

The Violated Body: Human Rights in Indra Sinha's *Animal's People*

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Abstract:

India's history is interspersed with human rights abuses, particularly in conflict zones. Poverty, social hierarchy, institutional weaknesses, corruption, marginalisation of the various minorities/subalterns and an inaccessible justice system has to a large extent made India a democracy only in name and paper. Human lives in India are valued differently and human rights have become a far cry for people living in the margins. The story of the innocent victims of the Union Carbide Corporation (UCC) industrial disaster at Bhopal in 1984 is a testimony to this. The deaths and sufferings due to the diseases caused by this man-made (industrial) disaster sadly remain mere statistics in the pages of the nation's history. Indra Sinha's *Animal's People* (2007) is a narrative which exposes the human rights abuses of the poor, marginalized and disempowered people whose lives apparently matters less to the state. Sinha's *Animal* is a metaphor of human rights abuse by the state and the society at large. Out of the countless number of stories that has emerged from the embers of this monumental disaster Sinha's novel is significant, because it is a narrative that exposes the question of what it means to be human and the lack of (human) rights of the marginalized people. *Animal's People* is an alternate history of India.

Keywords: democracy deficit, disability, discourse, grotesque body, grotesque realism, human rights, justice, marginalisation, narrative, normalisation, norms.

Introduction

Indra Sinha's *Animal's People* (2007) is a voice of angst against the establishment. It is a story of pain, suffering and struggle for justice of the victims of the Bhopal disaster' and a narrative of human rights abuse where the innocent victims of the disaster are twice victimized. Sinha has narrativized the rightlessness and vulnerability of the victims of the Bhopal industrial disaster in 1984 through the deformed *Janvaar* (Animal). He was born abled, as normal human being, but in the aftermath of the disaster, the poison released by the disaster entered his body twisting his spine into a condition which forces Animal to walk in four limbs like an animal. Subsequently, his deformity and poverty abjects his life into a condition which is not fit even for animals, from a human being Animal becomes a "janvaar" (animal). Rejected by the society, he is forced to live on the streets of Khaufpur (Bhopal) by scavenging like the street dogs. In this regard, one may allege Sinha of "spectacularizing" and "exoticizing" the trauma of the victims of a horrific industrial disaster for the sake of 'selling' the story, like the "jarnaliss" (journalists) does. But, Sinha through his novel *Animal's People* (2007) expresses his belief that he sees literature, like the critic Joseph

Slaughter, as a medium to recompense ambiguities in the human rights discourses and narratives. By rendering a cultural discourse to a monumental human tragedy Sinha highlights the rampant human rights abuses and sees the possibility of its operationalization/enforcement through the active involvement of all the stakeholders. Sinha gives the readers an insight and an idea about the bitter truth or fact that exists in the underbelly of the largest democracy of the world. The combination of poverty, social hierarchy, institutional weaknesses, corruption, marginalization of the various minorities/subalterns and an inaccessible justice system makes a lethal poison (which is even more harmful than the poisonous gases released by the pesticide factory), resulting in what can be called “democracy deficit”, the root cause of human rights violations.

Literature and Human Rights Discourse

Sinha, as also some of his characters in the novel, went on a hunger strike to pressurize the Indian government to act, at least to listen to the plight of the victims of Bhopal disaster. Their disappointment with the feeble response of the Indian government and their utter frustrations at the establishment for not doing enough for the victims in providing basic right to justice took the shape of a novel *Animal's People*. In many circumstances and situations where there is “democracy deficit” political measures and recourses like hunger strikes and agitations in pressurizing the government to listen and to act does not generally work. This is evident in the case of the Bhopal disaster as the Indian government utterly failed to stand up to the challenge. Moreover, the Indian government proved to be indifferent towards the plight of the victims of Bhopal disaster.

Justice is a recurring theme in *Animal's People*. The Bhopal disaster is the world's worst corporate homicides and it resonates through each and every line of *Animal's People*. Even to this day, after nearly four decades of the tragedy, the court has not been able to punish the accused. Justice has eluded the victims. Instead of playing the role of a guardian and a vanguard of human rights, an inaccessible (expensive and dysfunctional) justice system where justice is inordinately delayed and weak institutions (corrupt and inefficient bureaucracy) have compromised the merits of a democratic system of governance in the largest democracy of the world. These factors have created a fertile ground for the powerful people to violate human rights of the lesser mortals with impunity. Sinha's novel tells the story of “*ous raat*”, “*cette nuit*” (that night) to bring the victims of corporate human rights violations/abuses to visibility.

