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Intersectionality in Disability: Class, Gender, and Nation in *One Little Finger and My Left Foot*

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Abstract

This paper explores the intersectional dimensions of disability in Malini Chib's *One Little Finger* and Christy Brown's *My Left Foot*, focusing on how class, gender, and national context shape the lived experiences and narrative representations of the authors. Drawing on intersectionality theory and disability studies, the paper argues that disability cannot be understood in isolation but must be analyzed in relation to other social categories that influence access, agency, and identity. Malini Chib, an Indian woman with cerebral palsy, navigates a society steeped in patriarchal norms and limited accessibility, yet her elite class status and international education afford her opportunities for advocacy and empowerment. In contrast, Christy Brown, a working-class Irish man with the same condition, faces economic hardship and social marginalization, but gains recognition through his artistic talent within a conservative, Catholic society. Through a close reading of both autobiographies, this study reveals how systemic inequalities related to gender and class intersect with national attitudes toward disability to produce unique configurations of oppression and resilience. By analysing these narratives comparatively, the paper highlights how intersectionality provides a more nuanced framework for understanding disability beyond the binary of ability and impairment. Ultimately, the study underscores the need for inclusive, culturally sensitive approaches to disability discourse that account for multiple axes of identity.

Keywords: Intersectionality, Disability Studies, Autobiography, Gender and Disability, Class and Social Inequality, National Identity.

Introduction

Disability, long approached through a narrow medical lens, has in recent decades emerged as a crucial site of cultural, political, and theoretical engagement. Autobiographical narratives by people with disabilities offer not only personal testimony but also critical insight into the social, structural, and ideological forces that shape lived experience. This paper examines *One Little Finger* by Malini Chib and *My Left Foot* by Christy Brown, two memoirs that vividly portray life with cerebral palsy. While both texts explore the challenges and triumphs of navigating a disabling world, they also reveal how disability intersects with other identity categories—particularly class, gender, and nation—to produce distinct experiences of marginalization and empowerment.

Malini Chib, an Indian woman from an affluent and educated family, confronts not only the physical limitations imposed by her condition but also the cultural constraints of gender and the infrastructural inaccessibility of Indian society. In contrast, Christy Brown, a working-class Irish man, faces economic hardship and social exclusion in mid-20th-century Dublin but finds an outlet for self-expression through

art and writing, ultimately gaining recognition despite limited opportunities. These contrasting narratives demonstrate that disability is not experienced uniformly; rather, it is shaped by the specific socio-political contexts in which individuals live.

To understand the complexities of these narratives, this paper employs an intersectional approach, drawing on the work of scholars such as Kimberlé Crenshaw and Rosemarie Garland-Thomson. Intersectionality, initially developed to address overlapping forms of oppression—especially those related to race, gender, and class—offers a powerful framework for analyzing how multiple identities compound and complicate experiences of disability. By reading *One Little Finger* and *My Left Foot* through this lens, the paper argues that an intersectional understanding is essential to fully grasp the nuanced realities of disabled lives.

This study will explore how gender norms, class positions, and national contexts inform both the content and construction of these autobiographies. It will also consider how Chib and Brown use narrative voice as a form of resistance, challenging prevailing assumptions about disability, dependence, and agency. Ultimately, this paper aims to show how a comparative, intersectional reading of disability life writing can enrich our understanding of both personal identity and broader social dynamics.

Theoretical Framework: Intersectionality and Disability Studies

To analyze *One Little Finger* by Malini Chib and *My Left Foot* by Christy Brown through a critical lens, it is essential to draw on two intersecting fields of theory: **intersectionality** and **disability studies**. Together, these frameworks provide a comprehensive approach to understanding how identity categories such as disability, gender, class, and nation coalesce to shape lived experiences, social opportunities, and self-representation.

Intersectionality

The concept of **intersectionality** was first coined by legal scholar **Kimberlé Crenshaw** in 1989 to describe how systems of oppression—particularly racism and sexism—interact and intensify each other in the lives of Black women. Intersectionality has since evolved into a broader theoretical tool that examines how various social identities (e.g., race, gender, class, ability, sexuality) intersect to produce unique experiences of privilege or marginalization.

