

**The Making of a Disabled Supercrip: A Social Propaganda Presented in Sunil Gangopadhyay's Popular Novel Series Kakababu**

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**Abstract**

*Disability Studies focuses on how society discriminates on the basis of set norms, and people have to confine themselves within the set boundaries to qualify as 'normal', a concept which appears very vague. For people with physical impairment, their bodies become the site of investigation, interpretation, subjugation, a sight of objectification, betrayal and misrepresentation. Their bodies are often disdained, and either they are portrayed as overtly sexual and homosexual, from where the concept of 'crip' theory came into existence, or as asexual, bereft of any sensuality. Kakababu is the magnum opus creation of Sahitya Akademi award winner Sunil Gangopadhyay; it is regarded as a masterpiece in the history of the Bengali Novel tradition. Raja Roy Chowdhury is referred to as 'Kakababu', a 'title' asserted to signify his position of importance. The portrayal of Kakababu in the novel reverses the gaze of the ordinary, though he has lost one leg in an accident, yet nothing can stop his determined soul from going on with his expedition and exploring new adventures, which take him to new destinations. In all the series, we find Kakababu as an energetic, enthusiast who, despite his physical impairment, refuses to lose hope and goes against all the prejudices and pre-conditioning. The presentation of the character 'Kakababu' goes beyond the medical and charity model of disability while establishing the social and human rights model. He is not a victim but a hero, who has the capability to solve any mystery with his intelligence and imperturbability.*

**Keywords:** Disability, Physical Impairment, Supercrip, Ableism, Other, Society.

**Introduction**

The discipline Disability Studies emerged as a critical response to the century old systemic exclusion, prejudice, and misrepresentation of people with impairments. Sometimes they are treated as inhuman, sometimes to be a monster highlighting a medical problem in the body of that person, who is also portrayed as devoid of any emotions. Disability often is regarded as a personal tragedy emphasizing on social, political and cultural impact on the psyche of that individual. The idea of Normalcy is defined to exclude a section of people from others. The concept of 'ableism' is created to differentiate a section of society and defines a barrier within individuals. Disability is regarded as a natural deficiency but is actually a product of social discrimination and cultural stigma. Literature and cultural narratives across times have played a significant role in reinforcing or dismantling the stigmatized ideologies through representation of the disabled characters as either a hero or a villain.

While tracing the historical depiction of persons with impairments in fiction, the authors have leaned toward extremes: either the disabled persons are portrayed as pitiable and tragic, or as deviant and threatening. And both the perspectives strip away the individuality from a person and creates complexity, this idea turns the impaired body into a symbol of either excess or as lack. In opposition to these limited frameworks, crip theory has developed within Disability Studies to challenge ableist and heteronormative assumptions. This approach views disability as a position of cultural and political resistance rather than deficiency, seeking to disrupt binaries of ability versus disability and normal versus abnormal. According to Michael Oliver, disability is the result of social barriers, discriminatory attitudes and inflexible system that prevents people with impairments to lead a peaceful life.

Sunil Gangopadhyay's popular novel series Kakababu provides an important case study on the idea of Disability. Sunil Gangopadhyay, is a recipient of the Sahitya Akademi Award, who also remains a central figure in modern Bengali literature. His creation of Raja Roy Chowdhury, popularly known as Kakababu, gets special mention plays an important part while discussing Disability Studies. At the beginning of the novel, the reader witness Kakababu who has lost a leg in an accident, but is not portrayed as someone who is a helpless and a side-lined figure like many other novels. Instead, he is portrayed as an independent person who embarks on expeditions to explore the unknown landscapes and takes part in daring adventures. Kakababu consistently demonstrates his intellectual brilliance and emotional steadiness, no matter what situation comes but can never diminish his self-determination and identity as a leader, adventurer, and a problem-solver.