Journalism which is touted as the fourth pillar of democracy failed to rise up to the occasion in addressing the crisis of Bhopal disaster. Rather, as described by Sinha, for many journalists Bhopal disaster became a means to mint money by ‘selling’ the same single story of “that night” to the world over and over again. This reduced the trauma of the victims into a spectacle and their lives were transformed into a cruel joke. Under the circumstances, journalism became a farce and the disaster became a double tragedy for the victims. Animal quipped, “[o]n that night it was poison, now it's words that are choking us” (Sinha 2007, p. 2). Instead of speaking for the rights of the affected people of Khaufpur (Bhopal), the “jarnaliss” (journalists) “suck[ed] stories” from them. The activities of many unscrupulous “jarnaliss” reduced the victims to a kind of carcass that attracted scavengers. With sarcasm Animal says:

you were like all the others, come to suck our stories from us, so strangers in far off countries can marvel there's so much pain in the world. Like vultures are you

jarnaliss....drawn by the smell of blood. You have turned us Khaufpuris into storytellers, but always of the same story.....always that fucking night. (Sinha 2007, p. 5)

Therefore, these circumstances brings up the question as to whether “..... the most marginalized people have the capability to ask questions, seek accountability from the state and participate in the process of governance.”² The absence of these measures in a democracy makes it shambolic and human rights often become a prisoner of legalese and partisan politics. A fully functional and healthy democracy is the primary prerequisite for operationalizing human rights because, “[d]emocracy becomes meaningful when people can shape the state and the state in turn creates enabling social, political, economic and legal conditions wherein people can exercise their rights and achieve freedom from fear and want.”³ Most of the victims of the Bhopal disaster are marginalized people who lived in slums in and around the fateful pesticide factory and their struggle for justice have fallen on deaf ears pointing to the fact that the marginalized do NOT have “the capability to ask questions, seek accountability from the state and participate and in the process of governance.”⁴

It is banal to repeat the line “literature is a voice for the oppressed”. However, with the saturation of the ideas of human rights in other areas of study, cultural discourses like literary texts have assumed greater significance. Literary studies have taken up the cudgels of human rights by playing a proactive role in the dissemination of ideas. Through its “soft power” of storytelling, in numerous ways literature engages the thinking faculty of the people and creates a conscious citizen, the bulwark against any travesty of justice. In this regard Pramod K. Nayar says, “[c]ultural discourses and their texts, in many media forms and genres, tell stories of what it means to be human or to be denied humanity, and of these storytelling forms, Literature is by far the most pervasive” (2016, p. xi).

Sinha's novel *Animal's People* rationalizes and makes it possible to understand what a “human person’ means” and brings into visibility the human rights abuses perpetrated by the powerful corporate houses. Further, in this context, it needs to be borne in mind what human rights scholar Anthony Langlois had stated. According to him, “human rights are rights, generated by narratively rationalized metaphysical beliefs, beliefs, which inform us as to what the metaphysical category ‘human person’ means” (2005, p. 383). By consciously casting his protagonist in the form of a debased creature Sinha confronts the readers with the question of what it means to be a ‘human person’. Sinha's *Animal's People* is a story of what it means to be human and what it means to be denied humanity. The transformation of a young healthy boy into a “janvaar” (animal) is Sinha's way of presenting the pain of a violated body and the experiences of an abjected life to make it visible. The novel is an archetypal bildungsroman, focussed on the life and growth of the eponymous anti-hero foul-mouthed and with a deformed body, who is considered a “janvaar” by the people around him. In this context it is pertinent to recall the observations of the critic Joseph Slaughter who is of the view that the plot of the Bildungsroman bears a resemblance to and spreads the citizenship model of human rights. It is seen that in modern nation-states, in a globalized world, literature and human rights intersect at this particular point, i.e. on the issue of citizenship. By definition modern nation-states recognizes solely the universal rights of ‘man’, and by the term ‘man’ it means the citizens of a nation-state. Kate Nash says:

Human rights and citizenship have long been closely entwined; indeed historically they share similar roots in liberal individualism. This is clearly expressed in the great 18th-

century declarations of the ‘rights of man’, the American and the French, which, having resoundingly called for the recognition that ‘all men are created equal’, born with inalienable natural rights, then go on to make it quite clear that by ‘man’ they mean a citizen of the national state. (2009, pp. 1068)

This implies that the modern nation-state has its own system of defining who comes under the purview of law and to whom it is obliged to protect, enforce and ensure human rights. When the society refuses to recognise Animal as a human being, they are in fact stripping him of all his claims to rights and privileges guaranteed by the laws of the nation-state. The denial of humanity is a clever but inhuman way of circumventing the enforcement of human rights in the case of Animal’s life.

