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Beyond Resilience: Deconstructing Disability and Social Barriers in the Life of Khadim Hussain Nida Sahito

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the lived experience of disability through a critical analysis of the life of Khadim Hussain Sahito (1941–2025), a paralyzed individual who navigated social, economic, and cultural barriers in rural Sindh. Drawing on Critical Disability Studies and the Social Model of Disability, the research explores how disability is not merely a physical condition but a socially constructed phenomenon shaped by exclusionary structures, negative societal attitudes, and limited accessibility. Through a qualitative case study approach, the paper analyzes Khadim Hussain’s life as a narrative of resistance, resilience, and agency. While his determination, religious faith, and commitment to his children’s education enabled him to overcome numerous challenges, this study argues that his struggles were intensified by systemic neglect and social marginalization. Furthermore, the paper critically interrogates the dominant “inspirational” framing of disabled individuals, suggesting that such narratives often obscure structural inequalities. By situating Khadim Hussain’s life within a broader theoretical and cultural framework, this research contributes to literary and cultural studies by bridging lived experience with narrative analysis, highlighting the need to reconceptualize disability beyond individual resilience.

Keywords: *Critical Disability Studies, Social Model of Disability, Lived Experience, Narrative Analysis, Disability and Society, Marginalization, Resilience, Pakistan*

Introduction

Disability has long been represented in literature and cultural discourse as a condition defined by limitation, dependency, and tragedy. Traditional narratives often reduce disabled individuals to passive subjects whose identities are shaped primarily by physical impairment. However, contemporary critical approaches, particularly Critical Disability Studies, challenge this perspective by arguing that disability is not solely located in the body but is actively produced by social, cultural, and structural conditions.

This study seeks to explore disability not through fictional representation but through a real-life narrative: the life of Khadim Hussain Sahito. Born in 1941 into a privileged feudal family in rural Sindh and later paralyzed due to polio, Khadim Hussain’s life presents a compelling case for examining how disability is experienced and negotiated within a specific socio-cultural context. Despite his physical limitations and lack of societal support, he demonstrated remarkable determination, working as a tailor, establishing a small home-based bakery, and eventually securing a government position as an octroi clerk. As a father of eight children, he prioritized education and succeeded in ensuring that all of his children achieved higher education and stable livelihoods.

While his life is often framed as a story of resilience and bravery, this paper moves beyond a purely celebratory narrative. Instead, it critically examines the social conditions that shaped his experience, including stigma, exclusion, and structural barriers. By doing so, the study aims to shift the focus from individual perseverance to the broader systems that define and constrain disabled lives.

The central argument of this paper is that Khadim Hussain's experience illustrates how disability is socially constructed through a combination of economic hardship, cultural attitudes, and institutional neglect. His life serves not only as a testament to personal strength but also as a critique of a society that fails to provide adequate support and inclusion.

Literature review

The study of disability has evolved significantly over the past few decades, shifting from a purely medical understanding to a more complex interdisciplinary framework. Early perspectives, commonly referred to as the medical model of disability, conceptualized disability as an individual deficiency requiring treatment, rehabilitation, or cure. Within this framework, emphasis was placed on the impaired body, often neglecting the broader social and environmental factors that contribute to disabling conditions (Shakespeare, 2014).

In contrast, the emergence of the Social Model of Disability marked a critical turning point in disability studies. Scholars such as Michael Oliver argue that disability is not caused solely by physical impairment but is produced by societal barriers that restrict participation and access. These barriers may include inaccessible infrastructure, discriminatory attitudes, and institutional exclusion. According to Oliver (1990), individuals are disabled not by their bodies but by the environments and systems that fail to accommodate diversity.

Building on this foundation, Critical Disability Studies expands the scope of analysis by incorporating cultural, political, and literary dimensions. This approach examines how disability is represented in narratives and how power structures shape definitions of normalcy. Rosemarie Garland-Thomson emphasizes that cultural norms construct the "ideal body," marginalizing those who deviate from it. She argues that disability is not an inherent deficit but a category produced through social expectations and visual culture (Garland-Thomson, 1997).

In literary studies, disability has historically been used as a symbolic device, often representing moral failure, tragedy, or deviance. Mitchell and Snyder (2000) describe this phenomenon as "narrative prosthesis," where disability serves as a tool to advance plot or characterize moral conditions rather than representing authentic lived experiences. Such representations reinforce stereotypes and limit the understanding of disabled identities.