Applied to disability, intersectionality reveals how being disabled is not a single, isolated experience but one that is fundamentally shaped by other aspects of identity. For instance, a disabled woman

may face not only inaccessibility but also patriarchal expectations and gender-based discrimination, while a disabled person from a marginalized economic background may lack access to healthcare, education, or advocacy platforms. This theoretical lens challenges the assumption that disability can be treated as a universal or monolithic experience and instead situates it within broader social and cultural matrices.

Disability Studies and the Social Model

Disability studies, as an academic field, emerged in the late 20th century as a response to the dominance of the **medical model of disability**, which views disability primarily as a physical or mental deficiency that must be treated or cured. In contrast, the **social model of disability**—developed by scholars and activists such as Michael Oliver—shifts the focus away from the individual's impairment and toward the social, architectural, and attitudinal barriers that disable individuals.

This distinction is crucial when analyzing autobiographical narratives such as those by Chib and Brown. Rather than positioning themselves as victims of a tragic condition, both authors critique the societal structures that limit their autonomy—whether it be in the form of inaccessible public spaces, insufficient educational systems, or the patronizing attitudes of those around them. In doing so, they align with the goals of disability studies to recenter the conversation on inclusion, rights, and social justice.

Integrating the Frameworks

By integrating intersectionality with disability studies, this paper seeks to go beyond a simplistic reading of disability as either biological fate or heroic triumph. Instead, it investigates how disability is experienced *differently* depending on one's social positioning. Malini Chib's elite class background offers her access to education and international platforms that many disabled women in India are denied. Conversely, Christy Brown's working-class status and limited institutional support confine his opportunities, despite his artistic talent. Their differing national contexts—Ireland in the mid-20th century and postcolonial, urban India—further complicate how disability is perceived, accommodated, or resisted.

This theoretical approach not only enriches our understanding of the autobiographical texts themselves but also contributes to broader discourses on inclusion, representation, and the politics of identity.

Gender and Disability: A Comparative Analysis

The intersection of gender and disability introduces a complex set of social expectations, stereotypes, and constraints that significantly shape the lived experiences of individuals. In both *One Little Finger* by Malini Chib and *My Left Foot* by Christy Brown, gender plays a pivotal role in how the protagonists experience, internalize, and resist societal attitudes toward disability. While both authors confront ableist environments, their respective genders result in distinct challenges and modes of self-representation.

Malini Chib: Disability and Femininity in Indian Society

Malini Chib's experiences as a woman with cerebral palsy in India highlight the ways in which gender amplifies marginalization. Traditional Indian cultural norms often associate femininity with domesticity, beauty, dependence, and submissiveness—roles that disabled women are often seen as failing to fulfill. Chib addresses these issues candidly, particularly in relation to her struggle for autonomy, her right to education, her desire for romantic relationships, and her assertion of selfhood in a society that tends to infantilize disabled women.

Despite coming from an elite, progressive family, Chib confronts deeply entrenched patriarchal attitudes. She is often viewed not only as "incapable" due to her physical condition but also as "unwomanly" because she defies expectations of passivity and dependence. Her refusal to be silent about her sexual desires, her fight to live independently, and her pursuit of a professional life are all radical acts in a context where women with disabilities are often rendered invisible or deemed asexual.

Chib's narrative, thus, becomes a powerful critique of both ableism and patriarchy. She not only documents her personal journey but also uses her life story as a platform for feminist disability advocacy, challenging dominant cultural scripts that define what it means to be a "proper" woman.

Christy Brown: Masculinity and Disability in Working-Class Ireland

In contrast, Christy Brown's narrative is shaped by his position as a man within a traditional, Catholic, working-class Irish family. Brown's masculinity is constantly negotiated within the context of physical dependency and limited speech—traits traditionally associated with femininity or weakness. As a result, Brown's disability places him at odds with dominant constructions of Irish masculinity, which idealize physical strength, stoicism, and labor.