Democracy Deficit and Human rights

The United Nations Organisation’s (UNO) Universal Declaration of Human rights, 1948 declares (I have quoted here some of the relevant Articles) that:

- No one shall be subjected to torture or to cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment. (Article 5)
- Everyone has the right to recognition everywhere as a person before the law. (Article 6)
- All are equal before the law and are entitled without any discrimination to equal protection of the law. All are entitled to equal protection against any discrimination in violation of this Declaration and against any incitement to such discrimination. (Article 7)
- Everyone has the right to an effective remedy by the competent national tribunals for acts violating the fundamental rights granted him by the constitution or by law. (Article 8)

(<http://www.un.org/en/documents/udhr/index.shtml>. Accessed 7 July 2018.)

Nonetheless, it is precisely the opposite of these “Declarations” which characterizes the life and existence of Animal. The trauma of his circumstances is too heavy to be borne by any human being. He is rejected and abjected by the society. His body and personhood is subjected to what can be called harsh “discipline and punish” (Foucault, 1995). His abjection as an animal is worse than that of a disabled (atleast they are considered human). Throughout his life (if it can be called one), what he has experienced numerous times is rejection, persecution, discrimination, inhuman or degrading treatment, non-recognition as a person before law, injustice and abjection. Animal expresses his pain in these words, “[i]t’s because I am an animal,’.....‘that’s the real reason isn’t it, that you can never marry me?... I’ll always be nothing but a fucking animal” (Sinha 2007, p. 333). The abjection of his being as an animal denies him the right to life, dignity, equality, etc. which are the basic inalienable right of every “human person”, but alas Animal is not considered a human person.

Forced to live on the edge of the society and far removed from the benefits of humanity, Animal is constantly tortured by the lack of hope. He says, "hope dies in places like this, because hope lives in the future and there's no future here, how can you think about tomorrow when all your strength is used up trying to get through today" (Sinha 2007, p. 185). Living on the streets by scavenging, his life is nothing better than that of the street dogs. Like any other human being Animal too has the inner urge to live a "normal" life as is exemplified by his love for Nisha and his expression of sexuality. The denial of a human identity is a denial of human rights.

It needs to be mentioned here, that human rights is an elitist and an alien concept for the poor, the marginalized, and the "animalised". Animal is not only poor and marginalized, but is "animalised" as well. As an animal, "janvaar" (Animal) does not have a human identity. In this scenario one cannot expect individuals like Animal to fight for his human rights. The onus is on the society to speak and fight for them. However, the larger society as a whole fails them miserably which is manifested by the fact that "jarnaliss" keep visiting in droves to Khaufpur (Bhopal) hoping to extract the same old story to make money for themselves. In exasperation Animal says, "How can foreigners at the world's other end, who've never set foot in Khaufpur, decide what's to be said about this place?" (Sinha 2007, p. 9). Instead, Animal tells *the* story on his own terms refusing to be dictated and trampled upon his rights, he has his own mind. Thereby he shows that he has his own individuality, perspective and knowledge like any other "normal" human person. He says nonchalantly:

Eyes, I don't know if you are a man or a woman. I'm thinking the things I am telling are not suited to a woman's ears, but if a person leaves things unsaid so as to avoid looking bad, it's a lie... if you feel embarrassed throw down the book in which these words are printed. (Sinha 2007, p. 79)

Animal is an unlettered person, but the experience of 'life' has given him the wisdom beyond his years. He may not be able to articulate the complexities of the concept of human rights, but he has the experience and the foresight to see the duplicity of the so-called "humanist society". His refusal to tell the same old single story as demanded by the "jarnaliss" speaks volumes of the fact that when stories are not followed with tangible action it remains just hollow words. This, Animal has the ingenuity to foresee. He has told the same single story, "Ous raat, cette nuit, that night, always that fucking night" (Sinha 2007, p.5) over and over again. "Declarations" and "Laws" affirming the human rights on paper are useless unless followed by actions that spring from genuine empathy.

