

Disability and Mobility in Afghanistan and Syria: Changing Perspectives in *On the Other Side of the Sky* and *The Girl from Aleppo: Nujeen's Escape from War to Freedom*



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Abstract: Disability is commonly perceived as a condition which associates complications to the existence of one's self. But it turns seminal to investigate if disability is really a barrier for one's growth or does the notion circulate through perspectives. While speaking about countries like Afghanistan and Syria, mobility turns up as a daily activity. The natives turning to refugees and their movement, therefore, turn important to be looked at in these locations. The crossing of frontier and leaving one's home already paints a picture of pain in one's mind and in case, if that migrant happens to be a person with disabilities, what extra challenges he/she needs to combat also arises as seminal aspects in the discussion of mobility from these places. This paper seeks to study two texts from Afghanistan and Syria, namely, *On the Other Side of the Sky* (2005) and *The Girl from Aleppo: Nujeen's Escape from War to Freedom* (2017) respectively. Both the texts deal with two young girls, Farah (from Afghanistan) and Nujeen (from Syria) and both share a common problem where they combat situations of conflict and move out of their country. Farah has a prosthetic leg while Nujeen sits on a wheelchair for her cerebral palsy and despite their obstacles, they migrate to different countries and prove themselves by leading the process. This study navigates how despite being termed as Disabled, these girls break barriers and change the dynamics of their lives and alter the perspectives regarding disability.

Keywords: Disability, Mobility, Obstacles, Independence

Farah and her Mobility: Breaking Barriers

Hailing from Afghanistan, Farah, a little girl, gets victimised by a landmine on her way to school. The episode of the landmine transforms her entire course of life, thereby stamping her into the category of disabled. But the journey of life that she ensues after the incident, regardless of the impairment that she withstands, enables the readers to discern the fact how disability is formulated and originates in the minds of people rather than in the activities of a person with disability. Farah had to stay in Germany for at least three years for her treatment and her dreams of wearing high heels, dancing with her friends and other expectations meet a blow when she realises that one of her legs has been cut and in the other, she needs to wear a prosthetic. Initially, as a little girl, being victimised by the disaster of war in Afghanistan and then her movement to Germany for treatment raises fear in her mind. The fact that Afghanistan lacks absolute procedure and amenities for treatment, she was scared thinking her wound would get deteriorated further. Agony intensifies while she lies alone in the hospital bed and being engrossed by the bitter reality of the loss of her legs, Farah's agony impacts deeply in the pursuit of her dreams. Farah's crisis, here, echoes the idea expressed by Clare Barker and Stuart Murray, two famous scholars on disability who write about how

war leads to the creation of disability and intensifies 'trauma'. Following lines from their essay "Disabling Postcolonialism: Global Disability Cultures and Democratic Criticism" published in *The Disability Studies Reader* (2013), a book on disability by the distinguished theorist Lennard J. Davis, expresses this issue of the medical condition which arises owing to the socio- political issues cropping up in an 'environment'.

Any engagement with the environments in which disability is created, especially by war or disaster, and the subsequent involvement of medical practice and discourse, invokes the category of trauma (Barker and Murray 69).

Farah's insecurity, therefore, is a proper display of the predicament of a little girl from a country of war who succumbs to the repercussions of conflict without any fault and ultimately combat the upshots. But it is in Farah's mobility with her mother who is an asthma patient where she takes care of her mother like a baby and gradually establishes newer perspectives of looking into a person with disability. Challenges begin to exhibit for Farah as the situation turns compelling when her father is killed in a bomb blast, where her sisters too die and later her brothers had to escape from the country for the sake of their lives. Terror sets out for the boys in Afghanistan who start falling prey to abduction on a

regular basis with the ultimate reality of being trained to be a Taliban after being seized. Responsibilities, thereafter, mark a shift all of a sudden towards Farah who then remains the sole person to look after her mother with her prosthetic leg. Farah, however, complies with the challenges and eventually the attitude that she formulates towards life alters the conventional discourse that prevails in a society regarding disability where disability is viewed through a pessimistic lens. The readers gradually witness the evolution of a little girl who used to weep on the bed in the hospital of Germany to someone who conquers every odd where disability ceases to remain a hurdle for her. In fact, in many situations she even does work which a person who does not suffer from any disability would not even dare to undertake.