What makes Kakababu different is the way he resists the dominant cultural narratives on disabled people. He is neither a tragic victim nor a subject to be pitied, rather, he emerges as a figure of strength and resilience in the novel, his optimism makes him achieve the unachievable. In the novels *Pahar Churai Atonko (Terror on the Mountain)* and *Khali Jahajer Rohoshyo (The Mystery of the Deserted Ship)*, Kakababu is presented as someone who can outthink, and outperform his adversaries despite his physical limitation. In Disability Studies, these type of figures are sometimes described as "supercrip": persons who can become an extraordinary character in a narrative. While this trope can sometimes reinforce as well as can narrow ideals of heroism by celebrating only the exceptional, in the case of Kakababu, the theme of a 'supercrip' plays a progressive role as it expands the cultural imagination and normalizes the presence of a disabled protagonist in any adventure fiction.

This paper aims to examine Kakababu as more than mere a fictional adventurer, and takes the centre stage in the debate regarding Disability Studies. This paper highlights the distinction between impairment, a biological condition and disability, a social identity shaped by exclusionary practices. Through a textual analysis of the novels *Pahar Churai Atonko* and *Khali Jahajer Rohoshyo*, the paper explores how Kakababu challenges the ableist notions and reclaims 'impairment' as a site of empowerment. The theme of deviance is explored further in the paper while taking references from the portions of the novels. The Kakababu series demonstrates the broader cultural impact of Adventure narratives yet differs significantly. Other Adventure narratives primarily feature able-bodied persons depicted as explorers, warriors, and detectives, making Kakababu series an exception. Gangopadhyay situates Kakababu, a physically impaired person as the protagonist of his stories. This perspective of his not only diversifies the genre but also provides an alternative model of heroism for children and young adults. By emphasizing on intelligence, courage, and determination over physical wholeness, the Kakababu stories subvert the dominant stereotypes and generate a powerful counter-narrative to contest and alter the subverting views of the ordinary.

### **Discussion and Analysis**

Physical impairment is a deviance and not a disability; it can be caused by some illness later developed in the body, or one can be born with this deviance, which makes them different but not alien. Physical impairment is not opposite to the concept of 'Ableism' but it is the term 'Disability' which forcefully excludes a section of people from the society through different means. Physical impairment as Michael Oliver in his book *Understanding Disability: From Theory to Practice* mentions, is lacking or having a defective limb or an organ. Disability, according to Oliver, "is the disadvantage or restriction of activity caused by a contemporary social organisation which takes no or little account of people who have physical impairments and thus excludes them from participation in the mainstream of social activities" (Oliver, 42). He also mentions the 'Disability Ghetto', where people suffering with all kinds of impairments are merged together as a homogeneous entity and treated equally, ignoring the fact that each person is different from the other and needs personal attention and care.

Literally there are four models of disability, namely the medical, charity, social and human rights models. Illness is caused by some disease, but disability is created by social organisations. Sunil Gangopadhyay's creation of 'Kakababu' debunks the idea of the medical and charity model of disability as he is not a victim but a hero who has the capability to solve any mystery with his intelligence and imperturbability. People suffering with some kind of impairment don't need our charity or pity instead, some of them inspire us by achieving the wonders which any ordinary person fails to achieve. And the novel challenges the society by presenting the character Kakababu, who goes against societal norms, which suggests that people suffering with certain challenges cannot achieve success, but Kakababu establishes the Human Rights model emphasising the real happiness of the self as the power to live a fulfilling life.

The word 'Disability' is biased, as it does not specify the degree of difference, which varies from person to person, and instead makes a person feel vulnerable, under the eye of gaze and constant scrutiny. It is often used as a derogatory word imposed by the society. Disability makes the physically impaired one disabled; the central aim is to exclude and make them feel isolated in the society. They are not a homogeneous community; each individual has to face different issues even though the impairment is similar, yet the personal experience adds on to the subjectivity which the term 'disability' ignores. The terms 'handicapped', 'specially abled' and 'differently abled' are variously used to define the persons suffering with some kind of impairment. Though each term is different from the other, yet it is often used synonymously to identify persons who are different according to the parameters set by the society.

Kakababu is the magnum opus creation of Sahitya Akademi award-winning writer Sunil Gangopadhyay; it is regarded as a masterpiece in the history of the Bengali Novel tradition. It tells the story of Raja Roy Chowdhury, who was a director in the Archaeological Survey of India, but during an accident he lost one of his legs to save his friend and soon resigned from his official post. He embodies the strength of courage against all impossibilities and odds and always comes up with possible solutions against all difficulties. Shontu, his nephew, accompanies

him. He is Kakababu's companion in all his adventures. Though retired from his post, Kakababu could never give up on his passion to explore, which further leads him to embark upon new adventures.