In recent memory there is no other tragedy (and farce) as the industrial disaster of Bhopal in 1984. The struggle for justice that followed thereafter is nothing more than a farce, and that makes it all the more tragic and painful. In the relentless pursuit of development, the lives of the common people are often trampled upon. Their lives change within a fortnight. A number of lives were lost on that tragic night; those who survived lived to tell the tale of horror and experienced the indifference of the society and government towards the victims who were rendered permanently disabled. Many children born thereafter became a living testimony of the disaster and these innocent children were made to pay with their disabilities for the rest of their lives.

Presently, "democracy deficit" has become a fancy term to refer to a number of short-comings in a democracy. As a multi-dimensional and comprehensive term "democracy deficit" encompasses a number of issues that confront the functioning of a democracy or the lack of it. In the present case, the term has been used to refer to the systemic failures/short-comings of the

institutional mechanisms in Indian democracy in meeting/fulfilling the aspirations and rights of the citizens as guaranteed by the Indian Constitution. The term does not mean just the lack/deficiency in the structure or mechanism of democracy, but more importantly it refers to the functional deficiencies like corruption, inaccessibility to justice delivery system, non-accountability, violation of rights, poverty, fragile social cohesion, lack of freedom of expression and suppression of voices of the marginalized, crony capitalism, etc. No doubt, India regularly holds election to choose its representatives and form the government through a universal adult franchise, it represents one of the most important procedures for the sustenance of democracy, yet this procedure alone is not a guarantee for a functional and healthy democracy where human rights are fully operational. In practice, Indian democracy has not been able to ensure justice for all. This is because its justice delivery system is inaccessible as it is expensive and cumbersome and therefore beyond the reach of common man. Moreover, there is often an inordinate delay in dispensing justice, and justice delayed is justice denied. Therefore, although the Indian Constitution guarantees justice to its citizens it remains out of bounds for many poor, marginalized and the socially disadvantaged people. Without an effective justice delivery system human rights cannot be enforced. A swift, accessible and effective justice delivery system is a must.

Unfortunately, in many “developing countries” beset by corruption, inaccessible justice delivery system, non-accountability, violation of rights, poverty, fragile social cohesion, lack of freedom of expression, crony capitalism, etc. human rights abuses have come to be “normalized” as natural circumstances of everyday living. In India, most cases of human rights violations, particularly of the marginalized go unreported and unnoticed because it is seen as “normal”. Different yardsticks are adopted by the government(s), and the dominant and powerful people in shaping the discourse and narrative of human rights. The marginalized people, like the victims of Bhopal disaster who are mostly slum dwellers from the vicinity of the ill-fated factory, are often adjudged to be/dismissed as lesser humans⁵ as per their own conveniences and interests. This is a rule rather than an exception where the concept of human rights is often twisted to adjudicate human rights justice to different sections of people in the society differently. Under the circumstances, human rights become a privilege and a luxury of the dominant, and the powerful and rich people in the society. Therefore, it is not a surprise to find that most of the human rights abuses take place in what is called “developing countries” of the world like India.

Violence and discrimination against the have-nots and the underprivileged is a byword of human rights abuse of the marginalized. This partly explains the reason of the laxity in the safety standards maintained by the Kampani (company) which led to the disaster. Further, the caste and class based hierarchical social structure in India problematizes the issue of human rights as it discriminates the poor and the different people. The concept of equality which is a basic element in human rights discourse goes into a tailspin. The vast gap between the rich and the poor creates an invisible wall where the term human rights assumes different meanings and connotations on either side of the divide. Therefore, it will not be strange to argue that the concept of human rights, which has been declared as an inviolable right of every human being, has not been the same for every person in the society. It means different things to different people.

