

Debkumar Dandapat

Department of English

Vijaygarh Jyotish Ray College:

Title:

Revisiting Vision: The idea of blindness with reference to “the country of the blind “by H.G. Wells.

Literature, in its portrayal of life, not only mirrors the multiplicity of society, as a reflective device it mainstreams the marginalized and creates newer discourse about it. Lived experience of the disabled started to attract attention of the authors and artists since the time of Renaissance as they tried to explore the plurality of life to understand the truth of human existence. Although, disabled rights movement came into being during seventies of the last century reflection of disabled experience found its expression in literature in the context of rehabilitation of the post-world war wounded soldiers and existence of life in extreme condition-in science fiction. H.G. wells, otherwise, known as the pioneer of science fiction, in his short story “The Country of the Blind” not only challenged our imagination about the reality we live in but also open our eyes to the possibility of radically questioning the singularity of the visual culture. A survey of representation of blindness in literature would show that visual disability is portrayed in the light of negative or positive stereotypical way which reflects the prejudiced view of society. H.G. Wels’s “The Country of The Blind”, although written more than hundred years ago, is still relevant to the analysis of the disability studies for its unique treatment of blindness that questions the assumption of the non-disabled world about disability in general and blindness.

Keywords: Blindness, sight, visual culture, adaptation, ability:

A cursory look at the representation of blindness in literature would reveal the prejudiced view of the ableist society that reinforces the superiority of visual culture over the lived experience of the disabled. Since the introduction of the social and human rights model for the disabled initiatives are taken to uplift their living condition but the real integration remains the distant dream because of the stereotyped ideas prevalent in the mainstream society that literature continues to express and reinforce. Some related blindness to illicit sexual union, to some it is a tragic reversal of fortune. Some celebrated it as awakening of insight, and to some, loss of sight is compensated through other senses. But often, being blind in literature means the complete loss of personal, sexual, and political power. Beside this gloomy representation, superlative stereotyping is also ubiquitous.

Kenneth Jernigan’s article, “Blindness: Is Literature Against Us?”, is a significant commentary on the generalization of blindness. As a congenitally blind person himself, Jernigan makes it clear that such seemingly positive attitudes are insults in disguise, for they take away “all credit for our [the blind’s] achievements and all responsibility for our failings”. “Country of the blind” literally and metaphorically expresses what blindness is from an outsider’s perspective. The story

reveals the underlying fear of the sighted person about changing the image of blindness in his mind.

Condition of blindness, among other things, arouses fear in the mind of the sighted person. A study of dreams, phantasies and myths show us that a morbid anxiety connected with the eyes and with going blind is often enough a substitute for the dread of castration. We are accustomed to say, too, that we will treasure a thing as the apple of our eye. Explaining the reason behind this fear, Michael Monbeck says, "When a blind person is encountered, the sighted person may feel threatened in two ways that are closely related to this ability. First, the blind person reminds him of the vulnerability of his sight (related to the instinctive fear of being hurt or maimed in some way) and, by extension, his personal productivity and defense." "Granted that they do have intelligence, then that would leave us with only one important superiority – sight. We can see and they can't. Take away our

vision and the superiority is gone. Worse than that – our position becomes inferior to theirs because they are adapted to a sightless existence, and we are not. John Wyndham "The Day of the Triffids"

But a blind person can influence his sighted counterpart in another way. In this regard Monbeck says that "a perhaps more common reaction is the threat posed by someone who is blind and who is perceived as a functioning and productive person. In this instance, the highly valued sense of sight is shown in its true light, that is, as not essential".

If ability to see is considered the most important and most fundamental of the human senses, then imagining a world without it is inevitably going to be a significant departure from our own world. We attach too much importance to visuality and the ability to see. As Georgina Kleege states, "regardless of the fact that we can see or not, we belong to a visual culture and in the minds of especially the sighted, the importance of vision and consequently the idea of what its loss may bring are embedded." So, it is obvious that people having eye side consider themselves superior and their encounter with functional blindness prove that their advantage for their ability to see is an illusion. An analysis of the story will prove the notion.

