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Social exclusion: Gendered experiences in the exclusive situations masked as inclusive and beyond

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Abstract

In the modern day, after a long history of reform, social exclusion seems to have decreased in certain areas, while in some areas, it is still rampant. Women, children, LGBTQ members, chronically ill as well as differently-abled people face social exclusion in various aspects. In this paper, I would like to focus on chronically ill or differently-abled people, and then further look into how gender inequalities play a role among chronically ill and differently-abled people. In documents, as well as in appearance, these people are included in society, and in various social and institutional situations. However, reality is a bit different. Starting from schools to workplace to society to even certain family situations, they are excluded in many ways. Exclusions especially those on women, LGBTQ members, and other similarly marginalized people are irrational besides being problematic. Though some of the exclusions might be reasonable for certain groups of people like children or people with certain health conditions, but it seems that by excluding them from certain situations, and by doing it repeatedly, society develops a habit of excluding them from a lot of things, which are not only unnecessary, but also problematic. Society encourages this form of exclusion because it provides a false sense of superiority to the select ones included. These images of social exclusion, not only from certain activities, but from the status of an equal human reflect on the literature and the movies too. This exclusion is not only problematic in itself, but also has profound psychological effects on the excluded person or persons. Society, being phobic of differences, does not allow those people to be included in their core, who might threaten their homogeneity, or prove their existing habits, capabilities, and functions inadequate. The Covid-19 pandemic, affecting the whole world, without discrimination might have made it necessary to rethink inclusiveness and exclusiveness and their impacts on people. As social isolation became the norm, and the Covid-affected patients, especially at the beginning of the pandemic, were looked upon as taboos and were cornered besides being quarantined, it seemed fit to rethink what those people might go through who spend their entire lives feeling the same way covid patients felt in the early months of the pandemic.

Keywords: Social exclusion, layered exclusion, "inclusive" yet exclusive, chronically ill or differently-abled people, gender inequalities, reflection in films

Introduction

Social Exclusion: Female Experiences in the Exclusive Situations Masked as "Inclusive", and beyond

Exclusion has been the habit of people since ancient times. In various ages, various types of exclusion have been laid on different sections of the society. This system of social exclusion benefits a group of people, that is, who are the selected ones to be included at the cost of others. This system privileges the select individuals because, after the exclusion, there is a smaller number of people among whom opportunities, materials, resources are to be distributed, providing each select member with more opportunities, more materials, more resources, and easier access to them, than it would have been if it had been distributed equally among all in an all-inclusive society system. So, at the cost of the marginalized groups, the select members included enjoy these numerous privileges.

Social Exclusion also works in different levels and layers even among the select individuals. In every level, there is a smaller and more privileged group, who enjoy benefits that people of the previous level don't. Also, a particular individual can be included in certain privileged groups, and might not be included in others. In various aspects of social division and differentiation, the so-called "rules" play out differently

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For instance, a person might be the part of a privileged group of exclusively male members because he is male, but might not be the part of another privileged group of exclusively heterosexual members, because he is homosexual. Also, a particular individual might be subject to social exclusion in one aspect, and might be a member of the selected privileged group in another. Again, an individual might go through layers of social exclusion. For instance, a woman might be subject to social exclusion by virtue of being a woman in an exclusively all-male group, and might be further subject to social exclusion by virtue of being homosexual in an exclusively all-heterosexual group. These groups are most often not pronounced officially, especially in modern times, but that does not imply that they are totally absent. There might have been many changes over the ages, but many such exclusion practices still remain. It is harder to pinpoint them or identify them now because officially, most of these groups are all-inclusive.

Starting from a very young age, children are made to face certain social exclusions and divisions, so much so, that by time they grow up, they learn to normalize the social divisions and exclusions. For instance, in many schools, boys and girls are made to sit separately, taught the so-called "ladylike" or "gentlemanly" manners. In most schools, restrooms for boys and girls are separate, and there are no restrooms mentioned for people belonging to other sexes, and no necessary arrangements are made for them. They either have to conform to the boys group, or the girl's group, making them believe they are aberrations, and should not be the way they are.

