

Laughing in the Dark: Blind Female Sexuality, Desire and Resistance in Joginder Paul's *Blind*

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Abstract: The Indian English novel *Blind* by Joginder Paul presents one of the most intricate portrayals of sexuality in blind women in Indian literature. It is through the character of Roni that the novel subverts the established cultural stereotype of asexuality, helplessness, and vulnerability of blind women. This paper will show that Roni's narrative creates an empowering counter-narrative of desire experienced by the blind woman that is characterized by laughter, physicality, sexuality, trauma, motherhood, and ultimate reclamation of herself. Using Feminist Disability Studies theory with a focus on the scholarship of Kim Q. Hall and Alison Kafer, Indian feminist theory, and body politics, the paper explores how Roni's body becomes the locus of exploitation and pleasure, as well as how laughter becomes a form of resistance against attempts to silence her desire. Thus, the paper illustrates that while *Blind* features a blind female character, it prioritizes her eroticism and political agency, which is a rather unusual phenomenon in mainstream Indian literature and disability stories.

Keywords: Blindness, Female Desire, Sexuality, Agency, Resistance

Introduction

Within literary and cultural representations, the image of the blind woman has largely been constructed as either a figure of pity or an asexual character whose body has been rendered incapable of arousal. The common ableist perspective on disability in general, and female disability in particular, involves the process of desexualizing the disabled body. Joginder Paul's novel, *Blind*, challenges this trend in literature in an extraordinary manner. In his novel, the sexuality of the blind woman is neither obliterated nor demonized; rather, it is made complicated, contradictory, and political. The plot of Roni follows her sexual awakening with Ramrakkha as a child, through institutional life in the Home for the Blind, her relationship with Baba, forced entry into prostitution, marriage and motherhood with Mohan. Eventually, her return and remarriage to Sharfu represents one of the most prolonged depictions of blind female sexuality in Indian literature. A key element in such depiction is her laughter: Roni laughs at times of sexual excitement, tickling, embarrassment, and even pain. Her laughter acts as a sign of her rebellion against the sobriety of disabled women in Indian society and her determination to enjoy life.

This article explores the sexual and emotional development of Roni through the lens of Feminist Disability Studies, in particular Kim Q. Hall's ideas about the sexual agency of the disabled and the 'crip time' of Alison Kafer. In addition, it draws on insights from Indian feminism regarding the body, sexuality, and institutions. The following analysis will be presented in several key episodes of Roni's life, revealing the body as a site of contestation between power, desire, and self-realization.

Theoretical Framework: Feminist Disability Studies and the Politics of Desire

Feminist Disability Studies has always maintained that disability is not just a matter of being medically diagnosed but also a social and political identity intersecting with other identities such as gender and sexuality. According to Kim Q. Hall, disabled bodies have historically been de-sexualized in both medical and cultural discourse, and reclaiming one's sexual autonomy is the key political move (Hall). Alison Kafer takes up this perspective and argues that disabled people have been denied futures in terms of sexuality, desire, and reproduction. The idea of disabled women desiring breaks normative temporalities. In India, the issue of disability has been perceived from the angles of charity, karma, or national progress. As stated by Anita Ghai, Indian feminist activists have often sidelined disabled women by considering their issues an exception to general ones (Ghai). In such circumstances, it is even more interesting to analyze Paul's presentation of Roni. This character does not need anybody's consent to experience sexual desires. Her sexuality is chaotic, sometimes non-consensual, sometimes purely commercial and often joyful. Roni does not want to play the part of the pure, asexual blind girl that is expected of her according to Indian traditions and some kinds of activism.

The body in this novel is never neutral. It is subjected to various kinds of oppression: institutionalized (the Home for the Blind), patriarchal (Baba as father and lover), economic (the brothel), and emotional (romance). However, Roni keeps

affirming her possession over her body through its sensations. Her laughter is one of the few constant elements of her affirmations.