Contemporary scholarship, however, challenges these reductive portrayals by advocating for more nuanced and realistic representations of disability. Davis (1995) critiques the concept of normalcy itself, arguing that it is a socially constructed standard that excludes those who do not conform. This perspective aligns with broader critical theories that interrogate power, identity, and marginalization.

Despite these theoretical advancements, there remains a noticeable gap in research that integrates real-life disability narratives, particularly from non-Western contexts, into literary and cultural analysis. Much of the existing scholarship focuses on Western texts and experiences, thereby overlooking the diverse socio-cultural realities in which disability is lived and negotiated. This study addresses this gap by examining the life of Khadim Hussain within the socio-cultural context of rural Pakistan. By applying the theoretical insights of Critical Disability Studies to a

real-life narrative, this research contributes to a more inclusive and grounded understanding of disability, bridging the divide between literary theory and lived experience.

Theoretical Framework

This research is grounded in Critical Disability Studies, with particular emphasis on the Social Model of Disability and theories of normativity and stigma. These frameworks provide the tools necessary to analyze Khadim Hussain's life not simply as an individual story but as a reflection of broader social dynamics.

The Social Model of Disability distinguishes between "impairment" and "disability." Impairment refers to the physical condition, while disability is understood as the result of societal barriers that limit an individual's ability to participate fully in society. In the case of Khadim Hussain, his paralysis represents an impairment, but the challenges he faced—such as lack of support, social exclusion, and limited opportunities—constitute the disabling factors.

Normativity, as discussed in Critical Disability Studies, refers to the social standards that define what is considered normal or acceptable. These standards often marginalize individuals who do not conform to them, positioning disabled bodies as "other." Khadim Hussain's experience reflects this process, as he was not only physically limited but also socially excluded due to prevailing attitudes toward disability.

Stigma further complicates this dynamic, as it involves the negative perceptions and judgments associated with disability. The reported lack of support and instances of discouragement faced by Khadim Hussain illustrate how stigma operates at a social level, reinforcing exclusion and limiting opportunities.

By applying these theoretical concepts, this study seeks to uncover the underlying structures that shaped Khadim Hussain's experience, moving beyond individual resilience to examine the broader social context.

Life Narrative of Khadim Hussain

Khadim Hussain Sahito (12 November 1941 – 30 December 2025) was born into a wealthy wadera family in rural Sindh, Pakistan. As the son of Wadero Banho Khan, he was raised in an environment associated with authority, social status, and material privilege. However, despite this background, Khadim Hussain adopted a simple and modest way of life, distancing himself from the traditional expectations of feudal affluence.

At a young age, he was affected by polio, which resulted in permanent paralysis of his lower limbs. This physical impairment significantly altered his life trajectory, restricting his mobility and shaping his interaction with the social world. While his condition constituted a medical reality, the challenges he faced extended far beyond the physical limitations of his body.

Socially, Khadim Hussain encountered a lack of support from his community. Rather than receiving assistance, he often faced neglect and, at times, active discouragement from others. These experiences reflect the broader societal attitudes toward disability, where individuals are marginalized not only because of their impairments but also due to social exclusion and negative perceptions.

Despite these barriers, Khadim Hussain demonstrated remarkable determination and resilience. In his early adult life, he worked as a tailor, stitching clothes to sustain himself and his family. Later, he established a small home-based bakery, producing cakes and biscuits as a means of generating income. These efforts illustrate his adaptability and refusal to remain dependent, even in the face of limited opportunities.

After years of persistent struggle, he secured employment as an octroi clerk, a position in which he served with honesty and dedication. His professional life reflects a strong ethical commitment, shaped by his religious faith and personal values.

Khadim Hussain was the father of eight children three sons and five daughters. Despite financial and physical challenges, he remained deeply committed to their education. He did not compromise on their academic development, ensuring that all of his children achieved higher education at the master's level and went on to establish stable professional and married lives. This achievement represents one of the most significant aspects of his legacy.

Mobility remained a continuous challenge throughout his life. He relied on a manually operated, buggy-style wheelchair to navigate his surroundings, including trips to the local market for daily necessities. His ability to maintain independence in such circumstances highlights both his physical endurance and determination.