This is also true about children who are differently abled or chronically ill, and that is what I would like to focus on in this paper. For many differently abled children, and children with chronic diseases, there is a huge problem in attending regular schools, not because of their own attributes, but because of the deficiency of the systems in schools. A portion of certain such children usually attend special schools that have the necessary arrangements, but another portion of these children don't need that. They are deprived of the experience of regular school for no fault of theirs, though they are many times, nearly all the time, made to think that it is they who are responsible for that because they are not "fit" to study in a regular school.

This is not to say that the experience in special schools or the education provided or other activities taught in special schools are in any way inferior to those of regular schools. However, these social exclusions are problematic in themselves. They also have many impacts. For instance, it makes the child believe that he or she is different, and this difference is not celebrated, but rather considered to be an inferiority or a negative aberration. The child loses self-confidence and the belief that he or she can have a so-called "normal" life, let alone a good one. It also affects a child's career, because many a time being graduated from a special school does not sit well with the hiring members of the jobs. Also, there is a serious lack of institutions of higher education like colleges or universities, specially designed for differently abled or chronically ill people, so in most cases, they have to let go of their dream of higher education, which is not only problematic in itself, but in turn affect their careers too, because it becomes difficult for them to compete with their so-called "normal" competitors, who have been educated in higher educational institutions.

These social exclusions have profound psychological effects on children, and it affects them as individuals, as members of society even as they grow up. The insecurities remain with them even as adults and it becomes quite difficult to overpower them since they have been so strongly ingrained in them since childhood. The child in turn grows up believing that these exclusions are not only the so-called "norm", but that they are correct. It makes them think that there is no place for them in regular society. They start to lack self-confidence and also do not have the courage to dream big or have high ambitions. Even if they do have big dreams or ambitions, they are curbed by society, on various levels. Also, since the growing-up experiences as well as their academic and other qualifications, especially those certified by institutions, affect their careers, they have more difficulty in getting jobs, and a lot of times remain unemployed, making them financially, and a number of times otherwise dependent on other individuals around them. Being dependent, in turn, takes away their freedom, at least to some extent. It also takes away their power of making decisions for themselves many times. A lot of people do not care to spend much time and energy helping them achieve their dreams because they might need certain special arrangements in technology, or systems. They are usually considered failures and given that tag to live with the rest of their lives, while the truth might be that they did not even get a fair chance to try and test their talents and capabilities. However, since it is easier to just blame them for their conditions, rather than rethink the society's own shortcomings, the society chooses to give them full credibility for their situations.

Also many a time, they are considered a taboo or shame to society in various levels, starting from the family, to the school, to the neighbourhood, and many such levels and arenas, so much so that they consider themselves a shame too, even without any fault of theirs. They do not realize, when, where, or how the society put the responsibility of their own shortcomings upon them, and it might even be that the society does not realize it too a lot of times. Even the so-called "normal" members of society are brainwashed so much, that they forget to think for themselves that if what they are doing, how they are behaving towards or interacting with these individuals is proper or not, whereas many people might have been able to reform their behaviours, approaches, attitudes, or perspectives towards these individuals, if they stopped to rethink it for themselves, or were given the necessary awareness.

There are however certain exceptions where differently abled people, or people with chronic illnesses have achieved great things, but society loves to see such people as exceptions, and rare examples, and not make that the usual case in society. Differently abled or chronically ill people are discouraged, mocked, bullied, looked down upon, and excluded by society. They are easy targets because they are not taught right from their childhood that they are as equally respectable as the other so-called "normal" members of society. They usually take these insults and disapproving behaviours without protest, and in instances, where their bottled-up emotions burst out, and they do protest, it is taken a case of aberration, and attributed to their disability or their illness, even though the problem might actually lie not with them, but with the society, and how it interacts with them. This is more so in case of psychological or neurological diseases or disorders, or behavioural disorders. Every burst