Yet Brown's narrative often reasserts a conven-

tional male identity through his portrayal as a tortured artist, his defiant temperament, and his later romantic engagements. His writing often reflects a struggle for control—not only over his body but also over his image as a man capable of achievement, desire, and independence. While Chib confronts marginalization for deviating from expected female roles, Brown battles the anxiety of falling short of male ideals.

Importantly, however, Brown's position as a man allows for certain privileges in his social and familial context. He is taken seriously as a creative figure and is not denied the right to express his desires or frustrations—freedoms not always afforded to disabled women, especially in patriarchal societies. His mother's unwavering support also reinforces a model of masculinity that is nurtured and legitimized within the family, allowing his talents to be recognized despite systemic barriers.

Comparative Insights

The contrast between Chib and Brown underscores the importance of gender as a structuring force in the experience of disability. Chib's narrative resists both gender and disability norms, making her doubly subversive in her context. Brown's story, while equally inspiring, is more comfortably absorbed into traditional narratives of male genius and perseverance. This gendered divergence reveals how societal expectations can both limit and shape the possibilities for agency, identity, and resistance.

Both authors challenge normative assumptions about gender and disability, but they do so in ways that are deeply influenced by their respective cultures and gender roles. By examining their narratives side by side, it becomes clear that disability is not a uniform experience but one that is deeply filtered through the lens of gender.

Class and Access: Privilege And Poverty

Class plays a decisive role in determining the resources, opportunities, and social support available to disabled individuals. In *One Little Finger* and *My Left Foot*, Malini Chib and Christy Brown navigate vastly different socioeconomic realities—Chib as a member of India's urban elite, and Brown as a working-class individual in mid-20th century Ireland. These class positions deeply affect how each author experiences disability and responds to the barriers around them.

Malini Chib: Privilege as a Path to Empowerment

Malini Chib's upper-class background offers her access to elite educational institutions, internation-

al travel, advanced medical care, and a wide support network. Her mother, a prominent disability rights activist and writer, plays a crucial role in securing opportunities for Chib that would be inaccessible to most disabled people in India. As a result, Chib is able to study abroad, earn multiple degrees, and become an advocate for inclusion and accessibility.

However, Chib's memoir does not romanticize her privilege. She acknowledges that despite her class status, Indian society remains largely unaccommodating and discriminatory toward disabled individuals. Public infrastructure is rarely accessible, societal attitudes are often dismissive or patronizing, and inclusion is still an aspiration rather than a reality. Her privilege enables her to resist these conditions, but it also isolates her from the majority of disabled Indians who lack such resources. Chib is acutely aware of this gap, and part of her activism is directed toward closing it.

Thus, Chib's class position does not eliminate the impact of her disability but rather reshapes the nature of her struggle—from one of basic survival to one of advocacy, independence, and systemic reform.

Christy Brown: Disability in a Working-Class Context

In stark contrast, Christy Brown grows up in a large, working-class family in the impoverished neighborhoods of Dublin. His early life is marked by financial strain, limited access to education, and minimal institutional support for disabled individuals. His family, especially his mother, provides the primary—often sole—source of care, emotional support, and motivation. Brown's cerebral palsy is initially misunderstood and misdiagnosed, reflecting the broader ignorance and neglect surrounding disability in poor communities.

Unlike Chib, who is able to access formal schooling and higher education, Brown's education is informal and self-directed. He learns to read and write largely at home and later gains entry into the artistic and literary worlds through sheer determination and familial support. His success, while remarkable, is achieved against a backdrop of economic hardship and societal neglect. Brown's class position not only limits his mobility and options but also shapes the themes of frustration, alienation, and fierce independence in his work.

Nation and Cultural Perceptions of Disability

Disability is not merely a physical or individual condition—it is deeply shaped by cultural beliefs, historical narratives, religious values, and national policies. In *One Little Finger* and *My Left Foot*,

the experiences of Malini Chib and Christy Brown are framed within the broader national contexts of **postcolonial India** and **mid-20th century Ireland**, respectively. These settings shape public perceptions of disability, the availability of support systems, and the dominant narratives surrounding human worth, productivity, and normalcy.

