

A Multi-Cultural Perspective upon the Portrayal of Little People

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Abstract

This article aims at projecting the rejection of the age-long body-politics of which Dwarfs literature is a major genre to focus on. Body Cult states great devotion to one's body. It is the situation in which people have intense admiration and regard for the body to be very special. Body culture studies and analyzes its different dimensions and society in terms of human bodily practices. This study includes studies of dance, game, working habits, gender, race, sexualities, social culture, medical culture and bodies that are ill and disabled. Similarly, history states, because of social stigma, no employment was available to these little people but recent studies states that short statured individuals have begun to challenge their position in society, mainly in Western Nations. It seems quite similar to the cultural awakenings that women, African Americans, homosexuals and persons with disabilities experienced when they were identified as a community with shared goals and obstacles. Based on textual information and literary research, the representation of dwarfs will be studied through a multi-cultural dimension.

Keywords: Dwarf, Existentialism, Culture, Height, Midget, Zwerg, Freak, Myth, Achondroplasia, Ancient.

Introduction

Though dwarfism is connected to various fields of study, but it has somewhat, remained untouched in the literary field. The existential crisis of this neglected community and their struggle for identity are the need of the hour for research. An in-depth study can bring out the extent to which the unethical treatment the dwarfs are subjected to in different cultures.

Aim of the Study

The purpose of this study is to examine the condition of the dwarfs and their aimless journey to deal with the inhuman attributes since ages. Here is an attempt to make a multi-cultural exploration of the dwarfs. This study is a venture to critically analyse the selective works from a not-so-vast area with the agenda of existential crisis of a race in a social realm.

Review of Literature

Although some of the writers and authors have contributed to the society, yet a research scholar undertaking research on dwarfism will surely be troubled to face the challenge as hardly any literary research has been done on this specified topic. While relevant psychological, social and biological sources can be accessed, so far rarely any literary themes and debates on dwarfs have formed a limelight in most of the cultures. Availability of primary texts and secondary sources can provide a proper platform to study the case and highlight the problem faced by these so called "Little People" all over the world.

Main Content of the Study

The portrayal of dwarf legends in Indian culture lies with the reference to the mythological story of Lord Vishnu's Vamana incarnation. "Shadowy Dwarf: A source in Hindu Mythology", a prose work in Democratic Vistas by Walt Whitman refers to the Vamana Avatar of Lord Vishnu and this legend tells of a demon named Bali who having conquered the Gods, declared himself as the ruler of the earth, atmosphere and heaven. Vishnu took birth as the dwarf-Vamana, requested Bali a mere three steps of land for his own sacrificial ground. But when Bali accepted without any protest, Vamana revealed his identity and expanded to the size of universe and crossed earth, atmosphere and heaven in three strides, ultimately giving the king immortality by placing his foot on his head. It brings forth that everything lies in our mind and we create reasons of our own. Though we, Indians, worship the Vamana incarnation thinking it to be Lord Vishnu, yet we never have witnessed it, but it seems difficult for us to



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think dwarfs as normal human beings and not as mere objects of humiliation in the present scenario.

Even in the mythological Story of *Apasmara*, the Dwarf, it represented ignorance and epilepsy, also known as *Muyalaka* or *Muyalakan*. So as to preserve knowledge in the world he could not be killed which meant attaining knowledge without struggle, dedication and hard work. To subdue *Apasmara*, Lord Shiva adopted the form of *Shri Nataraja* and performed the cosmic dance of *Tandava* and suppressed *Apasmara* by crushing him with his right foot. He is one of the few demons destined to immortality and it is believed that Shiva remains forever in *Nataraja* form suppressing *Apasmara* for all eternity. This mythical story accounts that these creatures are strongly associated with death because of their deeds. With the evolution of their mythology, they have adopted modern image of short height and ugliness. They have been suppressed by the society in general, though their deeds are not at all dreadful.

