect?"<sup>34</sup>

From childhood, Malini had attempted to integrate into the everyday world of ableist society. However, as she grew older, she embraced her disability identity and fashioned her own version of normalcy. Malini challenges the notion of normalcy as being constructed in the society by illustrating her personal experiences in her life narrative. She redefines new notions of normalcy by highlighting the usefulness of various technological devices. For instance, her electric wheelchair provided her with the freedom of movement, while her communication device allowed her to articulate her thoughts without relying on an intermediary. She felt that

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<sup>31</sup> Chib, *One Little Finger*, p. 149.

<sup>32</sup> Susan Wendell, "Towards a Feminist Theory of Disability," *Hypatia*, vol. 4, no. 2, (1989), p. 119.

<sup>33</sup> Lennard J. Davis, "Introduction: Disability, Normality, and Power," in *The Disability Studies Reader*, ed. Lennard J. Davis (New York: Routledge, 2013), p.1.

<sup>34</sup> Chib, *One Little Finger*, p.197.



she became “an empowered disabled adult in London who could go everywhere.”<sup>35</sup> Malini's journey is one from being viewed as a vegetable by medical professionals to being employed as an event manager. Although she has embraced her disability identity, she is still aware of the piercing stares she will receive upon her return to India, as staring has become a cultural norm. She humorously comments that “Indians seem to have made staring their national habit.”<sup>36</sup> Despite all such exclusions and discriminations, Malini has achieved two postgraduate degrees, travelled independently, written, and given lectures both in India and abroad. She has faced oppressive stares and rejections but has used her fingers to do what society deemed impossible. In this way, she has become an activist who seeks to fight against social injustices and empower disabled individuals.

## Conclusion

Malini Chib illustrates how she was able to challenge societal norms established by ableism. It is important to note that Malini came from a wealthy upper-class family and could attend schools in England and India. This privilege enabled her to access opportunities that many disabled individuals in India, who face various social, economic, political, and attitudinal barriers, cannot afford. Malini's activism and the emergence of the disability rights movement have brought about positive change towards creating a more inclusive society. However, there is still much work to be done to achieve full inclusivity for disabled individuals in India and around the world. In her text, Malini Chib offers a critique of both medical and charity models of disability, which place the responsibility for an impairment on the disabled person. She argues that society is unwilling to look beyond disabled individuals' bodies to their inner selves. While living in England, Malini embraced her disability identity and recognised her self-worth. During this time, she engaged in everyday activities such as grocery shopping and household chores, demonstrating that she was just as capable as any non-disabled person.

This life writing work offers a unique perspective into the intersectional identity of a disabled woman in India in terms of gender, aspirations, sexuality, and her resistance against social oppression within an ableist patriarchal society. The author showcases her agency and empowerment through various means, ultimately subverting the ableist normative constructs and creating her own alternative normalcy.

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<sup>35</sup> Chib, *One Little Finger*, p.114.

<sup>36</sup> Chib, *One Little Finger*, p.196.