of emotion, every time the individual tries to stand up for himself or herself, or even every time the individual tries to communicate or convey their emotions, is outright tagged as madness or insanity, or ridiculous or illogical behaviour in the least. While at times, such behaviour might actually be a result of some underlying psychological or other such issues, it is not so every time. Everything coming from them is seen through an opinionated lens, where the consequence or the message or meaning is decided before really analysing the situation, or what the person is trying to convey. It is confirmed beforehand that the person is incapable of conveying anything worth paying any serious attention to, and whatever comes from the person inevitably makes no sense. So, there is no attempt by the people surrounding these individuals to understand them. They are also not allowed to take any important decisions on their own, and even, when an important, or even a not-so-important discussion is taking place in a family, or amongst friends, they are left out because they are not considered capable enough to understand the discussion, or the gravity of the matter, or bring anything valuable to the table. It is intriguing how society, based on a limitation or difference of an individual in a particular aspect, considers them limited and incapable in other aspects too. Everybody thinks that it is the work of a professional psychiatrist, or psychologist, or therapist to help such an individual, which it definitely is, but it is also the duty of the society, the layman individuals, to try to rethink their thoughts, perspectives, opinions, approaches, actions towards these people, and try to understand them better, not just exclude them from the society, calling them "unfit".

These outlooks of society and the social exclusions taking place in society are reflected in the literature and culture as well. It is widely seen in movies, where a large number of people witness this phenomenon on the big screen. At times it acts as a critique to the society's exclusion procedures, and at times, even though might be without intention, it "normalizes" these forms of exclusion. Some of the iconic movies give us not only insight into the lives of these individuals but also make us socially and ethically aware of our approaches towards them. For instance, *Forrest Gump* (4) shows the life of a boy who had certain physical as well as psychological disabilities. In the early scenes of the movie, it is shown how difficult it is for Forrest to get admission in a regular school, due to the prejudices of the society. However, the movie takes the disability of Forrest, turning it into a positive note, makes it his unique capability. It is a celebration of the differences, rather than a degradation of them. It also gives out the message that differently-abled people are not always deficient in a particular aspect. It could also mean that they deal with that aspect a bit differently than others. It might not always have to be the "wrong" way or the "inferior" way to deal with a situation.

In Indian cinema too, there are numerous iconic examples where the lives of children or people who have chronic illnesses or who are differently abled are portrayed in depth. For instance, *Sadma* (7) is a movie that shows the case of a girl with a trauma-induced psychological condition. It also shows how an ethically aware member of society, instead of being prejudiced to the individual, or taking advantage of the individual, might actually try to help the individual in the ways that he can. *Black* (2) is yet another iconic movie which tells the story of a girl who has vision and hearing

impairment. It vividly portrays the struggle of such an individual, for whom even the small tasks of everyday life can be difficult until they are shown an easier way to cope with it, and once that is done, they can flourish and blossom. *Barfi* (1) is a movie which brings together individuals suffering from both physical as well as psychological or neurological conditions and throws light on their lives. Instead of showing the lives of these individuals in a grim and gloomy manner, it shows them in a breezy and bright manner, and teaches us to laugh with them, not at them, and also understand their conditions. It also, in a way, promotes empathy rather than sympathy. *Taare Zameen Par* (9) is another movie which not only gives meaningful insight into the lives of children who are differently abled or have chronic illnesses, but also is a strong critique to the unempathetic society. It tells the story of a boy suffering from dyslexia. It vividly portrays his struggles, as society fails to understand, or even try to understand his condition, until one day, when a teacher comes along and changes his life as he understands his problem and helps him cope with it. This movie shows how sometimes even the closest relations of an individual, the family, might misinterpret a person's situation, and act blindly according to the established "norms" of the society, without even trying to understand what a person might be going through. Also, this film gives a classic example how institutions like regular schools do not have adequate arrangements for such children, and blame that on the children, or just deem them "unfit" to study in regular schools, when the truth might be that with a little help, both societal and professional, a good amount of such children could flourish in regular schools too. Another movie is *Margarita with a Straw* (5), which is an iconic movie in the sense it brings together a horde of the marginalized sections who are usually socially excluded. It shows a girl with cerebral palsy, her being bisexual, a girl with visual impairment, a woman with chronic colon cancer. It also portrays them not from the lens of pity, but shows them in empowering positions. They are shown as aspiring writers, music composers, being educated in institutions of higher education, activists, and such others.