In the world of Indian English Writing, one would perhaps cite *Chandras Choudhury's Arzee*, the Dwarf among one of the India's surprises that arouses curiosity to some extent in the mind of the reader, yet depends the way one understands the life of a dwarf man. In the very first page of the book, it is evident that *Arzee*, the dwarf is a metaphor for the feeling of smallness and inadequacy that resides in all of us. He has been too predictable earlier. *Arzee's* internal monologue – as a result of his daily struggle to dignify his existence, his small diminutive body is a perennial cause of resentment to him and the only way he imagines he can feel better is by having a normal life – a job, an adoring wife to sleep beside him. He knew that he will be crushed by the new cycle of rage and impotence and he has to walk face to face with “the crotches and asses of this world”, but he constantly struggles to prove himself a man. This novel of *Chandras* alludes to the power dynamics among people who behave according to their station in life. The one with power always tramples over the less fortunate ones; it is really a cycle of which *Arzee* is a part of, though one would be relieved that at last *Arzee* found a place for himself in the world of “fives and sixes”.

“Dwarfs in Ancient Egypt”, a historical review in *American Journal of Medical Genetics* by *Chahira Komza* states that the sources of evidence of dwarfism in ancient Egypt come from biological remains and artistic evidence including funerary gifts. He also presents a detailed study about many types of dwarfism that were documented in ancient Egypt, most skeletal remains and artistic pictures identify short limb dwarfism, mainly *Achondroplasia*. The ancient Egyptian artists develop standards for depicting dwarfs that deviated slightly from normal. They were portrayed with a small disproportionate statue. The head was large, the torso was relatively long and both upper and lower limbs were short. The legs were frequently bowed. Often dwarfs were illustrated with *lordosis* i.e. curved spine and protuberant abdomen. The earliest biological evidence for dwarfism in ancient Egypt dates to Pre-dynastic Period called the ‘Badarian Period.’ The

pictorial sources of dwarfs in ancient Egypt especially during the old kingdom are quite abundant and include tomb and vase paintings, statues and minor arts.

Monalisa Chakrabarty, a PhD Scholar, in “The Little People: An alienation from the new line society” in the journal, *The Literary Herald* cites the same book by *Chahira Kozma*, Professor of Pediatrics and Metabolic Disorder, Georgetown University Hospital, Washington DC, USA. *Kozma* writes that, based on the documentation left by their art, the ancient Egyptians recognized the presence of dwarfs in almost every facet of life. “Due to the hot dry climate and natural and artificial mummification, Egypt is a major source of information on *Achondroplasia* in the old world. The remains of the dwarfs are abundant and include complete and partial skeleton. Dwarfs are employed as personal attendant, animal tenders, jewellers and mainly entertainers. Some of the dwarfs achieved important status and had lavish burial places close to the pyramids. There are at least two dwarf-gods named *Ptah* and *Bes*. God *Ptah* was associated with regeneration and rejuvenation i.e. reversal of aging. The God *Bes* was a protector of sexuality, childbirth, women and children. Dwarfs were accepted in ancient Egypt, their disorder was not shown as physical handicap. Wisdom writings and moral teachings in ancient Egypt commanded respect for dwarfs and other individuals with disabilities.

Kozma further states that artistic evidence shows that there were several elite dwarfs from the old kingdom who achieved important status. They were *Seneb*, *Pereniankh*, *Khnumhotpe* and *Djeder*. The dwarf *Seneb* served during the fourth dynasty of Pharaohs *Khufu* and *Djeder*. *Seneb* statue is on display at Cairo Museum. *Seneb*, the father was most likely an *achondroplastic* dwarf though his wife and children are of average size. Dwarf *Pereniankh* or “the Dancing Dwarf” was a court official in the 5th or 6th dynasty. His tomb is located in the vicinity of the great pyramid. The tomb contained his skeleton with the diagnosis of *achondroplasia*. Egyptologists have suggested that *Pereniankh* was the father of *Seneb*. Dwarf *Djeder's* naked figure is on display at Cairo Museum, Egypt, showing an accurate depiction of the features of *achondroplasia* with short hand, shortening limbs and protruded abdomen. Dwarf *Khnumhotep* had achieved courtly status and held the title “overseer of clothing” suggesting that he belonged to the household of high official. His small figurine is on display at Cairo Museum, Egypt with elongated skull and shortening of proximal parts of his upper limbs, arched back and protruded abdomen. Apart from this, several reliefs from the old kingdom tombs depicts male and female dwarf entertainers, dancing, singing or playing music. The facial features and short limbs of dwarf musician are characteristics of *achondroplasia*. Several Egyptologists and researchers have concluded that the image of short people in ancient Egypt is essentially positive. According to them, *achondroplastic* dwarfs had magical significance and they were associated with sun god. The function of dwarf was the protection of the living and the dead from dangers facing those

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including diseases, venomous animals, snakes, crocodiles and other dangers. In incantation 3, against the snakes in the *Magical and Medical Papyrus of the New Kingdom*, the name of dwarf is invoked for protection from the snakes.

