



## Intersection of diaspora and disability: A close reading of Malini Chib's *One Little Finger*

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### Abstract

Disability appears to be a socio-cultural construct over impairment, and the living experience of a disabled person depends heavily on several factors encountered by them in daily life. Two significant factors that contribute most to the formulation of the experience are sociocultural settings and the person's economic condition. Furthermore, secondary elements such as the available infrastructure in a country, the attitude of ordinary people towards persons with disabilities, and the government's actions also contribute to the experience. In her autobiography, *One Little Finger*, Malini Chib wrote about her personal experience as a disabled woman living in two countries, India and England, and it is evident that she had distinct experiences in each. This study applies textual analysis to examine the perspectives raised in the text, with reference to theories in Disability and Diaspora scholarship. The paper aims to explore the intersection of disability and diaspora, a noble combination for interpreting the experience of a disabled person.

**Keywords:** Disability, diaspora, intersection, gender, disabling factors

### Introduction

Disability theorists believe that 'Disability' is a term applied to persons with an impairment in the body, and this application of the term appears to be socio-culturally constructed. So, any variation in the sociocultural setting may lead to a change in how the term 'disability' is applied and perceived. It has been observed in the past (through religious models) that a person with a disability was seen as a monster, a burden on the family, a curse, or an effect of Karma from a previous birth. Similarly, a change was noticed in the perspectives of people when the medical model and social model of disability were introduced in the second half of the twentieth century. The medical model observes a disabled person as an impaired person whose issues can be fixed with any scientific solution. Besides, the social model focuses on the demarcation between impairment and disability and emphasises the fact that Disability is a socio-cultural construct. Additionally, the cultural model locates representations of disability across various spheres of life, from literature to film. A notable point here is that Disability theories were introduced in Western countries such as the UK, the USA, Canada, and Australia, where people are educated and, most importantly, their per capita income seems sufficient to afford a quality of life for anyone, including people with disabilities. These countries offer a more inclusive atmosphere, including accessible transportation and infrastructure, as well as job opportunities for people with impairments. However, these are not the same globally, especially in third-world countries with low-income populations, and thus, the living experiences of a person with a disability may not be similar. This chapter aims to explore one such intersection of disability with diaspora and try to understand the facts concerning the amalgam. The research paper analyses Malini Chib's autobiography, *One Little Finger* (2010), as the primary source to explore the distinct features of the intersection and examine the changes in perspectives on disability influenced by sociocultural construction.

### Intersectionality of Diaspora and Disability

Disability scholarship shows that an intersectional approach offers scholars a chance to analyse disability from multiple perspectives. It allows experts from various fields- such as sociology, education, psychology, and literature- to work together, incorporate different viewpoints, and support people with disabilities in inclusive living. Disability is now seen as the "fourth form of discrimination and oppression," alongside race, class, and gender (Davies, "Enforcing Normalcy", 18-35). These factors can intersect, creating greater challenges for individuals affected by them. Therefore, a single method may not be sufficient to grasp the complexity of segregation faced by disabled people fully. In "Disability and the Edges of Intersectionality," Alison Kafer and Eunjung Kim state that disability is an "essential component of intersectional work" and opens "new lines of enquiry" (123). Dan Goodley, in *Dis/Ability Studies: Theorising Disablism and Ableism*, emphasises that "human beings are interdependent" and "mutually dependent and desiring interconnections" (49). Scholars also note that disabling factors can change depending on cultural ideas, spatial layouts, and available facilities for people with disabilities. Additionally, disability is influenced by various factors, including sociocultural context, government policies, and self-perceptions. If a person with a disability moves to a different location, their disabling conditions might change, potentially improving or worsening their experience of disability.

Malini Chib's *One Little Finger* (2010) is the primary text for this study. Malini Chib was diagnosed with cerebral palsy, a condition affecting muscle tone, movement, and coordination due to brain damage usually occurring before, during, or shortly after birth. In her case, she experienced a lack of oxygen during delivery. She faced disabling conditions since childhood in India and worked hard to overcome them. Later, she moved to London for her studies and subsequently pursued a teaching career. Chib has shared her experiences of disability in relation to spatial changes and how these influenced her life. A key focus of her book is the social construction of disability, where she challenges

medicalised views that portray cerebral palsy as a tragic flaw, emphasising society's disabling practices- what disability theorists call the "social model of disability" (Oliver 33). She recalls moments when physical spaces blocked her access or when teaching methods excluded her participation: "The walls of inaccessibility around me were thicker than the walls of my school building" (Chib 47). These insights echo Lennard J. Davis's critique of the "normate," which elevates able-bodiedness as the cultural norm (Davis 12).