Cultural discourses can to a large extent address the issue of “democracy deficit” because it empowers the (marginalized) people with a strong voice. For a very long time, human rights have remained a prisoner of legalese and partisan politics. Cultural discourses like literature gives power to the common people as it enables every individual to participate in the process of operationalizing human rights in letter and spirit. In this aspect Sophie McClennen and Joseph

Slaughter have opined that, “legal scholars and practitioners would do well to recognize that human rights are a cultural discourse as much as they are a set of legal standards” (2009, p. 6). Therefore, literature becomes a sure-fire means to address the issue of freedom of expression. The Indian Constitution provides for freedom of expression, in reality however, the poor and the minorities do not have the freedom of expression in the real sense of the term as they do not have a space in the cultural discourses of the mainstream nor do they have the wherewithal to secure freedom of expression. Sinha launches a scathing diatribe against the “jarnaliss” (journalists) in his literary narrative for making a mockery of human rights with its misuse of freedom of speech. This tribe of men, i.e. the “jarnaliss” (journalists) severely compromised human rights with its blatant misuse and inefficiency. Animal quips:

I said, many books have been written about this place, not one has changed anything for the better, how will yours be different? You will bleat like all the rest. You'll talk of *rights, law, justice*. Those words sound the same in my mouth as in yours but they don't mean the same, Zafar says such words are like shadows the moon makes in the Kampani's factory, always changing shape. On that night it was poison, now it's words that are choking us. (Sinha 2007, p. 2) [italics in original]

Literature pervades across societies, cultures, and caste and class hierarchies/barriers. Most importantly it does what other agencies or media cannot do, i.e. to persuade, educate, and inform the people creating a conscious citizen, the basic bulwark against any travesties. In this regard, Sinha's literary narrative assumes added significance in addressing the problem of democracy deficit as it gently persuades the people to understand what a “human person” *is, means, and ought to be*.

The Grotesque Body and Human-ness

In his novel *Animal's People* Sinha has employed what is called a ‘grotesque realism’ mode of narrative to give visibility and currency to the story of the Bhopal disaster. Because of his twisted spine Animal is forced to ‘walk’ on all his four limbs like an animal and has an unusual configuration of the body which give the impression that it is a “grotesque body.” In his study of François Rabelais' work *Rabelais and His World* (1968 {1965}) Mikhail Bakhtin observed that Rabelais in his novels used the grotesque body to relate political conflicts with the human anatomy and that grotesqueness, by which he means “exaggeration”, “hyperbolism”, and “excessiveness” is a form of subversion of the established order. Animal's deformity and his circumstance conforms to all that “are generally considered fundamental attributes of the grotesque style” (1968, pp. 303). Bakhtin has opined that in a stratified and hierarchical world grotesqueness is a device to mock the establishment and is essentially a satire. According to Bakhtin, “....., the grotesque is always satire. Where there is no satirical orientation there is no grotesque” (1968, pp. 306). Therefore, grotesque realism is essentially subversion and a degradation of all that is humane, noble and ideal which occurs in a carnival atmosphere.

In the present context, Bakhtin's concept of grotesque body resonates with Rosemarie Garland-Thomson's “Extraordinary Bodies”. In her book *Extraordinary Bodies: Figuring Physical Disability in American Literature and Culture* (1997), Garland-Thomson pointed out that in the cultural narratives across time and cultures people with “extraordinary bodies” have all along been considered “freaks” and non-normates. “Normates”⁶ is the term she used to describe a

category of persons that conforms to the “norms” or the accepted standards in the society. The non-normates are those with different configurations/deformities or what she calls “extraordinary bodies”. These species were (and they still are) subjected to scrutiny and ridicule who have been made a spectacle (they were employed in “freak shows”) and they are a discriminated lot in the society. In Sinha’s novel, Animal is a “grotesque body”. The corporeality of Animal diverges from the “norms” and therefore, it is seen as an “extraordinary” that is not only “freak” but “grotesque” as well in its appearance. Animal becomes a non-normate in the eyes of the people around him and not a complete or evolved human being per se. In other words, the “grotesque body” of Animal is read as a manifestation of all those that are vile, abhorrent and the gross. With a twisted spine and a bigger than normal “lund” (penis), Sinha’s Animal is the stereotypical “grotesque body”, which is seen as a bodily material form of the subversive and all that is gross. The appearances, looks, and conditions of the materiality of Animal’s body, i.e. the human anatomy is employed in the narrative to convey political conflicts or the dysfunctionalities of the political system. The much vaunted democratic system of governance is criticized here with the metaphor of a grotesque body, which is essentially a body that has gone wrong in its growth. The problem with Animal’s body is that it has gone wrong because of a lack and a deficit as a result of the entry of poisonous substances into the body. Sinha has used this as a trope to articulate all that has gone wrong with the functioning of democracy which has not been able to fulfil the basic obligations to the people ostensibly due to the lack or deficit in its structure which can be called “democracy deficit”. The grotesque body of Animal transforms into an enduring image of the failure of the modern nation-state in protecting the rights, particularly the human rights of its citizens.