Malini Chib: Disability in Postcolonial, Urban India

In India, disability is often framed within a complex mix of **religious fatalism**, **social stigma**, and **bureaucratic neglect**. Cultural attitudes influenced by Hindu karma theory or superstitions may interpret disability as a consequence of past sins or bad fate, contributing to a tendency to isolate or hide disabled individuals. While India has made legislative strides in disability rights—such as the Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act (2016)—on-the-ground realities still reflect a lack of accessibility in infrastructure, education, employment, and public life.

Malini Chib's memoir reveals how these cultural and institutional shortcomings play out in urban India, even for someone with privilege. Despite her elite status and access to Western education, she faces social marginalization, physical exclusion from public spaces, and a constant battle to be treated as a capable, autonomous individual. Her fight for inclusion is not just personal—it is political, as she challenges the invisibility of disabled people in Indian society and works to create change through activism and policy influence.

India's postcolonial context adds another layer. As a nation striving to modernize and develop, there is often an emphasis on "able-bodied productivity" as a sign of national strength. Disabled individuals are frequently left out of this narrative, reinforcing their marginalization. Chib's presence in public discourse, therefore, becomes an act of resistance against a nation-building ideology that tends to exclude bodies that do not conform to normative ideals.

Christy Brown: Disability in Catholic, Working-Class Ireland

Christy Brown's experiences are shaped by a very different national context. Growing up in a devoutly Catholic, economically challenged Ireland, Brown contends with both **religious conservatism** and **class-based neglect**. The dominant cultural narrative surrounding disability during Brown's youth was one of pity, charity, and silence. Disabled individuals were often institutionalized or relegated to the private sphere, seen as burdens or subjects of divine will rather than as full citizens.

Brown's memoir captures the reality of being raised in a country where state support was minimal and where disability was often hidden from public life. However, the Catholic framework also offers a nuanced dynamic: while it contributes to stigmatization, it also fosters a strong sense of family responsibility and care. Brown's mother, driven by love and moral duty, becomes his primary advocate—an embodiment of maternal devotion in a nation where the family was idealized as the moral center of life.

Ireland's cultural emphasis on artistic expression, however, provides Brown with a powerful outlet. As an artist and writer, he gains recognition in a country that values literary talent, which partially offsets the limitations imposed by both class and disability. Still, his success does not negate the cultural and institutional gaps that defined his early years.

Narrative Voice and Self-Representation

Autobiographical writing offers a unique space for individuals to reclaim authority over their own stories, challenging dominant narratives imposed by society. In *One Little Finger* and *My Left Foot*, Malini Chib and Christy Brown use narrative voice strategically to assert their identities, confront societal misconceptions about disability, and reshape the discourse around what it means to live with cerebral palsy.

Malini Chib: A Voice of Agency and Advocacy

Malini Chib's narrative voice is marked by clarity, determination, and a conscious effort to transcend victimhood. Despite the physical challenges posed by cerebral palsy, her writing is fluent, confident, and assertive, reflecting her refusal to be defined solely by her disability. Chib uses her autobiography not just to recount personal experiences but to educate readers about the social and political dimensions of disability in India.

Her voice also embodies advocacy, highlighting systemic barriers and calling for inclusion and equal rights. She actively challenges the stereotypes of disabled individuals as dependent or pitiable, emphasizing instead her agency, intelligence, and aspirations. Through this self-representation, Chib situates herself as both a survivor and a change-maker, forging a collective identity with others who face similar struggles.

Christy Brown: Articulating the Body and Mind

Christy Brown's narrative voice reflects the complexity of living in a body constrained by cerebral palsy while possessing a rich inner life. His writ-

ing style combines vulnerability, wit, and resilience, capturing the frustrations of physical limitation alongside the triumphs of creativity. Brown's voice emerges not only through the written word but also through his unique method of communication—painting and writing with his left foot—which becomes a powerful metaphor for overcoming barriers.

Brown's self-representation is closely tied to his identity as an artist and writer, using his creative output as evidence of his intellectual and emotional depth. His narrative disrupts societal assumptions that equate disability with incapacity, illustrating instead a vibrant, determined selfhood. At the same time, Brown's voice does not shy away from moments of anger, despair, and pain, offering a raw and honest portrayal that humanizes disability beyond inspirational tropes.