In the novel *Pahar Churai Atonko (Terror on the Mountain)*, Kakababu undertakes a journey to the mountain – in search of the mystery of 'Yeti' (abominable snowman), surrounding which exists a lot of illusion. The lack of transparency and true knowledge leads people to imagine and hallucinate regarding its existence and creates the myth of terror surrounding the abominable creature. But Kakababu, once determined to unveil the secrets, embarks upon the journey which gets justified by the lines:

"Wars across the horizon are yet to be won

Raja is taking the field thereby

Never afraid of falling, fighting or even dying

Just like the rustling of gusty wind

Will see the end of everything, whatever that costs

The sole reason for all his adventures"

(Chakravorty, title song of the movie *Yeti Obhijaan* in translation)

Through the conversations between Kakababu and his nephew Shontu, Sunil Gangopadhyay points to the intelligence and knowledge of Kakababu, which is quite exceptional as compared to other ordinary persons. Since he previously worked at the Archaeological Survey of India, he possesses a wide knowledge of history, sociology, science and is unprecedented in reading human minds. These cognitive abilities have helped him in many ways during his expedition. His sense of humour, intuition and perseverance in not to leave anything abruptly and completing every task undertaken, whatever difficulty it may cause, make him a superhero. It exceeds the idea that persons with some kind of impairment are not to be pitied or looked down upon but instead to be praised for their extraordinary courage to lead life with the strength which many ordinary people lack.

The whole mystery revolves around the dead old man's tooth, which Kakababu has brought from his Europe tour. After returning from the tour and devoting almost several weeks to a deep study, Kakababu offered Shontu a proposal for a trip to Mount Everest. But Everest is not an easy place to go, especially for a person who has lost a leg. Shontu becomes the narrative voice questioning the appropriateness of the proposal: "How could a person who needed crutches to walk expect to climb the highest peak in the world?" But inside his mind he was quite sure that if Kakababu has decided to do something, he will complete his aim no matter how hard it costs him. Kakababu and his nephew Shontu began their journey with other Sherpas and luggage-bearers. While climbing the hills, they first encountered a vicious mountain bear that was attacking one traveller and puncturing his bleeding stomach. Kakababu even in these fierce conditions didn't lose hope, and instead fired his revolver in the air to scare the bear. At the moment of crisis, Kakababu was determined and additionally taught Shontu to use a revolver if need arises. Kakababu is a constant source of energy and passion who, despite his physical limitations, inspires and unites the whole group and enlightens their motive of arrival. He also is the bearer of the cultural heritage of India as against the foreign force. When Shontu doubts their abilities as against the foreign men who fail in this expedition, he scorns Shontu and says, "What do you mean by even the sahibs... Do you think foreign folks are braver than us?"(2022, p. 32).

The narrative poses historical construction when, towards the very beginning of the novel, Kakababu delves deep into the recesses of history and picks up the palaeontologist Ralph von Koenigswald. Gangopadhyay also creates a fictional character, Caine Shipton, a British adventurer who goes missing during an expedition in Mount Everest. The search for the mythical 'Yeti' uncovers many truths, including the mysteries of Shipton's sudden disappearance during his expedition. In the middle of the novel when Kakababu gets kidnapped time and again, we find references of how, despite his one missing leg, his hands have the power of some iron and how he managed to use his hands in self-defence. When Caine Shipton detained Kakababu in the underground cell, he wanted to terrify him with the appearance of a Yeti, but Kakababu resisted the attack with his hand. The novel reaches its climax when Kakababu exposes the evil motive of Shipton and says, "I knew you were up to your old tricks. Spying on us for a foreign power! But did you have to stoop so low?"(2022, p. 192).

