

Research Article

Identity Politics and Practices of Exclusionism: A Review Via the Disability Lens

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ABSTRACT

Identity politics is emancipatory since it gives voice to diverse communities. During an emancipatory mission, identity formations also privilege certain themes, ideas, and ideologies that align with their standpoint. Privileging this way tantamounts to exclusionism. I review patterns of such a privileging by deploying disability as an analytical lens.

Keywords: Exclusionism, Magic circle, Knowledge borders

INTRODUCTION

Driven by perceived and real structural impingements, myriad identity formations such as those shaped by caste, gender, sexual orientation, and disability animate as though they were exclusive and closely bounded regions. In the process, they accumulate diverse, and yet idiosyncratic forms of knowledge. Identity formations may also invest in the idea that they hold a key to an archive of ‘shared knowledge’ which they can retrieve by an act of intuition alone. Outsiders will not be able to do this at all. At best, they may be able to access an internal signification of an identity group in degrees, and not in kind. I call such a closely bounded approach as exclusionism. Protective knowledge borders, consensuality, authenticity, and a propensity for somatic signification may prompt diverse identity formations to opt for a policy of exclusionism.

Exclusionism need not be wholly a devisive strategy. On the contrary, it may thrive as a formidable engine that drives identity politics. This article explore such a thesis by deploying disability as a binding narrative and an observational lens.

Protective Knowledge Borders and Politics of Exclusionism

Make no mistake. All identity formations, no matter their contexts of marginalization, dehumanize a perceived outsider. They may do it by outrightly invalidating existential angsts faced by identity formations that seem alien. Blind communities for example, may consider that their experiential knowledge of touch may not be understood by wheelchair users. The latter may be able to see the point about stigma linked to tactile learning, and nothing more. Likewise, wheelchair user groups in a University setting may have reservation about blind peers's capacity to visualize their existential angst concerning environmental barriers to learning. Diverse identity groups may raise thick epistemic borders between them this way. Thickness of a knowledge border is not determined by an aggressive self-interest as much as a resistance to knowledge sharing. For example, diverse identity formations hugely resist the idea of shared knowledge. They do this by defining shared knowledge by its inaccessibility to a perceived outsider. Again, it is hard to decide a definite persona or demography of an outsider. Outsiders could be a classmate, roomy, a disciplinary stranger, and even someone who looks and feels deviant.

Rigid epistemic borders also resist what one calls transformational identity politics. Why that should be the case? Driven by market logic, identity formations may become extra-competitive in chasing a wherewithal for consumption, political power, and strategic location in an ever-expanding identity grid. In this scheme of things, notion such as transformational politics may emerge as a mere slogan that can be used and dropped by will. For sure, learned communities of a University setting may equally deploy disability business this way.

Identity formations tend to raise protective knowledge borders in developing societies such as those in India. Little or no structural predictability in such societies prompt them to do so. Moreover, protective knowledge borders may aid such identities in securing privileges, benefits due from the state, bargaining power, and a competitive edge over other identities. An Orchestrated mistrust for knowledge sharing may also aid identities in sustaining a strong sense of victimhood.

Academic 'Magic circles' and Exclusionism by Consensus

Exclusionism may not always arise due to epistemic rigidities. It may also jolly well emerge via a consensus. Academic 'magic circles' do facilitate such a consensual exclusionism. Let us see how.

Broadly, 'magic circles' are something all of us end up connecting to. They are somewhat a close-knit community of seemingly likeminded people. In many ways, stories that do

the rounds in such communities shape our desires, aspirations, and even a propensity for ideological persuasion. I call such an ever-present, and yet a transient narrative covering as ‘magic circle’. The circle feels magical since it can bring familiarity and comfort, no matter what the external contingencies are. No wonder, it is from within such a magic circle one derives intellectual and emotional resources to handle all things worldly. Such is the importance of the magic circle, a miniscule misalignment of the same makes one feel vulnerable, if not devastated. However, change is indispensable; people and objects who are conjoined in the circle recede or move on, leaving traces of their disappearance on people’s perception of realities.