Early Desire and the Politics of Touch: Ramrakkha

Roni's sex life starts well before she comes into the institution for the blind. After being abandoned as a baby, she grows up under the care of her Nani and comes to have sexual encounters with Ramrakkha, who is a young cook in the household where her grandmother is working. It is amazing how candidly this encounter is shown in the story. Ramrakkha is nervous but "honest" in that he sexually approaches the young girl, Roni. Roni "opens one door after another" of her body to Ramrakkha. What is important to note here is that she feels pleasure in this experience as well. The laughter here is very important because even with this power differential, Roni's body reacts with pleasure. The tickling serves as an ongoing trope in the book, occurring again when Baba has sex with her and again when she recalls sex later on with pleasure. Her body is still capable of remembering pleasure despite the complex and sometimes guilty thoughts in her head. Here Roni's early life shows that her experience resists the binary of pure victimhood versus agency. In this way, Feminist Disability Studies allows us to unpack this scene. The ableist gaze tends to assume that women who are disabled cannot tell the difference between pleasure and exploitation, or that their experiences will be entirely tragic or predatory. Paul does not do this. Roni's laughter is proof that there can be pleasure in an imbalanced relationship, and that a blind woman's body can remember that pleasure.

Institutional Desire: Baba, Bhola, and the Ambiguities of Care

In the Home for the Blind, Roni's sexuality becomes linked with institutional power. Baba, the superintendent, plays a multifaceted role of father, guardian, and possible lover. He confesses his fall for Roni's "sightless eyes" and the way in which his gaze (that is, his new vision) moved along her body. Roni recognizes and interprets his gaze as desire. However, their relationship is never placed under any specific label. Baba rejects any idea of marriage because of his age and his role as a father figure to all inhabitants, but he still embraces her, talks about love, and feels physical desire. On her side, Roni accepts this ambiguity. She assures him that "anything that a blind man can see can be claimed" and finds herself in his embrace. Bhola's case makes it even more complicated. After Roni goes into Sharfu's room, she ends up with Bhola and engages in a sexual act with him. She gets angry at him, but the author does not view it as total rage. Years later, when she comes back to her homeland, she says that she is not angry with Bhola anymore. Experiencing different things throughout the years has made her feel like she has washed away sins that were committed unknowingly by the "sinner." The very ability to see things differently retrospectively is a form of agency. Roni is not willing to be stuck in the role of a constant victim. Even in an institutionalized environment of the Home, the power dynamics become more complicated, but she is never a completely passive character.

The Brothel and the Economy of the Body

After leaving the Home, Roni is housed by a woman who, at first, is a 'mother' figure (Nani) but who turns out to be a madam. The novel is very clear that this part of the story should not be romanticized. Roni is forced to work in prostitution, being pressed, dressed, and put into this system of sex trade. Customers arrive; some of them are nice, while others are rough. One of them wants his hair stroked so that he could sleep and think of his mother. Another one, Mohan, becomes a regular customer and loves her. What is remarkable is the fact that even in such an exploited place, Roni manages to keep her agency and her desires. She feels sorry for Mohan and tries to convince him to stop spending his life in a brothel. And when Mohan says that he cannot exist without her, she kisses him. She differentiates between her performance in prostitution and her true feelings. She also keeps on laughing; sometimes from fear, sometimes from happiness, and sometimes as a way of dissociating herself from the place. In this respect, the idea of "crip time" proposed by Alison Kafer might be helpful. "Crip time" opposes the productive temporal framework associated with the lives of non-disabled individuals. Roni's time at the brothel is not an orderly degradation phase that is followed by her liberation. Instead, this is a non-linear time of exploitation, survival, emotional involvement, and sensual experience. Roni does not leave this phase a victim. She leaves it as a survivor.

Motherhood, Marriage, and the Return

Roni's relationship with Mohan becomes a temporary settlement. They run away together to Kanpur, get married, and have a daughter, Lakkhi. For some time, Roni enjoys the usual milestones of "respectable" womanhood: marriage, domesticity, and maternity. However, even at this point, her blindness is affecting the relationship. She keeps asking Mohan to speak because in silence a blind person feels very lonely. She says that silent love is enough for seeing people, while blind people need speech.