Both authors utilize their narrative voices to reclaim power over how their lives are understood. Chib's voice is explicit in its political engagement, aiming to dismantle ableist structures and advocate for broader social change. Brown's voice, meanwhile, is more intimately tied to personal expression and artistic achievement, though it similarly challenges prevailing notions of dependence and incapacity.

Their self-representations move beyond simplistic victim or hero narratives. Instead, they present nuanced portraits of disability as a multifaceted experience involving struggle, creativity, and resistance. Through their autobiographies, Chib and Brown assert their identities on their own terms, inviting readers to reconsider assumptions about ability, worth, and human potential.

Resistance, Resilience and Advocacy

The narratives of Malini Chib in *One Little Finger* and Christy Brown in *My Left Foot* are not merely accounts of personal struggle but profound acts of resistance and resilience. Both authors challenge dominant societal attitudes toward disability, employing their life stories as tools for advocacy and social transformation.

Malini Chib: Advocacy through Visibility and Activism

Malini Chib's memoir embodies resistance against the systemic ableism embedded in Indian society. Her life story disrupts the stereotype of disabled individuals as passive or dependent, showcasing instead a subject who actively claims agency over her body, education, and professional life. Chib's privileged background enables her to engage in activism on national and international stages, advocating for inclusive policies and accessible in-

frastructure.

Her narrative underscores the importance of visibility—by telling her story publicly, Chib helps to dismantle stigma and raise awareness about the rights and capacities of disabled people. She uses her platform to advocate not just for individual accommodation but for systemic change, emphasizing disability as a human rights issue that intersects with gender, class, and culture.

Christy Brown: Resilience in Creativity and Self-Expression

Christy Brown's resistance takes shape through resilience and artistic expression. Despite severe physical limitations and social marginalization, Brown refuses to be defined by his disability. His ability to write and paint with his left foot becomes an act of defiance against expectations of incapacity.

Brown's narrative communicates a fierce determination to assert identity and worth, even in the face of hardship. His success as a writer and artist not only challenges societal prejudice but also inspires others with disabilities to seek their own forms of expression and recognition. His story illustrates how resilience can transform personal limitation into creative power.

Shared Advocacy and Broader Impact

While their methods differ, both Chib and Brown exemplify how autobiographical storytelling serves as a form of advocacy. Their works encourage readers to confront ableist assumptions and recognize the diversity of disabled experiences shaped by intersecting identities.

Moreover, their narratives contribute to wider disability rights movements by humanizing disability and demanding social inclusion. They advocate for structural reforms—whether in accessibility, education, or social attitudes—that move beyond charity to equality.

In essence, *One Little Finger* and *My Left Foot* are testaments to the strength and agency of disabled individuals, highlighting how resistance and resilience are central to both personal survival and collective empowerment.

Conclusion

The autobiographies *One Little Finger* by Malini Chib and *My Left Foot* by Christy Brown offer rich, nuanced insights into the lived realities of disability, revealing how class, gender, and nation intersect to shape individual experiences. Through an intersectional disability studies lens, this paper has demonstrated that disability cannot be understood in isolation but must be analyzed in relation

to broader social identities and cultural contexts.

Chib's narrative highlights how privilege and gender in postcolonial India influence both the challenges faced and the avenues for resistance available to a disabled woman. Brown's story, meanwhile, illustrates how working-class masculinity and Catholic cultural values inform the contours of disability experience in mid-20th century Ireland. Both authors use their autobiographies to reclaim narrative authority, challenge ableist stereotypes, and advocate for greater inclusion and recognition.

Their stories emphasize that disability is not simply a medical condition but a social and political identity shaped by multiple intersecting factors. By engaging with their memoirs comparatively, this paper underscores the importance of contextualizing disability within the complexities of class, gender, and national culture. Ultimately, *One Little Finger* and *My Left Foot* serve as powerful testimonies of resilience, resistance, and advocacy, reminding us that the struggle for disability rights and dignity is deeply entwined with broader movements for social justice.

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