Kakababu is resilient and obstinate in his approach, and though apparently the Sherpas and luggage-bearers who accompanied them were hesitant to carry on with their journey, in front of Kakababu, no one is allowed to lose courage and leave the journey incomplete. Time and again in the novel there are references to the lame body parts, comparing them against the willpower of Kakababu. Mingma, a sherpa accompanying them on the journey at the beginning, reminds Shontu of Kakababu's inability and says, "your uncle will never be able to climb Everest... how can anyone with one leg climb a mountain?"(2022, p. 46). Yet Kakababu proved him wrong as he completed his mission and helped the Government officials to end the corrupt businesses of some foreign spy organization.

Quest narratives always involve a central character, around whom all the actions revolve, yet ultimately it remains a collaborative journey; here also we find Kakababu taking the centre stage. The description of the purpose in the narrative gives the reader a curiosity to seek and question. It helps provide a structure to the narrative, adding to it the mode of suspense, which helps develop the intuition in the minds of the readers. The language used is metaphorical, catering to the cognitive abilities of the reader, instigating the sense of fear, and preparing the mind for exploration, reversals and new discoveries.

Every adventure narrative revolves around a purpose. Though the adventures of Kakababu remind one of Tintin's adventure in Tibet, yet Herge's presentation of the journey of Tintin surrounds the search for his friend 'Chang', who got lost in a plane accident. Herge accuses the figure of 'Yeti' of being involved in Chang's disappearance, which towards the end proved wrong, yet the portrayal of 'Yeti' is kept open-ended, left for interpretation. But Sunil Gangopadhyay delves deep into the myth of Yeti, who also plays the role of a catalyst. Gangopadhyay makes the mythical snowman come alive while challenging the preconceived notion of humanity. Humans are presented as more inhumane in their approach as compared to the 'Yeti'. It is a human who uses the mythical snowman as a trope to terrify people and gain benefit out of it. Kakababu is the hero of the narrative; he rejects the boundaries set by the society. His physical impairment can never come in the way of his self-confidence and free will, and towards the end he emerges as the supercrip in the novel. Towards the end the statement "Even a lame person can also cross a mountain if they put their mind to it." justifies Kakababu's quest emphasizing his willpower and inner capabilities.

In the novel *Khali Jahajer Rohoshyo (The Mystery of the Deserted Ship)*, Kakababu embarks upon a new journey in search of a deserted ship floating on the Bay of Bengal, coming near the Sundarbans coastal area in West Bengal. It was a well-appointed vessel, which was perhaps meant for living, with a bedroom and fully equipped kitchen, yet there was no trace of crew or documents indicating the owner of the ship or its place of origin. The most interesting thing in the whole ship is the little table in the kitchen where two sausages, a slice of cheese, a piece of toast, and a cup of half-drunk coffee was found; apparently, it seemed as if somebody was having his breakfast but had to abandon the ship in a hurry. Ordinary people suspect it to be either a fisher boat or some smugglers boat, but it is only Kakababu who can smell some rot and begins his expedition to find out the hidden truth behind the mystery of the deserted ship. Kakababu predicted some risk of life related to the empty ship and embarked on a journey with Shontu and Biman, a neighbour of his. Facing many difficulties, they got help from Government officials one of whom named Ranabir accompanied them and provided them with all kinds of support to unveil the mystery.

Kakababu, despite his physical challenges, is the embodiment of human compassion and empathy. Shontu, his nephew, is the only one who was well aware of Kakababu's nature after being with him as a companion in several adventures, and he exclaims that even in the point of crisis, "Kakababu could never bring himself to shoot someone" (2022, p. 326). Through the whole action we witness his difficulties in travelling; one such instance is when Kakababu predicts some hidden room inside the ship and begins the search. Upon finding the room below, it was difficult for him to go inside the hidden room, yet he somehow managed to get down with the help of the other members in the ship and started reading the diaries of Ignmar Smelt. Further, during his visit to the small island near Sunderban, their boat capsized and all the members fell in the water, yet Kakababu managed to hold on to something and float in the water, as he cannot swim with his one leg.

