



## FROM MARGINS TO METAPHOR: A DISABILITY STUDIES PERSPECTIVE ON *CHHOTO BORO (1951)*

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### RESEARCH ARTICLE



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#### Abstract

This paper offers a critical reading of Satinath Bhaduri's short story *Chhoto Boro (1951)* through the lens of Disability Studies. The study moves beyond traditional interpretations to examine how disability is represented not merely as a physical condition but as a metaphorical and political construct shaped by socio-cultural hierarchies. Through a close textual analysis and an application of key theoretical frameworks from scholars such as Lennard J. Davis, Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, and Tom Shakespeare, this paper argues that *Chhoto Boro (1951)* critiques normative ideals of bodily integrity, productivity, and value. The narrative positions the disabled character at the intersection of social marginality and symbolic richness, exposing the latent ableism embedded in the rural Bengali society portrayed in the text. This study thereby contributes to rethinking Bengali literature's engagement with the politics of difference, exclusion, and resistance.

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### Introduction

The domain of Disability Studies invites us to interrogate not only the lived experiences of disabled individuals but also how disability is socially constructed, culturally represented, and politically mobilized. As an interdisciplinary field, Disability Studies challenges the biomedical model that pathologizes disabled bodies and instead focuses on how society imposes limitations through environmental barriers, social attitudes, and cultural representations. Literary works, therefore, become crucial in shaping public imagination around disability, often perpetuating stereotypes or, alternatively, offering space for resistance and reimagining.

In Indian literature, especially in regional narratives, the figure of the disabled person often oscillates between silence and symbolism. Characters with disabilities are frequently used as narrative devices to elicit sympathy, teach moral lessons, or symbolize societal failure. However, some texts disrupt these patterns by presenting disability not as a personal tragedy but as a lens through which systemic injustices can be examined. It is within this framework that Satinath Bhaduri's *Chhoto Boro (1951)* offers fertile ground for scholarly engagement.

Bhaduri, known for his social realism and critique of hierarchical structures, subtly embeds questions of bodily difference within his portrayal of rural Bengal. While the story is often celebrated for its humanistic undertones and nuanced depiction of class and power relations, this paper seeks to shift the focus toward its construction of disability. In *Chhoto Boro (1951)*, the disabled character is not merely a passive figure of pity or inspiration. Instead, their bodily difference becomes a site where normative standards of physical ability, productivity, and social worth are interrogated.

Drawing upon interdisciplinary perspectives from Disability Studies, the paper analyzes how Bhaduri's narrative voice and character development critique able-bodied assumptions and expose the underlying structures of exclusion embedded in the community's social fabric. The story's portrayal of disability as both a literal and metaphorical element allows for a deeper exploration of the politics of embodiment, marginality, and resistance. The paper also considers how silence, physical immobility, and the denial of social roles are used to construct and contest the boundaries of normativity.

Through a critical reading of *Chhoto Boro (1951)*, this study aims to contribute to a broader understanding of how Bengali literature engages with disability, not simply as an affliction but as a complex and contested identity shaped by cultural, economic, and historical forces.

### **Disability as a Cultural Construct: Theoretical Framework**

Disability Studies as an academic field resists the medicalization of difference and instead situates disability within cultural, historical, and political contexts. It views disability not as an inherent flaw within the individual but as a consequence of social arrangements and cultural meanings that privilege able-bodiedness. This shift from a medical to a social and cultural model has led to more nuanced understandings of how disability operates in literature and society.

Lennard J. Davis (1995) critiques the concept of normalcy, arguing that the very idea of the "normal" body is a 19th-century invention linked to industrial capitalism and the rise of statistics. According to Davis, disability is constructed in opposition to this manufactured ideal. Rosemarie Garland-Thomson (2002) contributes by defining the "normate"—a cultural figure who embodies the unmarked, privileged position in society. Disabled bodies, in contrast, are seen as deviant or deficient, which makes their literary representations particularly potent in revealing social assumptions.

Tom Shakespeare (2006) emphasizes the relational aspect of disability, highlighting how it arises from the interaction between individual impairments and socially constructed barriers. His work on the social model of disability provides a foundation for understanding how representation in literature is not just about individual characters, but about broader systems of inclusion and exclusion.