However, these movies also makes one rethink that what would have happened if the chances and coincidences that occur in these movies would not have taken place. What if the trauma-induced psychologically challenged girl in *Sadma* (7) was never spotted by the kind-hearted man who transformed her life? What would have happened if the girl with vision, hearing and speech impairment in *Black* (2) did not have a teacher as she did? What would have happened if the individuals with autism and speaking as well as hearing impairment had not met each other in *Barfi*? (1) How would the little boy with dyslexia in *Taare Zameen Par* (9) have fared in academics and in life if the teacher who changed his life would not come to his boarding school as a substitute teacher? Could the girl with cerebral palsy in *Margarita with a Straw* (5) have been able to explore herself and her orientation if she had not chanced upon the visually impaired girl, and formed a bond with her? All these questions show how obscure the system of approach towards these individuals is, in society. They are, for the majority of the aspects, excluded by society. Their lives would have continued to be miserable, mostly because of society's ways of dealing with them, had they not had these chances and coincidences in their lives. A lot of such children and people do lead such miserable lives in reality,

because these chances might not come along in their way. Also, the well-being of an individual should not depend on a chance that could possibly, and more often possibly not come along their way. The basic resources for these chronically ill or differently-abled people are dependent on chances and miracles, rather than the facilities provided by society- facilities, like education to which, every individual has a right. This is one of the reasons that successful people in the sphere of chronically ill or differently-abled individuals become a 'special case scenario' and not an everyday possibility. They are deprived of the healthy life that they have a right to, only because society fails in, and possibly tries to avoid understanding these individuals, their conditions, their needs, and the ways to approach them and help them live a "normal" life. If society could be more inclusive to them, they would have a much better life. Also, these movies are different from most mainstream movies where physical or psychological or other conditions or chronic illnesses are not seen with empathy, rather they are portrayed as stock characters who are to be laughed at, ridiculed, and at whose cost, it is worth having fun. The characters in such movies are either seen with an overarching pity as lost causes or are seen as comic characters whose illnesses and disabilities are just present to amuse and entertain the "normal" people. They are also most often not the main characters, but side characters, or characters who are part of the subplot.

There are many documentaries too, which give us realistic glimpses into the lives of such individuals and their day-to-day hurdles, and how social exclusion affects them. *Open Heart* (6) shows the journey of eight kids as they have to leave their home, and go far in order to have affordable open heart surgery. This again shows the lack of easily available or affordable arrangements for such people. *Blindsight* (3) is another documentary showing the struggle of six visually impaired individuals as they embark to climb Mount Everest's Lhakpa-Ri peak, and also have to face the superstitions of the fellow villagers, who consider them cursed. It is a metaphor of society's perspectives towards these individuals, and the shortcomings and prospective dangers of such perspectives. *Smile, Pinki* (8) is a documentary on a girl with a cleft lip. She was not allowed to go to school and was looked down upon due to her condition. This shows society's outlook on individuals with such conditions. Going to school, which has nothing to do with having or not having a cleft lip, and in much probability would not have caused any hindrance in education, had done so, only because of the perspective of the society. With the help of a programme that offered cleft lip and palate surgeries, her life was changed. These show that the reality of such people is a harsh truth, on which society likes to turn a deaf year.