In "The country of the blind" the story of the protagonist Nunez begins with a climbing accident. Although he survives, he falls into the mythical world of the country of the blind. Due to an epidemic the people of this valley went blind many generations ago and, geographically and culturally remained isolated. People of the outside world only heard the rumor of its existence. When Nunez realizes that the concealed world is really lies before him, he recognizes the immense possibilities of adventure, and the much-heard proverb begins to refrain in his ears: "Nunez advanced with the confident steps of a youth who enters upon life. All the stories of the lost valley and the Country of the Blind had come back to his mind and through his thoughts ran this old proverb, as if it were a refrain – In the Country of the Blind the One-eyed Man is King." In the Country of the Blind the One-eyed Man is King." And very civilly he gave them greeting. He talked to them and used his eyes." Nunez was confident enough that he will win their trust and subordination because he feels himself superior to them. As he belongs to the visual culture, he is accustomed to think like a man with sight and to him, absence of sight is absence of power.

So, with a colonial state of mind he thinks it is his Heavenly right to become their king and master, and his duty to introduce them with visual culture. While he meditated his coup d'état, he did what he was told and learnt the manners and customs of the Country of the Blind. He found working and going about at night a particularly irksome thing and he decided that it should be the first thing he would change". Nunez not only wanted to become the king of the country of the blind he also wanted to alter their lifestyle in accordance with his convenience. But it did not dawn on him that this change might be debilitating to their ability. As they do not require the daylight in their activity they preferred to work in the night and sleep in the warmth of the sun. Nunez wanted to exploit the blind people of the land as a king does to his subject. Nevertheless, the reaction he receives is opposite to his expectation. From his first interaction to the people of the land he was considered as a "wild man using wild words" and imply that "his mind is yet unformed". Gradually Nunez understood that he was not superior to the blind people of the country as he thought when he reached there. When he thought that he could full the people by taking advantage of his sight he hid himself. But soon he realizes that they can even hear his footstep on the grass. When he tries to make a villager recognize his real potential and mentions the proverb of the world outside "In the Country of the Blind the One-eyed Man is King," he is surprised to learn that the word blind holds no meaning to them. Permanent absence of anything cannot be counted as a loss. In spite of it, he tries to prove the advantage of sight to the blind people of the village and realize that the advantage of seeing depends on certain preconditions like presence of light and no obstruction. When he fails to prove his superiority and is ridiculed instead, he resorts to violence. But in his attempt to hit he realizes that his superior ego is preventing him to hit a blind man in cold blood. Still, with a surge of panic, he thinks that he is trapped, and his dreams of grandeur come to the brink of collapse. In a frenzy he strikes at one of his opponents encircling him and runs away, only to turn back after "he thought chiefly of ways of fighting and conquering these people and it grew clear that for him no practicable way was possible. Thus, Nunez ends up being a slave in the country he thought he would rule, and later, upon being forced to have a surgery to remove his eyes, he flees from the valley.

So, the concept of ability or the lack of it entirely depends on adaptation. The villagers function as a unit. "It was marvelous with what confidence and precision they went about their ordered world. Everything, you see, had been made to fit their needs; each of the radiating paths of the valley area had a constant angle to the others, and was distinguished by a special notch upon its kerbing; all obstacles and irregularities of path or meadow had long since been cleared away; all their methods and procedure arose naturally from their special needs. Their senses had become marvelously acute; they could hear and judge the slightest gesture of a man a dozen paces away-could hear the very beating of his heart. Intonation had long replaced expression with them, and touches gesture, and their work with hoe and spade and fork was as free and confident as garden work can be. Their sense of smell was extraordinarily fine; they could distinguish individual differences as readily as a dog can, and they went about the tending of the llamas, who lived among the rocks above and came to the wall for food and shelter, with ease and confidence." So, we see how they transformed their surroundings according to their need as a part of adaptation and learnt by the time to rely upon their senses to get more information out of them. Michael Monbeck aptly states in "The Meaning of Blindness", "Wells admirably demonstrates that man can and does adapt his existence to whatever conditions he must face. The