At the dawn of her journey for exile itself, the readers get acquainted with Farah's real courageous self who does not move her steps back but marches ahead equally with the fellow refugee partners and even climbs up high mountains with her deformed leg. The urge to seek life elsewhere with her mother, induces Farah's spirit and there arises situations where she gets an appraisal and is cited as an example by her fellow migrants to those who were getting exhausted. Ghulam Ali, the head of another family with whom they were migrating speaks about Farah to his daughter who was almost of equal age with Farah,

"Look at that Girl. She's missing a leg, and yet she's going faster than you. Why can't you keep up? Hurry now!" (Ahmedi 112).

Farah crosses every hurdle wherein she could have posed excuses to herself. Amidst multiple difficulties of being a refugee, a girl, without any male support, Farah after crossing the border to Pakistan, had no other option but to work twenty-four hours as a maid in a house and there starts her exposure to the world of pain as she now needs to earn bread in a new country for her mother and above all, as a person with disability. The daughter of the housemaid intentionally inscribes upon Farah those works which are actually very painful for a girl with a deformed leg as a result of which her prosthetic starts to damage as she says,

My prosthesis started to wear out from getting wet and then from my dragging it across the rough cement (Ahmedi 126).

This she does to break Farah's confidence but Farah leaves everything upon the Almighty and does not let anything shatter her move. Every now and then, she had to accompany and rush her mother to the hospital because she experiences shortness of breath. Moreover, her prosthetic too fades but her responsibilities to keep her mother alive makes her forgetful of her leg and grabbing the opportunity to shift to America under the initiative of a 'private Christian organization called World Relief' (Ahmedi 134), Farah gears up her life again.

As time passes, her mother's illness turns critical yet her involvement with the new environment makes her confront a world where she feels her disability is just a condition and not any constraint. The day she finds that the government has been contributing in sending the Afghan migrants from Pakistan to America, she considers that as an opportunity and she does not excuse herself that she can't stand on the queue for she is a person with disability, later on she finds that her disability proves effective to her as they are called off earlier for the formalities. Farah's story opens up the reality that sidelining persons with disabilities happens through a medium within the society which can normally be seen in circulation of the idea that the disabled are the ones who are to be excluded from the society. Analysing Farah's narration on lines of the prominent thinker of Disability, Tania Titchkosky, it becomes evident how the society's treatment of disability consequently results in the 'marginalisation' of the disabled. In her book, *Disability, Self and Society* (2006), Titchkosky writes,

Disability is typically treated in an oppressive and exclusionary manner leading to the on- going marginalisation of disabled people and disability issues (Titchkosky 8).

Farah's story brings to light that marginalisation of a person because of disability can pull back the life of that person and he/ she might suffer as a victim all throughout his/ her life. However, the change in location sometimes makes one envision the possibilities of fulfilling a dream. After her migration, Farah becomes so confident that she does not miss her home and starts concentrating on fulfilling her dreams. Finally, her shift to America and towards the end, her driving of the car is enough to portray how a girl who is a migrant and has a deformed leg stands on her own with multiple challenges.

Nujeen's Shift in Wheelchair: Exposure to the Outer World

The inability to do things is one of society's primary definitions of disability (Titchkosky 14).

Titchkosky has very well defined disability and in connection to this, Nujeen's story reflects how a person with disability is considered as someone who is incapable of doing things. Nujeen, the refugee girl from Syria was considered ineffectual in doing anything on her own. This was, however, a notion that had its creation in the hands of the society. Her family stands apart in this regard and never lets Nujeen feel downhearted for her condition. At the onset of the narrative, Nujeen sits in the wheelchair all throughout the day and night and is provided every amenity in order that she can facilitate her life equally as how her brothers and sisters have been living with. But time alters for this girl who is compelled to turn into a refugee for the approaching dangers in her native country, Syria. Nujeen now needs to adapt to the realities of being a refugee with

the additional identity of being a disabled migrant. Nujeen, however, views everything so optimistically that she says,

I want to be useful—feeling you are doing nothing is awful. But I do believe everyone is in this world for a purpose. I just hadn't found mine (Mustafa and Lamb 76).