An essential aspect of his life was the support of his wife, who remained a consistent and supportive presence throughout his struggles. Her role underscores the importance of familial support systems in navigating disability within a socio-cultural context.

Thematic Analysis

Disability and Social Barriers

From the perspective of the Social Model of Disability, Khadim Hussain's experience illustrates that disability is not solely a function of physical impairment but is significantly shaped by societal conditions. While his paralysis limited his mobility, the absence of social support and the presence of discouraging attitudes intensified his challenges.

As Michael Oliver (1990) argues, individuals are disabled not by their bodies but by the barriers imposed by society. In Khadim Hussain's case, these barriers included not only physical inaccessibility but also social neglect and, at times, hostility. The reported lack of assistance from his community reflects a broader pattern of marginalization, where disabled individuals are excluded from full participation in social life.

Furthermore, the absence of inclusive infrastructure such as accessible transportation and public spaces meant that Khadim Hussain had to rely on his own physical effort to navigate daily activities. His use of a manually operated wheelchair in such conditions highlights the extent to which environmental factors contributed to his disabling experience.

Poverty, Labor, and Economic Struggle

Although born into a wealthy family, Khadim Hussain's life challenges the assumption that economic privilege automatically ensures security for disabled individuals. His need to work as a tailor and later establish a home-based bakery reflects the economic realities he faced.

Disability often intersects with poverty, creating a cycle in which limited opportunities lead to financial instability, which in turn restricts access to resources and support. Khadim Hussain's entrepreneurial efforts demonstrate his agency and determination, yet they also reveal the lack of institutional support available to him.

His eventual employment as an octroi clerk represents a significant achievement, but it also underscores the difficulty of accessing stable employment as a disabled individual. This aligns with broader research indicating that disabled individuals frequently encounter barriers in the labor market, including discrimination and limited accessibility (Shakespeare, 2014).

Masculinity, Fatherhood, and Responsibility

Khadim Hussain's role as a father of eight children provides a critical lens for examining the intersection of disability and masculinity. In many cultural contexts, masculinity is associated with physical strength, independence, and the ability to provide for one's family. Disability, therefore, is often perceived as a challenge to these norms.

However, Khadim Hussain's life redefines these expectations. Despite his physical limitations, he fulfilled his role as a provider and caregiver, demonstrating that masculinity is not inherently tied to physical ability. His commitment to his children's education, in particular, represents a form of responsibility that transcends conventional definitions of strength.

His success in ensuring that all of his children attained higher education and stable livelihoods challenges dominant narratives that portray disabled individuals as dependent or incapable. Instead, his life illustrates how responsibility and care can serve as alternative markers of masculinity.

Faith, Morality, and Inner Strength

A central aspect of Khadim Hussain's character was his strong religious faith and moral integrity. Described as honest, brave, and God-fearing, he approached life with a sense of ethical responsibility that shaped both his personal and professional conduct.

Faith can function as a source of resilience, providing individuals with a framework for understanding and coping with hardship. In Khadim Hussain's case, his belief system appears to have played a significant role in sustaining his determination and guiding his actions.

However, it is important to critically engage with narratives of resilience. While his faith contributed to his ability to endure challenges, it should not obscure the structural barriers that made such endurance necessary. As scholars in Critical Disability Studies argue, focusing solely on individual strength risks overlooking the social conditions that produce inequality.

Beyond the "Inspirational" Narrative

Khadim Hussain's life is often framed as a story of inspiration and bravery. While these qualities are undeniably present, it is important to question the implications of such narratives.

As Rosemarie Garland-Thomson (1997) suggests, the cultural tendency to portray disabled individuals as inspirational can reinforce existing power structures by shifting attention away from systemic issues. When disability is framed as something to be overcome through personal effort, the responsibility for change is placed on the individual rather than on society.

In this context, Khadim Hussain's achievements should not be seen merely as evidence of exceptional resilience but also as an indictment of a system that failed to provide adequate support. His success, therefore, exists not because of societal structures but in spite of them.

Discussion

The life of Khadim Hussain offers a compelling case for understanding disability as a socially constructed experience rather than merely a biological condition. When examined through the lens of Critical Disability Studies, his lived reality reveals the complex interaction between impairment, social structures, and cultural expectations.