Education emerges as another central theme. Chib's challenges in Indian schools highlight systemic neglect, where teachers and classmates often did not accommodate her needs. Her move to the UK exposed her to disability-sensitive teaching methods, revealing global disparities in educational access (Chib 72–74). Employment also becomes a landscape of exclusion, as she recounts the difficulty of obtaining work in India despite her qualifications. Her eventual advocacy for disability rights demonstrates how personal struggles can lead to political activism (Chib 146). Gender adds complexity to these issues. As a disabled woman, Chib describes being denied romantic and sexual agency, noting that "People assumed that my body, because it was disabled, could not desire or be desired" (Chib 165). This aligns with feminist disability scholarship by Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, who stresses how disabled women are often desexualised or infantilised (Garland-Thomson 1997) [8]. Indian feminist disability scholar Renu Addlakha, in "Disability Studies in India: Global Discourses, Local Realities," remarks that "women with disabilities are often considered as asexual and incapable of taking on sexual, reproductive, and maternal roles" (16). S. B. Agnihotri and Amrita Patil observe in their article "Women with Disabilities: How Do They Fare in Our Society?" that "the disadvantages of gender and disability intensify the existing gender gap among persons with disabilities across various aspects of rights and functioning" (67). Chib's honest reflections on love and sexuality challenge these stereotypes, affirming the legitimacy of disabled desire.

Diasporic narratives often reflect experiences of dislocation, cultural negotiation, and hybridity. Chib's memoir exemplifies these themes through her experiences living and studying in London. She notes that while Britain provided infrastructural support and inclusive educational opportunities, she still faced cultural alienation and subtle racism: "I was always looked at as different, both because of my body and because of my colour" (Chib 54). This dual feeling of estrangement highlights Avtar Brah's concept of the "politics of location," where diasporic identities are inherently fractured (Brah 193). Additionally, Chib's return to India after studying abroad further complicates her diasporic identity. Having been used to more inclusive systems in the UK, she encounters India's systemic neglect of disabled people: "When I came back to India, I realized how little my country had done to recognize the rights of people like me" (Chib 102). Her diasporic perspective enables her to critique both environments, framing her narrative as a transnational critique of how East and West address disability.

Malini Chib's autobiography, *One Little Finger* (2011) [4], illustrates her personal experience living with cerebral palsy while also exploring her identity as a member of the Indian diaspora. The story shows how the intersection of disability

and diaspora creates both barriers and opportunities for empowerment. Her diasporic journey reveals contrasting cultural perceptions of disability. In India, disability is often viewed through stigma and fatalism, with conditions like cerebral palsy sometimes considered divine punishment or karmic consequence (Mehrotra 26). Chib recalls the lack of infrastructure and the societal tendency to see disabled individuals as dependent or pitiable. In contrast, her life in the UK offered better access to education and disability-friendly facilities. Nevertheless, she also faced subtle alienation stemming from racial and cultural differences (Chib 54). This duality highlights that neither cultural setting offers full acceptance; instead, Chib navigates her identity across two systems that are different yet equally exclusionary.

A key diasporic element in Chib's story is her family's choice to migrate for education and recovery. In India, her schooling was hindered by limited teaching methods and weak institutional support. Conversely, the UK provided adaptable resources, but she faced cultural displacement (Chib 72–74). This reflects what Rukmini Pande describes as "diasporic negotiation," where access to opportunities abroad often results in a loss of cultural connection (Pande 119). Chib experiences what diaspora scholars call "in-betweenness" (Brah 193). Her disability places her on the margins in both societies, and her diasporic identity intensifies this otherness. In Britain, she was identified as Indian; in India, her Western education and diaspora exposure made her seem foreign to her peers. This overlapping marginalisation highlights what Anjali Arondekar refers to as "layered exclusions," where diaspora and disability intersect to create multiple barriers (Arondekar 87).

Chib's diasporic identity also strengthens her activism. Building on the progress made in disability policy and infrastructure in the UK, she advocates for improved accessibility and rights in India (Chib 143–46). Her story illustrates what Nirmala Erevelles calls "transnational disability politics," in which diasporic individuals serve as bridges between global rights discourses and local practices (98). As a disabled woman, her diasporic identity is further shaped by gender expectations. In India, patriarchal systems marginalise her as both a woman and a disabled person. In the UK, despite more progressive gender norms, racial and cultural differences still pose challenges (Chib 165). This intersection emphasises the importance of understanding disability in relation to diaspora, gender, and class. Chib's work powerfully shows how disability and diaspora create layered exclusions. In the UK, she experienced infrastructural inclusion but cultural marginalisation, as her identity as an Indian woman marked her as different. Conversely, in India, she felt a sense of cultural belonging but faced systemic neglect due to limited accessibility (Chib 83, 102). This dual alienation highlights the complex nature of her identity as both disabled and diasporic.