Also, most of the treatments and facilities available for chronically ill or differently-abled people are so expensive, that a huge portion of the population is not able to afford them. This makes their lives even more difficult. Here, another form of social exclusion comes into play, where, division and differentiation are seen even among the sphere of chronically ill or differently-abled people. People who can afford these treatments and facilities have more accessibility to a better life, better prospects in life, and a better chance at achieving success. For instance, people who can afford wheelchairs or prosthetic legs have access to easier mobility and all the benefits that come along with it,

than a person who has to depend solely upon crutches for mobility. It is also similar to many treatments. Treatments that could cure or at least lessen the intensity of chronic illnesses, and also those that could help with disabilities are so expensive that a large section of the people has no other choice but to live with the chronic illness or the disabilities simply because they cannot afford the medicines, or the procedures. It is true that many institutions do help such individuals, but much more needs to be done in this area, so that people with chronic illnesses or differently-abled people have a better chance of leading a "normal" life, and have access to equal opportunities.

An intriguing factor in inquiring how people who are chronically ill or are differently-abled are treated can be seen while analysing how gender discrimination affects them. Gender discrimination, which discriminates people on the grounds of the biological differences of the different sexes, and instead of celebrating these differences and achieving equality, creates a societal, emotional, psychological, professional, and other rift, might not leave these people out either. Many times, women are the victims of gender discrimination more than men because they are not given many opportunities that men are given. They have been socially excluded in multiple fields down the ages. Starting from the voting rights, the suffragette, property rights, the marriage and divorce rights, to movements for equal wages in professional fields, the struggle for equality has been going for years. Though a lot has been achieved over the ages, there is still a long path to tread. Gender discrimination has also created different and at times watertight gender roles for different sexes. Also, certain other unrealistic character traits which were considered typical to a particular sex are attributed to the different sexes. For instance, shrill voices and expressions of emotion were attributed to women, while thicker voice and no expression of emotion were attributed to men. Phrases such as "Men don't cry" are examples of this. It goes so far that when men express their emotions or tear up, they are chided saying, "Don't cry like a girl!" Also, certain kinds of gaits are associated with certain sexes. Certain kinds of looks, hairstyle, and wardrobe are often associated with certain sexes. In the modern day, however, fluidity has increased to a great degree, and gender stereotypes are constantly challenged. However, society, even today, is ridden with gender stereotypes to a great extent.

In regard to these and many other gender stereotypes and discrimination, the treatment of people who are chronically ill or differently-abled might be double-sided or might have a duality in nature. On one hand, this discrimination might lead them to face a multi-layered exclusion, while on the other hand, due to some reasons, gender discrimination might be dissolved among them to some extent. Oftentimes, they are ridiculed, and socially excluded by society because they might have a gait, or voice, or their style of speaking, gestures and other such things, due to their condition that does not match the stereotypical idea of gendered way of walking, talking or of gestures. Also, their way of expressing particular emotions might be somewhat different from what society holds to be the "normal" way of expressing or not expressing emotions among different genders, leading to further social exclusion. They might not be able to behave in the socially accepted "gentlemanly" or "ladylike" behaviours due to their conditions, leading them to get excluded socially further. They might not understand

the world in the ways society considers "normal". Therefore, gender discrimination affects them too, in various and multiple ways.

Also, sometimes, women are doubly socially excluded in these situations because they are the already oppressed section of society. Even today, in professional areas, even if women are present, they are in numerous cases much less in proportion to men. It is so ingrained in every individual that whenever we hear the phrase, "The first person to...." (achieve a great thing), we picture in our minds a man, and many a times it is actually so because of the difference in opportunities, not only in academic or professional fields down the ages, but also, also due to the curbing of many other opportunities, or not letting women access the available opportunities due to the perspective of the society. This is so much so that when women achieve something, it becomes worth mentioning that a woman has achieved the thing. That is why we hear, "The first woman to...." because society has made the "norm" to be that achievements in most fields are to be first accomplished by men, and women are to follow in their footsteps. Also, many people, while mentioning the name of a post or professional seem that it is necessary to mention the biological sex of the person if the person is female. For example, in cases of doctors, pilots, professors, sports persons, astronauts, authors and countless other professionals, if the said professionals are male, they are just mentioned as doctors, pilots, professors, astronauts or authors, while if the said professionals are females, they are mentioned as female doctors, female pilots, female professors, female astronauts, or female authors. Also, terms such as chairman, sportsman and such seem to exclude females from the posts so much so, that the term itself suggests that it is only for a 'man'. That is why it has been necessary to modify these terms now and change them into chairperson, or sportsperson. Also, many people still consider describing a female poet as a poetess, a female author as an authoress, and such, suggesting that the terms "poet", "author" and such are exclusively for males, and any females taking up the profession is again a 'special case scenario' or that they are merely following the footsteps of men, and trying to become like them by pursuing the men's occupations.