One of the central insights emerging from this study is that Khadim Hussain's challenges were not limited to his physical condition but were significantly intensified by social barriers. As Michael Oliver (1990) asserts, disability is produced through societal exclusion rather than individual impairment alone. This is clearly reflected in the lack of community support and the discouraging attitudes that Khadim Hussain encountered. His experience demonstrates how social environments can transform impairment into a disabling condition.

Furthermore, the concept of normativity plays a crucial role in shaping perceptions of disability. As Rosemarie Garland-Thomson (1997) argues, societies construct an “ideal body” that defines what is considered normal, thereby marginalizing those who deviate from it. Khadim Hussain’s exclusion can be understood within this framework, as his physical condition positioned him outside socially accepted norms, limiting his participation and recognition.

At the same time, his life challenges dominant assumptions about dependency and incapacity. His active role as a provider, his entrepreneurial efforts, and his unwavering commitment to his children’s education complicate traditional narratives that portray disabled individuals as passive or reliant. In this sense, his life functions as a counter-narrative, disrupting stereotypes and demonstrating alternative forms of agency and strength.

However, it is equally important to critically examine the tendency to frame such lives as purely inspirational. While Khadim Hussain’s determination and resilience are significant, an exclusive focus on these qualities’ risks obscuring the structural inequalities that shaped his experience. As Davis (1995) argues, the concept of normalcy itself is a social construct that privileges certain bodies while marginalizing others. By celebrating individual success without addressing systemic barriers, society perpetuates the very conditions that necessitate such resilience.

From a literary perspective, Khadim Hussain’s life can be understood as a form of lived narrative that embodies key elements of storytelling, including conflict, character development, and resolution. His experiences illustrate how real-life narratives can be analyzed using literary frameworks, thereby expanding the scope of English literary studies beyond fictional texts. This approach aligns with contemporary trends in literary criticism that emphasize the importance of life writing, cultural narratives, and marginalized voices.

Additionally, the socio-cultural context of rural Pakistan adds another layer of complexity to this analysis. Issues such as limited accessibility, economic constraints, and cultural attitudes toward disability intersect to shape the lived experience of individuals like Khadim Hussain. By situating his life within this context, the study highlights the importance of incorporating non-Western perspectives into disability and literary studies, which have historically been dominated by Western frameworks.

Ultimately, this discussion underscores the need to move beyond simplistic interpretations of disability. Khadim Hussain’s life is not merely a story of personal triumph but a reflection of broader social dynamics that both constrain and shape human experience. His narrative calls for a more critical and inclusive understanding of disability, one that acknowledges both individual agency and structural inequality.

Conclusion

This study set out to examine the life of Khadim Hussain through the lens of Critical Disability Studies, with the aim of understanding disability as a socially constructed phenomenon. By analyzing his lived experience, the research has demonstrated that disability cannot be reduced to a physical condition but must be understood in relation to the social, cultural, and economic environments in which individuals exist.

Khadim Hussain’s life illustrates the profound impact of social barriers, including lack of support, negative attitudes, and limited accessibility. These factors played a significant role in shaping his experience, reinforcing the argument that disability is produced through societal structures rather than inherent bodily limitations. At the same time, his determination, moral integrity, and

commitment to his family highlight the capacity for agency and resilience within constrained circumstances.

Importantly, this study has also sought to challenge the dominant “inspirational” narrative often associated with disability. While Khadim Hussain’s achievements are remarkable, framing his life solely in terms of inspiration risks overlooking the systemic inequalities that made such achievements necessary. A more critical approach reveals that his success occurred not because of supportive structures but in spite of their absence.

By treating his life as a form of narrative, this research contributes to English literary studies by expanding the boundaries of what constitutes a text. It demonstrates that real-life experiences can be analyzed using literary and theoretical frameworks, offering new insights into the relationship between narrative, identity, and social structures.

Furthermore, the study emphasizes the importance of incorporating diverse, non-Western perspectives into academic discourse. Khadim Hussain’s story, situated within the socio-cultural context of rural Pakistan, provides a valuable counterpoint to dominant narratives in disability studies, highlighting the need for more inclusive and context-sensitive research.

In conclusion, Khadim Hussain’s life stands as both a testament to individual perseverance and a critique of societal failure. His story calls for a rethinking of disability—not as a condition to be overcome, but as a social reality that demands structural change, inclusion, and recognition of human dignity.

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