“o, dwarf! My magical powers are against my enemies. To render the influence of the poison of the snakes harmless. May they be free from intrusion for ever.”

In the same Papyrus the dwarf god is invoked to stand by the speaker:

“O that dwarf of the sky, o that dwarf of the sky. O dwarf great of face, with high back and short thighs. O great pillars, extending from the sky to the underworld. O lord of the great corps which rests in Helipolis. O great living Lord [Leitz, 1999].”

Women in childbirth also invoked the help of dwarf gods. In a pure Papyrus at Leiden, there is a spell to felicitate birth called “the spell of the dwarf”:

O good dwarf, come, because of the one who sent us....come down Placenta, come down placenta, come down!

The prayer was to be spoken four times over a dwarf of clay placed upon the vertex of the woman who is giving birth. The woman in pain shouts: “To the man for a dwarf – statue of clay” [Borghouts, 1971]. It also teaches that care for the old, sick and malformed is a moral duty because:

*Man is clay and straw,
the god is his builder.
The wise man should respect people
Affected by reversal of
fortune.[Simpson, 1973]*

Thus, dwarfs were likely accepted in ancient Egypt and were given a visible role in the society.

In “Dwarfs in Ancient Egypt and Greece”, author, Veronique Dasen examines dwarfs in myth and everyday life in ancient Egypt and Greece where physical beauty was highly admired even to excess. The spectacular forms of dwarfism were always a focus of interest, and it is the most depicted disorder in antiquity. Dr. Dasen brings together a whole range of unpublished or little-known iconographic, epigraphic, literary and anthropological evidence. Dasen opens her book with a question- “In ancient Egypt and Greece, physical beauty defined in terms of proportion, was highly admired. What happened to those who conformed neither to these ‘ideal proportions’ nor to norms of human appearance?” She attempts to answer this question with particular reference to dwarfs. The chapter starts with the typology of growth disorders including a table of main types of dwarfism.

She quotes there is no sign in the literature about the nature of disorder or of the difference between various forms. Egypt, says she, follows and worships the dwarf god, the longest devoted to Bes. The only information that Dasen could give us from the Old Kingdom reliefs was, Dwarfs were frequently

represented as part of the household in royal and noble tombs, and conclusion can be drawn about the role that they played, as personal attendants, tenders of animals, entertainers dancing and making music and as jewellers. Less informative about the actual status of the dwarfs are the figurines which predominate in the Middle Kingdom, whereas there is a remarkable absence of dwarfs in household scenes in the New Kingdom when in contrast the number of dwarf-gods increases. One can never get into conclusion regarding the status of human dwarfs in Egypt. Dasen concludes that “ancient Egyptians welcomed short statured people and there are no signs of rejection or exclusion.

The information about dwarfs in Greece does not cover all the periods and the literary sources are very sparse. Dwarfish figures occur in myths in the guise of pygmies. Dasen examines the literary account and finds that dwarfs appear as liminal, wild but inoffensive things like powerless pygmies. There are some vase-paintings and Attic-red figures carrying a child, basket or shield in the 2nd half of 5th century and middle of 6th century which offers the hope of answering Dasen’s questions like what were the normal attitude towards dwarfs and their status in society, yet the materials were in damaged condition. There is only one picture of female dwarf that implies that women were not accepted to the same extent as male. They could not admit female deformity. Some of the remains showed that the dwarfs were engaged in same sort of activities as the normal-sized Athenians, but again, interpretations of these run into problem.