The death of Mohan in an accident brings her back to the state of vulnerability. After living for a while with Makhan Lal (Mohan's disciple), she decides to come back to the Home for the Blind along with her daughter. Her return is not portrayed as a defeat. It is a conscious step. Even in a dream, Mohan comes to her and says that if she wishes to make him happy, she should come back to Baba's home. On her return, she is married off to Sharfu. Baba facilitates this marriage with the encouragement of the community. It is important to note that Roni does not come into this marriage as a broken woman in search of shelter. She continues to show sexual appetite. She tells Sharfu what he should do to love her in the manner she desires and also how she would teach him how to "weave" her again.

Laughter as Resistance

In the novel, Roni's laughter emerges as an enduring form of resistance. She laughs while Ramrakkha tickles her, when Baba has sex with her, during her recollection of sexual pleasure, and even in times of fear or embarrassment. In doing so, Roni resists the sense of seriousness expected of disabled women in a culture of ableism and patriarchy. The laughter is a reminder that the blind female body can find

pleasure, indulgence, and joy that cannot be entirely controlled and accounted for. In terms of Feminist Disability Studies, one might call the laughter 'crip humor' or resistant affect. It resists the need to perform the experience of disability as tragedy. Through laughing, Roni asserts her right to an erotic life that is not necessarily marked by pain.

In the context of Feminist Disability Studies, this type of laughter can be interpreted as a form of resistant affect. Kim Q. Hall explains that there is an omission of disabled eroticism in the hegemonic discourse. Reclaiming this pleasure is a political struggle. Roni's laughter represents precisely this form of resistance. It doesn't require social permission to happen. It doesn't care about the appropriateness of this particular situation. It just declares that sensation and pleasure are still available despite the existence of power imbalance. Alison Kafer's concept of "crip time" also adds to the understanding of the topic. Crip time rejects the linear and productive temporality of the able body. In the case of Roni's laughter, the narrative order of degradation – rescue – redeemed victim is subverted. It creates gaps of discontinuity when both pleasure and exploitation, trauma and joy co-exist.

It is also important to recognize that Roni's laughter is not merely a form of liberation that is easily achieved. On the contrary, she laughs precisely when she feels most vulnerable, when she is tickling her own body with that of the powerful man, when she is performing for her clients, or when she recalls the moments which were both painful and pleasurable at once. This is extremely significant, as laughter in the novel is not offered simply as an escape from oppression but rather as the insistence of the self that it cannot be wholly characterized by it. Even later on, when Roni recalls her moments with detachment and self-reflection, the memory of her laughter stays with her. Within the broader economy of the novel, Roni's laughter becomes something of an antithesis to the heaviness and solemnity of the world of figures of institutional and political authority, such as Baba. Whereas Baba has become increasingly preoccupied with secrecy, scheming, and immorality, Roni continues to laugh. As such, Roni's laughter becomes not merely an act of personal defiance, but also an implicit criticism of the somber, controlling masculine world that tries to orchestrate the lives of the blind characters. Roni's laughter appears to be one of the most radical statements made in the novel. By laughing, Roni refuses the idea that a blind woman cannot have an erotic and emotional life of her own. Within the literary and cultural tradition, the blind woman could only appear either pitiable or virtuous. The laughter of Roni is thus simultaneously subversive and affirmative, affirming the fact that even the blind female body is entitled to its own pleasure.

Conclusion

In Joginder Paul's *Blind*, there is one of the few literary depictions of blind female sexuality that neither pities nor idealizes. Via the character of Roni, the author presents a woman whose sexual drive is richly nuanced, whose body is violated and experienced, and whose laughter becomes a mark of protest. Using the theoretical concepts of Feminist Disability Studies and Indian feminism, the article above has demonstrated that Roni's story is a valuable counternarrative to the desexualization of disabled

women. Roni fails to become an agent for herself without difficulty. The presence of structural factors, including economic insecurity, power relations, and abuse, characterizes her life. However, she persistently reaffirms her right to experience, to memory, to laughter, and to self-definition. Thus, she creates new opportunities for representing a blind female character in Indian literature, making this character more than an image of vulnerability. In conclusion, the novel shows that vision is not something that belongs exclusively to the eyes. It is the ability to see the whole range of human characteristics, including sexuality, of those who have been deliberately kept away from the light of society.

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