The grotesque body of Animal becomes a text. The narrative of the novel takes on the form of grotesque realism with its widespread use of the imagery and metaphor of grotesqueness. Sinha’s protagonist in *Animal’s People* is not a stereotypical hero with good looks and great/charming powers rather it is a figure that represent a degraded form of human person and a disfigurement of the noble and the ideal. The narrative is filled with a language of excess, whether it is the spoken words of Animal with sexually explicit words or the nature of the unspoken languages of the world where strange voices rush into his head to tell stories and advise him from picking up a quarrel (Sinha 2007, pp. 55). Sinha used the grotesque as a form to critique the state of affairs if the Indian democracy, and exploited the potential of the grotesque to dismantle or to unsettle the structures and ideologies of exclusion, marginalization, disempowerment, and domination through this form of parody and satire. The grotesque body of Animal is not simply a figure of naked vulgarity, but a disfigurement and deformity that represents moral as well as intellectual bankruptcy, in other words “democracy deficit” in the Indian democracy.

Conclusion

Animal is an embodiment of the tragedy of human rights violations of an individual. Through the novel, *Animal’s People*, Sinha subjects the issue of human rights to cultural discourse liberating it from the rarefied heights of set legal standards and the partiality and opaqueness of political discourses to drive home the point that human rights need a humane understanding and treatment. Its narrative and discourses cannot be left alone to the forces of law and the power of the state. Cultural discourses are better adjudicator of human rights. Literature as an agency of cultural discourses has the “soft power” to unravel and demystify the normalization of violence

against the marginalized human beings. In *Animal's People*, the irony is not lost when 'people' start calling a human being "janvaar" (Animal).

Human rights need to be made a part of culture, naturalised in the actions, thoughts and behaviour of mankind irrespective of caste, creed, colour, gender, etc. in order for it to become operational and a universal phenomena. Discrimination, which is the basic mechanism ingrained in the caste and class social structure, undermines the efficacy of institutions to guarantee the human rights of the underprivileged, poor, disempowered and marginalized in the social hierarchy. As much as gender is a question of performativity 'enforced' by cultural discourses (it has become kind of 'natural' since), respecting the rights of a person need to become a kind of performativity. Until then, human rights will remain a pipe-dream and its violation will have to be fought in the streets. In other words, it will remain a mere "Declaration" on paper.

Notes:

¹ The accident took place in the pesticide factory owned by UCC (Union Carbide Corporation) in Bhopal, the capital city of the state of Madhya Pradesh, India on 2-3 December 1984.

² See Social Watch in India. (2004). Making Democracy at Work. (www.citizenreport2004.com)

³ See Social Watch in India. (2004). Making Democracy at Work. (www.citizenreport2004.com)

⁴ See Social Watch in India. (2004). Making Democracy at Work. (www.citizenreport2004.com)

⁵ After a prolonged and protracted legal battle the UCC (Union Carbide Corporation) did accept moral responsibility and made a full and final financial settlement of \$470 million which amounted to \$2200 to the families of the dead. The settlement calculations rest on a flawed and apparently different valuation of an Indian life compared to an American one. Edward Broughton in "the Bhopal Disaster and its Aftermath: A Review" published in *Environmental Health: A Global Access Science Source* 4 (6): 1-6 observed that "[h]ad compensation in Bhopal been paid at the same rate that asbestos victims were being awarded in US courts by defendants including UCC—which mined asbestos from 1963 to 1985—the liability would have been greater than the \$10 billion the company was worth and insured for in 1984."

⁶ In her argument in "Extraordinary Bodies", Garland-Thomson, coins a particularly useful term, "the normate" to talk about "disabled figures". The *normate* is the composite identity position held by those unmarked by stigmatized identifiers of disability (or race or gender for that matter). The *normate* is the imagined everyman whose self-determination, independence, rational thinking ability, and physical sturdiness makes American democracy philosophically possible. The disabled figure—the cripple, the invalid, the idiot—comes to represent everything that the *normate* is not. While Garland-Thomson identifies this dynamic as the driving constitutive force of disability identity in American culture, she acknowledges that ability/disability distinctions have meant different things within different times and cultural contexts; in theory, this assertion opens the possibility that by resisting oppressive representations of disability, the culture of abelism might be changed.

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