In a book named “Representation Subversion and Eugenics in Gunter Grass’s *The Tin Drum*” Peer Arnds states in Chapter 3 “The Dwarf and Nazi Body Politics” (pg 49) the Nazi’s worship of the desirable body and their ill-treatment because of the race, political or religious belief of the undesirable body. They perceive that physical beauty is an indicator of life’s value and worthiness of life. This view was mainly adopted from Nietzsche. Around 1900, journals like “Beauty” and “Strength and Beauty” desire to heal the body from diseases of civilization.

The Munich Exhibition of Degenerate art was divided into two opposite parts, one that propagated the ideal of beauty, and the other that focused on cripples, disfigured bodies and bodies in pieces. The Nazis aspired to the former, the creation of beautiful bodies by going through the latter one – the bodies in pieces. In his speech at the opening ceremony of “House of German Art” and “Great German Art Exhibit”, Hitler pointed out that National Socialism had made it its task to free the Reich (third regime or empire) from all those influences that might be destructive to its people, and even if this cleansing did not happen in one day, everybody who participated in this destruction ought to know that the hour of his or her elimination would come sooner or later. The healthy body aesthetically appealed the Nazis. Since, it is the healthy body that can function well, it was considered useful for the building of the thousand-year empire. They went so far that even people with

minor defects were killed. To maintain the health of the individual and overall health of the collective body, National Socialism relied largely on the beneficial impact of the physical education. The understanding was that if the individual body was not intact, the whole body of the people would suffer. Therefore, to recover its overall health, it's better to cut away the diseased parts of the collective social body. National Socialism tried to represent this people's body in its texts and public scenarios like in Olympics games of 1936. In view of the overall health of the collective body, it was each individual's duty to keep his or her body in good shape. Nazis created the term *Gesundheitspflicht* (the duty to stay healthy). Black bodies were considered natural miracles by the civilization. In view of such politics, stunted growth was an alien to the German kind, degenerate and damaging to the health of the civilization.

Ursula Hegi, a German born American writer tells one of the most eloquent story in her novel *Stones from the River* through the central character Trudi Montag, a Zwerg—a dwarf—short, undesirable, different, the voice of anyone who has ever tried to fit in. Eventually she learns that being different is a secret that all humans share—from her mother who flees into madness, to her friend Georg whose parents pretend he's a girl. Trudi is a complex character, as damaged by her mother's madness and early death as she is by the later circumstances of her life, and she is sometimes cruel, vindictive and vengeful. A perennial outsider because of her deformity, Trudi exploits her gift for eliciting people's secrets—and often maliciously reveals them in suspenseful gossip. But when Hitler ascends to power, she protects those who have been kind to her, including two Jewish families who, despite the efforts of Trudi, her father and a few others, are fated to perish in the Holocaust. She states that she chose life in the middle of war. She took action instead of simply staying silent to atrocity. She gave people books and stories to take them away from their dismal worlds of hunger and strife. Despite being a little woman who was pitied and bullied because of her height, she chose people and books. She was not all good, but she was not all bad. She was human.

The famous English poet, anthologist and short story writer, Walter de la Mare in his surrealistic novel *Memoirs of a Midget* has portrayed Miss M. (a midget) as larger than life, larger than her size. He writes, "How small was Miss M.? This is uncertain but for years she was so tiny that she ran about on the dining table and stood there reading books that was taller than her. When a child, born to embarrassed full-sized parents, she could sleep in a cat's basket. Even at the age of 20 – the year of her personal crisis as a young lady – she could hardly manage stairs. She may have reached a height of two feet. She has a tiny safe income, until the crash comes. She is at times violent, sharp-tongued and conceded away by adult passions, determined to be seen as far more alert than the normal people around her, at once scornful of them and craving to belong. She is sometimes arch, always demanding and a delightful talker. She was ready to set herself against the world,

but there is no escape to this. She even hopes someday she might be taken seriously, neither with scorn, nor with pity but as one reads a work of a common-sized person. After all, each one has shared the world on equal terms.

Betty. M. Adelson, an American psychologist and a mother of a dwarf daughter brings special insights by tracing the widespread mistreatment of dwarfs over the centuries, endangered by their being viewed as curiosities rather than as human beings capable of same accomplishments as people of average height as deserve the same pleasures as others. In her book, *The lives of Dwarfs: Their Journey from Public Curiosity toward Social Liberation*, she states about dwarfism that they have borne the labels "freaks" and "oddities", they have been collected as pets, displayed as spectacles and treated as comic relief spanning the centuries from ancient Egypt to the present, this unique social history chronicles the various ways this population has been exploited.