These theoretical insights provide a lens to reinterpret *Chhoto Boro* (1951) as a text that critiques the taken-for-granted ideals of able-bodiedness. Rather than portraying disability as a static condition or medical problem, the story exposes how bodily difference is made meaningful through cultural narratives, and how the disabled character becomes a site where social anxieties and contradictions are negotiated.

### **Textual Overview: *Chhoto Boro* (1951) and Its Narrative Landscape**

*Chhoto Boro* (1951) (literally translated as "Small and Big") is set in the intricately layered socio-cultural milieu of rural Bengal. The story captures the power dynamics, prejudices, and moral complexities of a village community, and centers on two characters whose lives are shaped by social perception rather than personal agency. Among them, a physically disabled character serves as a narrative focal point—a figure whose bodily difference is as socially constructed as it is physically real.

Bhaduri's storytelling is marked by understatement and subtle irony. His prose allows space for the reader to engage deeply with the emotional and social interiority of his characters. The disabled figure, although unnamed and largely peripheral in conventional narrative terms, plays a central role in disrupting the community's rigid hierarchies. Their body, marked by visible difference, becomes a site onto which the village projects its fears, biases, and contradictions.

Importantly, the disabled character is denied full narrative agency—not just in terms of speech or action, but also in their social recognition. They are spoken about more than they speak, and they are interpreted more than they are understood. This narrative choice reflects the broader cultural silencing of disabled individuals in both literature and life.

Nonetheless, the story also creates fissures in this silence. Through moments of irony, resistance, and quiet observation, Bhaduri invites readers to look beyond the surface. The disabled character's presence—though marginal in terms of plot—acts as a narrative irritant that unsettles the status quo. In doing so, *Chhoto Boro* (1951) challenges its readers to question the assumptions they bring to bodily difference and to consider how literary representations can expose the subtle workings of ableism in everyday life.

### **Disability and Social Exclusion: A Close Reading**

The disabled character in *Chhoto Boro* (1951) is not overtly vilified, but neither are they fully integrated into the social fabric. Instead, they occupy a liminal space—neither fully visible nor entirely erased. This condition of social ambiguity is key to understanding how marginality is constructed and maintained. The disabled figure becomes a canvas upon which societal fears, discomforts, and contradictions are projected, echoing what Rosemarie Garland-Thomson (2002) describes as the "visual rhetorics of disability." These rhetorics not only inform how the disabled character is viewed but also how they are talked about within the village community.

The community's interaction with the disabled character frequently shifts between pity and ridicule, reinforcing the binary tropes of the "tragic cripple" and the "inspirational overcomer." Such tropes are not neutral; they reflect and perpetuate a dehumanizing gaze that reduces individuals to their impairments. In the narrative, the disabled character is primarily defined by what they lack—mobility, productivity, normative physicality—rather than by any intrinsic human qualities. This framing, rooted in ableist ideology, contributes to their symbolic erasure.

However, Bhaduri complicates this depiction by inserting subtle gestures of resistance into the character's portrayal. Their silence or limited speech can be interpreted not simply as an absence, but as a strategic withdrawal from a discourse that has no place for their voice. Following Garland-Thomson's (2011) theory of "misfitting," the disabled body in *Chhoto Boro* (1951) clashes

with the environment's expectations of functionality and normalcy. This misfit, rather than denoting deficiency, exposes the inflexibility and exclusionary tendencies of the sociocultural space.

Moreover, this liminality allows the disabled character to occupy a unique perspective—being within society but not of it. Their marginality grants them a critical distance that silently interrogates the very norms that render them abject. In doing so, the character becomes a symbol of what Disability Studies calls “non-normative knowledge” (Kafer, 2013), which challenges hegemonic understandings of ability, productivity, and worth.

### **Metaphor and the Disabled Body: Symbolic Representations**

Beyond its critique of social exclusion, *Chhoto Boro (1951)* also mobilizes disability as a metaphor. The disabled body in the story is not merely a passive recipient of societal attitudes but an active symbol upon which broader cultural meanings are inscribed. These include notions of weakness, deviance, fragility, and, paradoxically, moral insight or truth-telling. Through such symbolism, the character's physical difference mirrors the moral decay and hypocrisy of the community itself.