Academic world, particularly the modern humanities establishment rely on such magic circles to draw boundaries between ideological positions. What follows is a stirring and yet an affectionate conversation between Mary and Ram, a couple who may have graduated just a few years ago. The couple draw on their respective magic circles which seem to be full of mistrust for each other. Yet they move on, bound by immense affection.

Mary: *Ram, does it still hurt you. That doggie seems to have bit you very badly.*

Ram: *Not much now. I think the painkiller has started working. Luckily, I did not fall off my wheelchair!*

Mary: *That doggie may be so angry about something. I think it is a terrible mistake to let pet animals go astray like that. By the way, your supervisor Peter may call dog-straying as social discrimination against people with disability.*

Ram: *I know! Think about your supervisor; she may make a big apologia for the dog world! She is after all an animal activist and a feminist!*

Mary: *Stop that Ram. You don’t have to find some excuse or other to attack my group.*

Ram: *No dear, that was just a joke.*

Mary: *No, no, you can’t pass a snide remark against feminism and call it a joke. We have to use appropriate language in our conversations. Is that clear?*

Ram: *Ok, ok, cool down.*

Mary: *The right-wingers have a stone for a heart, you know. They can’t even be kind to animals.*

Ram: *The left-wing sort are not better either. They simply fail to understand that stray dogs are a threat to themselves as much as the vulnerable.*

Mary: *Ok Ram, I will get one more filling. (She gives a gentle pat on his shoulder as she walks towards the kitchen.)*

In the little world of Mary and Ram, authoritative voices of their PhD supervisors echo in circles. Even better, such voices stay installed inextricably in their personalities. Naturally, the couple seek recourse to them when they are confronted by a personal affliction, an argument concerning a particular worldview, and a widening disparity between real-life happenings and what is proclaimed of them in critical theory. Performing almost like a moral conscience, a supervisor's voice also prompts them to adopt a politically correct language. Perhaps, it also leads them into slotting untameable universes around them into left and right-wing camps. Now, Mary and Ram may not have direct access to learning environments of their alma mater; at least not in the way they were available to them as students. However, such environments do remain with them as internal attachments, ably surrounded by a narrative covering. The couple immerse themselves into such a system, treating it all the way like a safety-blanket.

For sure, narrative coverings or magic circles of a University are much more than safety blankets. They are cerebrally structured; often drawn between, and constrained by disciplinary frontiers, ideological persuasions, and factionalisms. Mary and Ram, and a million other graduate students get trained in such microscopic universes. They go on to recreate, and perhaps ally with academic magic circles that reaffirm a familiar intellectual habit. Such habits, as much as peer manoeuvrings are not bad in themselves. In fact, close-knit knowledge arrangements aid academics in challenging entrenched, and yet crudely violent systems such as patriarchy, ableism, capitalism, casteism, and a rigid heteronormative ideal. Put differently, a rare capacity for collective political engagement offers humanists a wherewithal to cultivate knowledge systems that can potentially counteract hegemonic configurations. However, a wherewithal for counteraction does not automatically guarantee a space for empathy amidst academic magic circles. On the contrary, it can upholster a system of pedagogy that prompt academic environments into becoming self-serving cosmologies. If you like, such cosmologies celebrate some sort of thematic exclusionism. In the process, they may become univocal and exclusionist in character. What Mary and Ram confront are magic circles that already lean one way or other. One is either a animal activist or a disability activist, and never both. They cannot yet imagine building institutional arrangements which can secure animal and human welfare alike by a binding normative worldview.