The journey unlocks copious realities wherein one gets to comprehend the space that a person with disability is offered in a society, that is, of ignorance, and the perspectives that disseminate among the people which they reinforce in contemplating a differently-abled. Nujeen migrates with her sister from Syria to Germany and in between crosses many boundaries like Turkey, Greece, Serbia, Hungary. Being a patient of cerebral palsy, initially she was considered a burden upon the refugees and her wheelchair was not allowed by the fellow refugees as they say "if the wheelchair became a problem in the boat we would get rid of it" (Mustafa and Lamb 135). None pays heed to what her condition would be in the absence of the wheelchair. Her disability turns out to be an obstacle not for herself but for everyone else, finally urging her to say "I'm always the obstacle" (Mustafa and Lamb 133). This portrays the desolate state of Nujeen who is made to feel unwelcome among the refugees for her disability. Her identity gets restrained only to being a girl who is shifting as a refugee with her sister and would generate inconveniences in the journey for the entire group.

Prior to her transformation into a refugee, Nujeen spends her life in Syria in a wheelchair and watching television. But for her, the television serves as the arena which endows her knowledge from every sphere of the world. Although Nujeen was confined in the room, with the TV as her companion, it can be seen that her time there was actually a preparation which she was making unconsciously for the life that would ensue. Unknowingly she was tutoring herself with the sense of responsibilities and trustworthiness that she would have to set her hand to once she turns into a refugee. She becomes proficient in English from the television and subsequently alters the perspective of judging a person with disability as she becomes the most wanted in the group of the refugees when they reach Turkey. The sole refugee having knowledge of English and possessing the quality to communicate through English make Nujeen a crucial member of the group. She, therefore expresses herself and speaks, My English was proving very useful. It was like I was the official translator of the group. For the first time in my life everyone needed me! (Mustafa and Lamb 151).

In the course of the journey, Nujeen's identity is formed differently which in the twinkling of an eye dismisses her previous identity as created by her fellow counterparts. The lack in her body was once a

determining factor of Nujeen as a person with disability in the eyes of her fellow refugees and the formation of her identity as such, further intensifies her agony. But later on, they revamp the lens of scrutinizing her detrimentally and rather start considering her talent as important and consequently her body gets overlooked. The perspective for contemplating Nujeen now changes as she is considered someone very special for the language she knows. Such an idea resembles the discussion by Katrina M. Powell who in her essay "Rhetorics of Displacement: Constructing Identities in Forced Relocations" writes about how identity is constructed with the combination of language and body.

The inextricable linking of bodies and language produced by and about the body is crucial in understanding how identities are constructed (Powell 300).

Nujeen's identity thus alters all of a while by the language she speaks now. She voices on behalf of the Syrian people and attempts to bring it to the international forum later on with her writing. The ability to communicate in English through her disabled body makes people forgetful about the disability that they were concentrating on Nujeen at the onset of the journey of their exile. Moreover, Nujeen finds her purpose in life as she gets the opportunity to do something for the people. Nujeen's account, like Farah's, drives home the fact that the pain of a refugee is often ignored and here in case of the Syrian refugees, Nujeen the girl who sits in the wheelchair has been able to communicate about the needs of the entire Syrian migrant community through her language. The perspective with which she was viewed has suddenly changed altogether and she proves that disability actually lies not in the body of Nujeen but in the thoughts and visions of the people.

Conclusion:

The experiences of Farah and Nujeen demonstrate how perspectives turn crucial in fostering identities. Prior to encountering life as refugees, the potentialities of Farah and Nujeen were undiscovered as they were sustaining life as persons with disabilities. They, however, did never look down upon themselves and continually cherished the dream to live life normally. It seems like there prevails a common lens in society to gaze at a person with disability and focus only on highlighting the lack to the fore. *On the Other Side of the Sky* and *The Girl from Aleppo: Nujeen's Escape from War to Freedom*, portray how the society of Farah and Nujeen had locked the doors for both the girls to look into the outside world of possibilities. However, as the situation gradually turns gruelling and when time offers the sole option to them, that is, to expose themselves to the life of a refugee and undertake all the prevailing risks, they turn the vision wrong

which had been taking a strong hold for so long. Farah's act of climbing the mountains while migrating; working as a maid in Pakistan with damaged legs; driving the car in the foreign country with a prosthetic; looking after her mother who is an asthma patient and Nujeen leading the refugees through her talent of speaking and communicating in English with the foreign authorities, transfiguring herself from being unwanted among the refugees to being an inseparable person in the group, both Nujeen and Farah exemplify that constraints of a differently-abled can be considered to dwell in the mind of the onlookers who very often do not allow the perspectives to follow an optimistic lens, rather than any hurdle dwelling in the bodies of any person with disability.

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