The whole narrative of the novel revolves around the search for a Swedish origin scientist Ignmar Smelt, one of the greatest mind whose name was proposed for the Nobel Prize the year Vietnam War began. He petitioned to withdraw his name as he believed that science was meant for the benefit of mankind but after watching the hazard it caused to human life and how countries misused it for the sake of their own benefits he called upon all scientists to stop their research which is aiding to war and suffering. But nobody responded positively and he in bitter disillusionment decides to leave the society and his national identity. He declared to live his entire life on the International waters, over what no country has a particular claim. Towards the end Kakababu finds Smelt on an island in Sundarban; upon being attacked by some plunderers, he took refuge in a lonesome forest which was predicted to have snakes and tigers by the locals, yet miraculously he was alive, unharmed by any of those animals, and when asked, Smelt replied, "Perhaps they understood my infirmity and showed me mercy. I hope you'll believe me when I tell you that no animal is as cruel as a human can be" (2022, p. 396).

Disability is a social propaganda used by people in power to streamline their existence and hence categorize them as inhuman or non-human. Several terms like 'handicapped', 'physically challenged', 'disabled' are used to homogenize a group of people, putting them into a single cage and resisting their voice. But Kakababu challenges the social construction, proves the institutions wrong and inspires even the ordinary to think differently and add on empathy and subjectivity in their approach while dealing with people suffering with some kind of impairment. Both the novels, though situated in extremely opposite location, depict Kakababu's courage despite his physical impairment. He is not reluctant or pessimistic regarding his life tragedies but instead believes

in self-expression and self-exploration. He wants to spend his entire life on some fruitful expedition and to contribute to the nation's cause. Despite his physical impairment, he has the willpower and thinks about the betterment of the society, ignoring all the social discriminations and ostracization. Mental strength and self-confidence combined with perseverance and willpower, make him the Superhero who, instead of cursing his fate for the tragedies in his life, loves to take on challenges and win with flying colours. Sunil Gangopadhyay's collection 'Kakababu' novel series deals with the popular narratives by depicting cultural heritages, moments and history; it is received by a wide range of audience and is particularly famous among children and young adults for its depiction of the self through the political lens. The end of the novel gives us the lesson that one should never accept social stereotypes without questioning them.

### Conclusion

The Kakababu series engages and discusses the potential of literature to reshape attitudes towards disability. Sunil Gangopadhyay's decision to create a magnum opus character who is a physically impaired adventurer is worth praising. Kakababu demonstrates that physical impairment does not automatically lead to exclusion or helplessness. Contrastingly, his adventures also illustrate how resilience and intelligence can coexist with bodily difference. He willingly thrives in dangerous situations and subverts the long-standing stereotypes that equate disability with weakness or dependence. The novels challenges the medical and charity models of disability by portraying Kakababu as a capable, decisive, and inspiring person, the idea which aligns with the social and human rights model.

Gangopadhyay challenges society's insistence on labelling the impaired body as "Other." Kakababu's role as a cultural icon further reinforces the idea that heroism is not about physical perfection but about determination, adaptability, and moral conviction. The "supercrip" foundation complicates the picture of subaltern and celebrates the extraordinary disabled figures which may inadvertently create unrealistic expectations in the minds of disabled individuals. However, in the cultural context of Bengal and Indian popular fiction, Kakababu serves a crucial role. By offering readers, a role model who redefines what it means to be heroic, the Kakababu series restructures the cycle of stigma and pity that often shapes disability narratives in literature. Kakababu not only becomes a source of entertainment but also a medium of social education. It inspires the audience to recognize 'diversity' as a strength rather than deficiency. Kakababu's enduring appeal emphasizes the transformative potential of popular culture in Disability Studies. Through the protagonist 'Kakababu', Gangopadhyay debunks conventional perceptions of ability and inability and contributes to a more inclusive imagination.

The figure of Kakababu functions at two levels: one, as an adventurous hero within the fictional world; and second as a symbolic challenge to real-world ableism. The novel stories of Kakababu proves that true heroism is not rooted in bodily strength but in the strength of the mind, it is in the courage to persist, adapt, and overcome prejudices. Gangopadhyay embodies the possibility of a world where impairment does not only equate to exclusion or disqualification rather it can help inspiring others and works as a form of empowerment. Disability Studies highlights the need for inclusive representations and Kakababu stands out as a pioneering figure who proves that despite being physically challenged, with true determination and will power, one can overcome all hurdles and stand victorious.

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