Identity Stratification and Somatic Exclusionism

Did I say 'binding normative worldview'? For sure, overarching worldviews are hard to sustain. Even more difficult is to harness a worldview or standpoint that seem acceptable to all. Why so? Standpoints are not abstract entities. Instead, they are systems of idiosyncratic knowledge generated via a network of carnal arrangements. Carnality is the stuff we do, and do not with our bodies held together. maybe, there is nothing in

the world that does not derive itself, (symbolically and otherwise), from within the realms of the corporeal. For example, one may lend ears, put down a foot, besides remaining tongue-tied, heart-broken, or influenced by a gutt-feeling while gathering a logically organised standpoint. Like the above predispositions, carnal politics may also be diverse, fragmented, deeply subjective, and incorrigibly exclusive. So are standpoints that emerge in sync with carnal politics of the day. Naturally, identity studies scholars and activists alike do not shy away in giving a special attention to the role of carnal politics in the negotiation, the makings, and the institutionalised exclusion of certain identity formations. In the process, they may also write themselves into one or other exclusive carnal script espoused by a much favoured identity group. I call such a selective leaning as somatic exclusionism.

Recall Victor Turner's somatic society (Paterson and Hughes, 1999). Turner's somatic societies are loose configuration of communities that rely on corporeal performances for public visibility. Such performances may draw on assertive postures, an archive of idiosyncratic meanings, and multiple registers of somatic happenings. In due course, identity groups may claim fuller ownership to such performatives. Minus such a claim, identity formations run the risk of not being able to stratify their private meanings, and subsequently dissolve into oblivion. In this scheme of things, an intensely subjective phenomenon such as pain may serve the cause of identity stratification too. For example, an identity group may claim that their sense of pain is unlike anything that is seen beyond their enclave. Such exclusionist claims are not a mere symptom of chauvinism. Instead, such claims may form the building blocks for a given identity. An identity formation can ill afford to let go of its own building blocks. Let us see how pain becomes a contested, and yet an exclusionist cluster of building blocks this way.

Lay people consider pain as an exclusive sensation. One may also take to the phenomenon as a private, idiosyncratic, and linguistically elusive entity (Pain). Identity studies scholars may dishonour such an exclusivity logic of pain, i.e. its intra-corporeal characteristic. All the same, they may still locate pain, and explore its fullness solely from within one or other identity category. For example, Anitha Ghai makes a point about incapacity of mainstream women's movement in comprehending the psychological pain of disabled women. She does not blame patriarchy as much as exclusionist tendency of mainstream feminism. Feminism is driven by the desire to overcome a defeatist topology. And it may fear the worse: a focus on psychological pain, and the disability business at large may upset the feminist rhetoric that women are not any less able than men (Ghai, 2002).

Ghai's point is about excluded agendas in mainstream feminism. That said, disability sector may also refrain from a conversation on pain which may be a best seller elsewhere.

Elaine Scary for example, talks about a wide spectrum of pain. Pain may emanate from a wounded and an ill body. Similarly, it can emerge during an orchestrated event such as torture. In the process, pain can affect and transform both the perpetrator and the hapless victim (Scary, 1985). Disability Studies scholars find Scary's remarks on torture and pain useful. However, they hesitate to adopt insights concerning naturalness of pain in everyday life. In its formative stages, Disability Studies vigorously resisted a discussion on pain and suffering lest one is overwhelmed by tragic fatalism about disability.

No matter where and how they hold a position within the identity grid, all identities selectively exclude insights that they consider are counterproductive. Identity groups may particularly do this when they are required to consolidate a stratified deposit of meanings that are supposed to strengthen their core.

Disciplinary Authenticity and Exclusionism

Let me begin with a couple of snap chats. "These vadas are authentic!" Ramesh exclaims with a wink. "I have a right to represent my sick husband. I know everything about him since I am his primary caregiver" Declares Sheela. Why are these assertions important? Because they have something to say about authenticity. For example, Ramesh gets into authenticity business by invoking regionality, culinary peculiarity, and perhaps his reanimated gustatory memory of vadas. Sheela's take on authenticity on the other hand, rests wholly on first-hand experiences of nursing and living together in pain. Neither of them are going to accept a seemingly second-hand claim; say, knowledge of caregiving via book-reading. Identities, and disciplinary frameworks that draw on them, almost always invoke a notion of first-hand experience or knowledge. In the process, they push aside knowledge systems that seem several steps away. I call such a pushback as exclusionism by disciplinary authenticity.