inhabitants of this world of blindness are shown as completely self-sufficient and, because of the fortunate circumstances of their valley, reasonably well off". Moreover, following citation from the text under discussion reinforces their success story. "Blind men of genius had arisen among them and questioned the shreds of belief and tradition they had brought with them from their seeing days, and had dismissed all these things as idle fancies, and replaced them with new and saner explanations". The people of this community transformed themselves functionally and philosophically and achieved what Clege called as "perfect adaptation" "When physical adaptation is supported by a transformation of mentality, the risk of retreating back to a state of chaos is fully eliminated". So, the proverb: In the country of the blind the one-eyed man is king, works if people fail to adapt themselves to blindness.

From the discussion above, we can say, the concept of normalcy depends on the prevalent culture of the people. Nunez's condition is the condition of each and every blind people in the real world: as Ray McDermott and Hervé Varenne says in "Culture as Disability", "In the Country of the Blind, a One-eyed Man is confused and confusing. That is what it is like to be in another culture".

A careful consideration of an alternative perspective, On the contrary, would show that The idea of sight, in the same way, is embedded to our existence. Rod Michalko, while examining the role of sight in a curiously titled paper "Blindness Enter The Classroom, draws the presence of sightedness in the classroom in terms of the social organization of the classroom. As Tom Shakespeare says " because of the wide-spread segregation of disabled people, many non-disabled people may not have come into contact with the disabled people", we hardly miss the tone of surprise during our interaction with students and non-disabled colleagues. Proff Michalko, in his article, addressed the underlying anxiety of non-disabled students behind the surprise regarding the ability of a blind professor to teach and evaluate them. " after all, there are textbooks to read, words to be copied from the chalk board, exams and term paper to be written and graded, professors to watch out for students who cheat-this site is full of sight." He interrogates the taken for granted practices and assumptions of classroom codes and applied alternative method like interruption by saying excuse me instead of raising one's hand. Similarly, the phenomenon of reading is intrinsically linked with the use of eye. The implicit connection between vision and print is an ideology which dominates in our society leading to the hegemonic privileging of sight.

But we all know that although we can't deny the role of sight in the dissemination and reception of knowledge, it is not the only way. Sight, in the same way, has been privileged in the phenomenon of recognizing one another. But faced with the most difficult challenge of the new millennium so far, we had to shift our in between space into the virtual world and now we rely upon our ears to register the presence of the other person. So, in this altered situation, when technology has played the role of a great leveler in terms of the access of the classroom content because irrespective of the ability to see or not we receive information mostly through our ears, we, the blind people, may be for few days only, do not feel as deprived as our sighted counterpart. Although considering the quality of life a disabled person can have in home confinement in compared to his non-disabled counterpart it is obvious that the amount of

suffering is much greater for a disabled but the shrinking of the classroom or office into mobile phone or desktop, has significantly reduced the anxiety about the mobility of a disabled person. This kind of technology enabled inclusion is, without any doubt, detrimental to the real inclusive way of living but as the story "The country of The Blind" discussed here, this pandemic induced reversed situation, once again, has proved the fluidity of the idea of ability or normalcy.

PROF. DR. NAZAN AKSOY appropriately summarizes the argument in "Vision and illusion": "Abilities change from culture to culture; no mental or physical trait is intrinsically superior to others. There is no fixed disability, but there are hardened habits of masses". "Today we depend so much on sight and value visuality so extremely that in such a case people cannot adapt swiftly to the situation and fall into a chaos. Only when the order is challenged, when we explicitly hurt ourselves we understand how we behave and that is what the author tries to expose.

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