However, diaspora also fostered forms of empowerment. Exposure to British disability rights discourses enabled her to voice demands for accessibility and equality in India: "I wanted to bring back what I had seen abroad and make India a place where disabled people could live with dignity" (Chib 143). This transnational activism places her within what Nirmala Erevelles describes as "global disability politics," where diasporic individuals serve as mediators between different contexts (Erevelles 98). Additionally, Chib's

diasporic perspective helps her critique patriarchal norms in India that further marginalise disabled women. By contrasting the gendered experiences of disability in India and the UK, she shows how intersecting systems of oppression function differently across cultures (Chib 165). In this way, she exemplifies Kimberlé Crenshaw's concept of "intersectionality," the interconnectedness of various forms of oppression (Crenshaw 140).

### Textual Discussion

Malini Chib's memoir, *One Little Finger*, offers more than just her life story with cerebral palsy; it also explores the complex layers of diasporic identity. Drawing from her experiences in India and the UK, she describes the challenges faced when navigating both disability and diaspora identity. Her narrative touches on issues like accessibility, stigma, alienation, empowerment, and belonging. Chib highlights how Indian cultural perceptions often render disabled individuals invisible or pitied. She recounts: "In India, people looked at me with pity. They thought I was a burden, someone whose life could never be meaningful. They saw the wheelchair, not me" (Chib 47). This illustrates how disability is socially constructed in India as a form of otherness, linked to karma or misfortune (Mehrotra 2013) [12]. The model approach in disability scholarship helps deepen understanding of disabled people's experiences. In India, the dominant model is the religious or moral one, shaping perceptions of disability. Banibrata Mahanta notes that disability was viewed as punishment for sins, associated with impurity, leading to social ostracism; it was also seen as shame for the individual and family, or as being chosen by God (82).

Her move to the UK represented a pursuit of accessibility and equal opportunities. She observes: "In England, I was finally able to attend classes with ramps, accessible toilets, and supportive teachers. Still, I felt like an outsider, an Indian girl with an unfamiliar body in a foreign country" (Chib 89). Here, Chib connects her disability to her diasporic identity, showing how migration offers structural support but can also deepen feelings of cultural alienation. She describes her liminal experience: "When I went back to India after years in England, I was too Western for my Indian friends, yet in London, I was always the Indian girl in a wheelchair. I felt I belonged everywhere and nowhere at once" (Chib 152). This sense of "in-betweenness" aligns with Homi K. Bhabha's idea of hybridity, where diasporic individuals occupy liminal spaces of belonging (Bhabha 1994) [2].

The intersection of gender compounds her marginalisation: "As a disabled woman, the expectations were doubly crushing. In India, marriage was considered impossible for someone like me. In England, relationships were hard because I was still the foreigner with a body that did not conform" (Chib 173). This shows how gender roles and cultural norms intersect with disability and diaspora, placing Chib within multiple systems of exclusion. Her experience in the diaspora also supported her activism: "The disability movement in England opened my eyes. I realized I was not alone, and that my struggle was political. Returning to India, I wanted to bring that same awareness to my own people" (Chib 201). The transnational approach allows Chib to critique Indian society while drawing on global disability rights discourses, particularly the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (Shakespeare 2014) [14].

Ultimately, Chib finds a sense of belonging through storytelling: "Writing *One Little Finger* was my way of belonging. Neither India nor England gave me complete acceptance, but in telling my truth I created a space where I belonged fully to myself" (Chib 233). This reflects the diasporic literary tradition, in which self-writing creates a sense of home in the absence of a fixed sense of belonging.

### Conclusion

Malini Chib's *One Little Finger* stands as a significant work in modern Indian disability literature, notable not only for its personal account but also for its theoretical significance. The book examines how disability intersects with diaspora, uncovering intricate stories of identity, gender performances, and sexuality of a person with a disability. While living abroad intensifies feelings of alienation, it also allows her to advocate for disability rights internationally. Her autobiography challenges straightforward narratives of personal triumph or homesickness; instead, it situates disability within broader global inequalities and highlights the agency of disabled people. By combining diasporic hybridity with disability activism, Chib critiques existing systems and envisions new spaces of inclusion and respect. Through the interconnected experiences of disability and diaspora, she depicts the complex negotiations involved in navigating multiple marginalised identities. Her story critiques the infrastructural and cultural shortcomings of both India and Britain, while also presenting a vision of empowerment through activism and transnational solidarity. Consequently, the text is a vital resource for exploring the links between disability studies, diaspora studies, and feminist critique.

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