Within the Disability Studies ambit, discussions on authenticity may trigger doubts concerning inherent strength of certain frameworks in capturing the hidden truth of disability. For example, when it comes to disability activism, social model of disability receives all the attention. That too an ethnographic descriptions of the same. Literary investigations concerning the workings of the model receives scanty attention.

What is social model of disability? Noncom passionate medical systems, orthodox religious cosmologies, and indifferent educational environments project disability as a tragedy and a personal loss. An unceasing flow of such projections force disabled people into believing that their impairment is a personal tragedy after all. Minus such a circulation of negative ideas and stereotypes, disabled people may never face social ostracisation. Instead, they may thrive and flourish no matter how deficient their bodies and minds are. Scholars and activists who invest in such a possibility subscribe to the

view that it is a malevolent social organisation, and not impaired bodies and minds that actually constrain disabled people. The belief that people with impairments become disabled by a malevolent and an ill social organisation is popular among disabled activists and academics alike. They fondly label such an approach to disability politics as social model of disability (Adams, Reiss *et al.*, 2015). Social model framework pervades across Disability Studies (DS), aiding activists in gathering resources to combat malicious structures at the grassroots. This is most definitely a welcome change. After all, lethal structural impingements can go on a destructive spree for generations, and still remain unnoticed.

Because of a capacity to combat structural impingements, many DS scholars tend to unduly privilege social model framework from within their magic circles. In doing so, they ignore certain realities of disablement that are more than a constructional matter. Likewise, a score of frameworks that do not connect ethnographically to the field of disability also remain passively ignored. For example, scholarship that does not draw on grassroots movements enjoy less favour from social modelists. Some of them may condemn literary investigations of disablement as an apolitical extravaganza and an armchair speculation.

How about academic environments where literary and philosophical interpretations concerning disability thrive? Well, they too have a penchant for disciplinary exclusionism! This time, exclusionism may involved undue counter positioning against perceived dominance of an ethnographic paradigm. For example, literary critics may prefer stories to comprehend a visceral phenomena such as disability accommodation and health. In doing so, they may treat field reports of the same as raw data lacking philosophical density. Let me for a moment examine my own cultivated impulses; if you like, exclusionist tendency as a literary critic interested in the disability business.

I am one of those literary kinds who take to stories seriously. Here is a personal story without a plot, and yet feels like a larger narrative mirror. When I was critically ill with Tuberculosis during my graduate days in England, a concerned English Doctor came up with the hypothesis that the current malady is a consequence of a bad schooling in India. The squalor in the school, he reasoned, is obviously the source of the TB. The infection may have remained dormant right from the days of squalor and filth at the blind school. It is somewhat inevitable that the TB rose back to action in England since my immune system seemed to have already lost track of its dormant presence. After all, my body was getting acclimatised to a serene and a hygienic first-world environment! After the Second World War, TB began receding from public imagination in Britain. Perhaps, the low incidence of TB reflects a stringent antibiotic treatment regime, a

conscious elimination of squalor and filth, and above all, a border-filter in that country which is based on the principle that every migrant from the third world is a potential carrier of a pathogenic microcosm. Naturally, the doctor was prompted to rate my TB as a destructive internal animation of a troubled biographical past. If such animations are not kept under check, they may rupture my current placing in the advanced world. A holding environment of the state may not be able to do much to heal the rupture.