While metaphor can deepen a narrative's emotional and thematic impact, it carries the danger of abstraction. Disability metaphors often run the risk of turning real, lived experiences into literary devices, stripping disabled characters of their subjectivity. Mitchell and Snyder's (2000) concept of “narrative prosthesis” highlights this dynamic—where disability is employed to support a story's structure or message rather than representing a fully realized character. *Chhoto Boro (1951)* navigates this tension with nuance, using metaphor without fully dehumanizing its subject.

Bhaduri offers occasional glimpses into the inner life of the disabled character—suggesting thoughts, emotions, and a quiet dignity that resists reduction. This dual function of the character—as both metaphor and individual—adds depth to the narrative while allowing for critical reflection. The disabled figure thus becomes a site of layered meaning: a symbol of social disorder and moral critique, but also an emblem of perseverance and complexity.

Furthermore, the metaphorical positioning of the disabled character may also be read as a commentary on postcolonial modernity. In a society struggling to reconcile tradition with modern values, the visibly disabled body becomes a marker of what cannot be assimilated—an embodied reminder of both resistance and rupture.

### **Disability, Voice, and Narrative Silence**

One of the most powerful narrative strategies in *Chhoto Boro (1951)* is its deployment of silence. The disabled character speaks little, and when they do, their voice is mediated or ignored. This lack of direct articulation aligns with a broader pattern in literature where disabled characters are either spoken for or rendered mute. In such representations, the denial of voice often signifies a denial of agency.

However, this silence is not merely a narrative omission; it can also be read as an intentional critique of the discursive structures that marginalize disabled people. As Lennard Davis (2002) suggests, deviations from narrative conventions—such as silence, fragmentation, or narrative opacity—can be forms of subversion. In this case, the silence draws attention to who is allowed to speak in literature, and under what conditions.

The absence of the disabled character's voice also invites the reader to inhabit a space of interpretive uncertainty. This uncertainty disrupts the reader's expectations and encourages deeper engagement with the politics of representation. The story thereby turns silence into a tool of resistance—highlighting how exclusion from speech mirrors broader patterns of societal exclusion.

Moreover, the mediation of the disabled character's voice through other characters and the narrator complicates notions of authenticity and empathy. It prompts critical questions: Are we hearing the character's true voice, or a ventriloquized version filtered through normative assumptions? This narrative layering underscores the limitations of dominant discourses in capturing the complexity of disabled lives.

In this context, silence becomes both a symbol of erasure and a critique of the systems that demand coherence, clarity, and articulation from all subjects. The disabled character, by remaining partially outside these demands, gestures toward alternative modes of presence—ones that challenge the supremacy of speech as the primary marker of personhood.

### **Conclusion**

By reading *Chhoto Boro (1951)* through the lens of Disability Studies, we uncover a layered narrative that critiques prevailing social norms while also grappling with the ethics of literary representation. The story exposes the subtle yet pervasive ways in which bodily difference is interpreted, constructed, and instrumentalized within a specific socio-cultural setting. Satinath Bhaduri's text avoids reductive portrayals; it does not offer sentimental resolution or celebratory narratives of overcoming. Instead, it embraces ambiguity, discomfort, and silence as narrative tools that compel the reader to engage critically with the marginalized figure at its center.

Through the nuanced depiction of the disabled character—as metaphor, misfit, and bearer of non-normative knowledge—the story makes a powerful statement about societal values and the politics of inclusion. It challenges us to reconsider how literature not only reflects but also shapes our collective understanding of what constitutes a valuable life, a complete body, or a meaningful existence.

This paper thus argues for a more inclusive literary criticism—one that foregrounds disability not merely as an aesthetic device or symbolic foil but as a lived, embodied reality worthy of sustained analysis. By integrating Disability Studies into the reading of regional Indian literature, we open new avenues for examining how power, privilege, and prejudice operate through cultural narratives.

Ultimately, *Chhoto Boro (1951)* serves as a call to reimagine the literary canon through a disability lens: to identify erasures, critique normative frameworks, and uplift alternative voices and embodiments. It invites readers, scholars, and educators alike to cultivate a deeper awareness of how disability intersects with literature, ethics, and social justice.

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