In these conditions, it is doubly difficult for women who are chronically ill or are differently abled to have proper opportunities and social freedom to accomplish a particular thing, or to pursue their dreams because society believes that they are less capable of accomplishing a particular thing or fulfilling their dreams. Also, in the modern days, there is a great deal of empowerment for women, and awareness that helps millions of women believe that they can achieve their dreams and accomplish their ambitions. Therefore, they gather the courage to struggle for what they aspire for. However, for chronically ill or differently abled women, much of these resources might not be available, as they do not have the freedom that other women have, to speak out, to mingle with other women, to be part of regular academic, professional and other programmes. Also, a lot of motivation and empowerment in today's world happens via the internet. Also, many webinars, programmes, competitions, platforms are present on internet today in a global world. So, if they do not have the freedom to handle such gadgets and use internet because they might be deemed unfit to do so, then they do not have access to these sources of inspiration, of exploration, these platforms to both

witness and perform, the latest knowledge, updates, opportunities and this outreach to the world. If using the internet is deemed risky for certain individuals because of their illness or disability, they might be given a guided use of the internet, there should be certain institutions or organisations which help these individuals reach the global platform by acting as the needed intermediaries between these people and the platforms on the internet. This might be useful for all sexes and genders.

However, there is another side to the gender equality question among chronically ill or differently-abled people as well. Gender roles at certain points do not seem to apply for differently abled or chronically ill people because society does not deem fit for any kind of role. They are left out of mainstream society for the majority of the times. Therefore their attitudes, behaviours, and actions are not considered to affect society and vice versa. This might be because society does not consider them as equal human beings. Since they are considered incapable of being cast into familial, social or professional roles, so society might not be able to, or care to cast them in gender roles as well. This, however, is not a totally bright side, since the cause of gender equality here is not inclusion of all, rather exclusion of the entire group of chronically ill or differently-abled people.

Since many of them might have certain special needs or limitations, their attitudes might be curated according to those, and might not follow the gender stereotypes. On one hand, it is good that they are able to challenge gender roles, but on the other hand, it is not because society accepts their differences and respects that in most cases, but because society rejects them from its mainstream population. Also, a lot of LGBTQ members face issues like these. Many people still consider them to be physical or psychological aberrations and socially exclude them and oppress them. They face similar challenges even though they are not differently abled or chronically ill because many people consider them to be so. Nowadays many chronically ill and differently-abled people are coming forward to share their stories, unite with other people, and also to inspire many others. The internet is a huge platform that provides a lot of opportunities to such people. They have come a long way, still, more empowerment is needed in many more aspects.

Conclusion

In literature, as in life, social exclusion is vivid. It is not only to children and people who are differently abled or chronically ill that social exclusion operates. It operates on most marginalized groups like women, LGBTQ members, coloured people and many others. The recent pandemic, which affected people globally, not discriminating among anyone might have served as an eye-opener because a lot of people who were on one side of the lens might have felt how it is to be on the other side of the lens. It led to isolation of people. The affected people, being quarantined, separated from their friends and family might have understood how it feels like to not be able to connect with society. In the earlier months of the pandemic, the affected people were considered to be taboo, and were given responsibility for their situations, which, though might be true in some cases, might not be in others. They were not only quarantined, which was necessary, but cornered emotionally, which was unnecessary and problematic. It inspires one to rethink what those people might go through who spend their entire life in such situations, and how social exclusions affect them.

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