In the novel "The Thing about Georgie" by Lisa Graff, which has also been cited in "The Little People: An Alienation from the New Line Society" by Monalisa Chakrabarty, we find Georgie being a dwarf faces difficulties to do things that are taken for granted. People notice him, stare at him and make fun of him for being what he is. There are enough trials in those twin years to make even the strongest lament to his fate- school, friends, the first inklings of romantic love, discovering one's particular strengths and weaknesses. As said, no pain equals no gain because nobody escapes those years without learning some big lessons. Georgie though surrounded for the most part by kind and helpful people, finds himself in the middle of a change in his life from which there is no escape. With courage and smart thinking, he manages to recognize his worlds so that new things substitutes to old habits and ideas and he can move forward with self-esteem and happiness.

"From the Freak Show to the Living Room: Cultural Representations of Dwarfism and Obesity" by Laura Backstrom states, dwarfism became constructed as an Identity Project with the aim of bodily acceptance. The mostly positive historical characterizations of dwarfs allowed them to easily adopt the tenets of the Disability Rights Movement as they evolved from the freak show performances to television as an educational platform. They have adopted a social model of disability, positive social identity, self-acceptance and full social-participation.

Andrew Solomon's *Far from the Tree*, brings forth the questions – what happens in families where a child displays traits the parents do not have, especially if they are undesirable ones. By reflecting on his own development as a gay and dyslexic child of straight parents, Solomon researched ten groups of anomalous children, one being Dwarf among them and tried to determine how their identity are formed or changed by such parent-child disparities, they should acknowledge a common identity as being anomalous apples that all fall far from the tree. In the third story, "Dwarfs", he states the feeling of a woman, the mother of a teenage dwarf who is desperate to start

dating. Many dwarfs experience their condition as an identity and some to have children who are also dwarfs, raising question about the ethics of selecting for difference. But neither dwarf nor average-height people have reached full agreement on whether dwarfism is a disability but it is certainly a difference, perhaps the most immediately visible of those chronicled in *Far from the Tree*.

The world has witnessed many eminent dwarf personalities like Paul Leicester Ford - the great grandson of Noah Webster, Benjamin Lay - the Quaker Dwarf who became the first revolutionary Abolitionist and Alexander Pope - an 18th Century English Poet best known for his satirical verse and use of heroic couplet, have not only accepted their difference but also achieved success in life.

The Autobiography of Mrs. Tom Thumb by the American writer, Melanie Benjamin is a coming of age story, depicting self-acceptance and growth of Lavinia Warren Bump who was introduced to the public by P. T. Barnum, the famous American Showman to bring out interest in the "curiosities" of the world. It made sense not only to Barnum but to Lavinia too, to get married to Charles aka General Tom Thumb - great discovery and greater friend of Barnum. Along with the civil war, their marriage too covered the newspaper pages and soon Charles, Vinnie along with her dwarf sister Minnie and Commodore Nutt travelled the globe as the most famous quartet in the world. It is the irresistible epic of a heroine who conquered the country with a heart as big as her dreams - and whose story will surely win over others. It states, "She was only two-foot eight-inches tall, but her legend reaches out to us more than a century later." She refused to let her size dictate who she was. She was big inside and she worked hard to prove it to the world, always demanding and receiving respect for who she was, not merely for what she was. Vinnie has a strong voice and a strong personality, and is consistently

interesting in her contradictions. She's flawed and, like many people and she misidentifies her flaws. The fact that she was a walking contradiction made her a very interesting character, even in her bad moments. She was determined to live life on her own terms, and not let her size limit or define her.

Conclusion

The characters, fictional or real, have always remained a victim of society and are trying hard to cope-up with others without losing hope. They dream of a bright future, if not for themselves but for the upcoming race, filled with the promise of humanity, liberty and identity. Though not suppression, in some of the cases, but lack of proper humanitarian attention has been a major reason in the degradation, humiliation and casting down of these little people.

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