These interpretations, intermittent beeping from medical gadgetry, plus a bout of delirium set me all again into a distant land. That was the world of Madhubindu, a traveller. Madhubindu is confronted by four robbers in a foreign land. To escape the robbers, Madhubindu quickly sneaks into a jungle. There a 'mad elephant' chases him. To his delight, he finds a deep well nearby. He jumps into it, still holding on to a protruding tree branch. Madhubindu would not let go of the branch since he spots an alligator and four snakes at the bottom. As though this is not enough, he notices two rats greedily chewing into the base of the tree branch, making his fall almost inevitable. Yes, yes, the elephant also does not leave the scene either. It madly shakes the tree branch. The violent shakes disturb a beehive at the top. You guessed it right! A bee stings him so hard that he almost loses the balance. Amidst such a turbulence and a seemingly end of life situation, a drop of honey drips into Madhubindu's mouth. He forgets his predicament and soulfully tastes the honey. Angels who pass by offer a rescue plan. Madhubindu requests them to wait so that he can taste another drop of honey. The angels are not too eager to wait. The rest is predictable: the tree branch is cut loose by the masticating rats. Madhubindu falls into his death, only after yet another savoury moment (2016).

In Jain theology, and in Indian imagination at large, Madhubindu's story emerges as an allegory for humanity's relentless lust for life. That said, why should Madhubindu's story hold a strange grip on my body and mind during a moment of critical illness? Perhaps, the story offered me a reassurance that human vulnerability, including an end of life situation need not always be an entrapment. Instead, it can be a point of journey in life where one can see through the real and shaky boundaries of structural power. Also, people's moral universes are boundless, and are not necessarily destroyed by an arduous journey across malicious structures. For example, Madhubindu's moral universe does not shrink in any sense although he is in an end of life situation due to a structural omnipotence. Talking about death, Madhubindu embraces the same as a glorious last chapter following a life-long, and yet a troubled immersion in a 'pleasure principle'. Maybe, he shows us that the current moment is precious, no matter what is going to follow. Perhaps, savoring a current moment with a due respect for life is a last of the supreme battles against an all-imposing structure. Then, what did mad elephant mean to me? Tuberculosis? A difficult and a protracted graduate life? Family discord? An

Overwhelming medical treatment regime? I do not know the precise answer. Nor I can treat these as discreet entities of a malicious structure in action. However, I can say with confidence that the figure of a chasing mad elephant helped me to gather stories that uphold a resilient spirit. The stories came in a flow, often taking an idiosyncratic course involving narratives of caregiving, interpersonal relationships, my blindness, Ved Mehta's oeuvre, Raagasahana, and what not. During a moment of immersion in these narratives, I had a glimpse of a rare internal universe, from which I still draw emotional and moral resources to negotiate a mad elephant rampage.

Literary critics who subscribe to such a narrative modality, also fondly take to its special position as a mirror of structural power. During a formal contract with a doctor for example, a patient may rely on a rich archive of stories that captures his or her current condition. At one point, the patient becomes a story where everything is possible including a rapid reversal of plots that have already unfolded (Peterkin, Vonnegut *et al.*, 2014). Sometimes, a patient's story may be in a form of a stream which need not flow across in a clean sally. Instead, it may come into visibility via an idiosyncratic course. This is in straight contrast to a positivist medical reasoning which may present itself in a linear trajectory. That said, such nonlinear narratives require a playful combination of ethnographic, biographical, discursive, and even a cluster of disability models for a critical review.

Exclusionisms and the fly and the fly-bottle problem

As a philosopher, Wittgenstein is interested in philosophical enquiries, and the ways and means by which they hit a dead end due to a lack of clarity concerning argument construction. To explain such a problem, he comes up with the metaphor of fly-bottle. A fly which accidentally enters a transparent glass bottle may find it hard to get out of it. The fly may remain permanently trapped in the bottle, for its wall is transparent, and therefore may give an artificial sense of freedom. To find a path to real freedom, the fly will have to retrace its steps towards the narrow exit at the neck of the bottle. Similarly, to escape a philosophical muddle, a philosopher will have to retrace his or her steps via an argumentative edifice, which may in turn resemble the transparent fly-bottle. Put differently, a willingness to examine false beliefs in a philosophical argument is something Wittgenstein demands of a philosopher (Karah, 2012).

Within the realms of identity politics and scholarship that inform the same, thematic exclusionisms garner a philosophical trap. One may not be able to refuse exclusionistic logic completely. However, one can aim for clarity of thought and action via a deep knowledge of what is excluded in an academic enquiry such as identity studies.

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