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De/constructing the Ableist Gaze: Dis/ability and Desire in Manik Bandyopadhyay's novel *Padma Nadir Majhi (The Boatman of the Padma)*

ABSTRACT

This paper offers an analysis of Kuber-Kapila's extramarital love affair under the lens of disability studies in Bengali author Manik Bandyopadhyay's novel *Padma Nadir Majhi* (*The Boatman of the Padma*) (1936). The concept of "ableist gaze" comes from the ideology of ableism and gaze/ spectatorship. It is rooted in the social expectations of normalcy, a desire for attaining 'perfect' body. Ableist gaze or non-disabled gaze has a sexual underpinning; it prefers to see able-bodied people as sexual beings. Especially women with physical handicap or impairment are treated as sexually less appealing. The "to-be-looked-at-ness" of the perfect female body, as film theorist Laura Mulvey puts it, engages an ableist point of view. The ableist male gaze privileges 'able-bodied' women as they are seen to be capable of evoking sexual attraction. This gaze-based sexual ability, accoording to Kirsty Liddiard, is termed as "sexual ableism". Sexual ableism inferiorizes and marginalizes disabled people. The two women in Kuber's life - the 'able-bodied' Kapila and disabled Mala - complicate his family life because he prioritizes his ableist gaze towards Kapila. This paper argues if Mala's dis/ability is the core reason behind Kuber's extramarital desire for Kapila. The paper also addresses the fact that Kapila's 'able-bodied-ness' and Kuber's ableist gaze construct and deconstruct each other.

Keywords: Sexual Ableism; Ableist Gaze; Able-bodied-ness; Disability; Extramarital Affair; Heterosexual Coupling

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Introduction

> She went into the awning. Calling out to Kuber she said, 'Will you take me along, majhi?'
> Yes. Let Kapila come along. Kuber could not sail so far away alone. (Bandyopadhyay 155)

Famous for Kapila's quote, "amare niba majhi loge?" ('Will you take me along, majhi?), Kuber and Kapila are one of the most romanticized couples in Bangla literature – their illicit love affair supersedes the social barriers and defies moral-ethical boundaries. Staying with the deformed wife Mala and showered with amorous gestures from his alluring sister-in-law Kapila, Kuber gives in to the temptation of passion play. What is problematic here is that Kuber's desire formation for Kapila is strongly rooted in his ableist viewpoint. He is not happy in his conjugal life with disable Mala. Kuber's masculine, ableist gaze operates as a spectating mechanism that desires Kapila in terms of her bodily perfection. Kuber falls for Kapila's 'able-bodied' appearance – something that he has always missed in his crippled wife Mala.

Any quick survey of the literary representation of adulterous couples include characters like Hester Prynne and Arthur Dimmesdale from *The Scarlet Letter* (1850) by Nathaniel Hawthorne, Anna Karenina and Count Alexei Kirillovich Vronsky from *Anna Karenina* (1877) by Leo Tolstoy, Emma Bovary's dual affair with Rodolphe Boulanger and Léon Dupuis in Gustave Flaubert's *Madame Bovary* (1856) and so on. Though these couples are entertained often with romantic excitements or tragic endings, none of these novels directly address the dominant cultural matrix under the ableist gaze, which disability theorist Kirsty Liddiard terms as "sexual ableism" (Shuttleworth and Mona 41). The visual response of an able-bodied person has a strong sexual pull. Starting from the ableist project of fairy tales like "The Beauty and the Beast" or "The Princess and the Frog Prince", disability (or, animality) and disfigurement are considered as derogatory conditions that strip off a person from his/ her 'human' appearance. The message is that romantic attachment should involve perfection of body, an ideal, standardized sense of wholeness. Any deviation from this ableist standard makes someone less appealing in sexual terms – in other words, physically able means sexually able.

Manik Bandyopadhyay's seminal novel *Padma Nadir Majhi* happens to be a key text in Bangla literature. A film has been made in the same name in 1993 under the direction of Goutom Ghosh and was released jointly in both India and Bangladesh. The novel depicts the life stories of a fishermen community inhabiting at the village Ketupur near the banks of the river Padma, in pre-independent rural East Bengal. Although the novel includes

the stories of multiple boatman characters, Kuber is highlighted as the protagonist with a realist depiction of his mental world. Despite having a seemingly 'happy' domestic life with his permanently crippled wife Mala and four children, Kuber falls for his flirtatious sister-in-law Kapila. Kuber struggles on the one hand with the economic deprivation being a low-paid fisherman; on the other with his personal and familial turmoil. Kuber's extramarital desire for Kapila and Kapila's enigmatic sexual advances towards Kuber cover a large part of the novel. Kuber's male gaze sees Kapila as the object of his erotic desire, largely because she has a 'perfect' female body without any signs of disability. The story deals with Kuber's attempts of negotiating between this separate attraction towards the two women of his life – Mala and Kapila; but in the end he unites with Kapila in a faraway island named Maynadwip, which is patronized and supervised by the owner Hossain Mian.

The novel upholds the intimate details of the day-today lives of Bengali boatmen and fishermen community. Bandyopadhyay's bird's-eye view dissects their individual as well as communal lives with special concentration on the inner world of the protagonist Kuber. To explore the tiniest corners and caverns of human mind, Bandyopadhyay has studied the Freudian theory of people's subconscious sexual feelings, which is primarily governed by the ideology of ableism. He believed that "sexual passion was dark, primitive, biological instinct" as Ratan K. Chattopadhyay mentions in the preface of *The Boatman of the Padma*, "which might have undergone cosmetic changes with the advancement of civilization but the basic libidinous instinct remained the same" (ix). Bandyopadhyay shows how perfection of body comes up as a determining factor for adulterous attraction. The present paper attempts to read Kapila-Kuber-Mala interactions under the lens of disability studies. This paper attempts to trace if Mala's dis/ability is the core reason behind Kuber's extramarital desire for Kapila. The paper also explores the fact that Kapila's 'able-bodied-ness' and Kuber's ableist gaze construct and deconstruct each other.

Dis/ability, Desire and Ableist Gaze: Theoretical Framework

Ableism often comes as the counterpart of disablism. The ideology of ableism is grounded on the conception of what Lennard J. Davis calls as 'normalcy', that is, a norm or standard of human body based on certain features and expectations. In *Enforcing Normalcy: Disability, Deafness, and the Body* (1995), Davis contends that the hegemony of 'normalcy' is rooted in human beings' obsession over the 'ideal' or 'average' body, any deviation from which may be considered as abnormal. Davis's idea of normalcy relates to what Rosemarie Garland Thomson calls as "normate". In her book *Extraordinary Bodies*, she defines normate as "the constructed identity" who

steps into a position of authority and represent power by means of "the bodily configurations and cultural capital" (Garland-Thomson 8). Normate designates the social figure by which (non-disabled) people represent themselves as definitive human beings. Premised upon the ideas of normalcy and normate, ableism marks the distinction between what it is understood as normal body and disabled body. Able-body refers to a body without any physical disability. Fiona Kumari Campbell has defined ableism as: "a network of beliefs, processes and practices that produces a particular kind of self and body (the corporeal standard) that is projected as the perfect, species-typical and therefore essential and fully human" ("Inciting" 44). Campbell further argues that ableism is an attitude that "devalues or differentiates disability through the valuation of able-bodiedness equated to normalcy" ("Refusing" 3). Ableism is a stereotyping mechanism that sets a certain standard or measuring tool to describe what it is known as 'non-disabled body'. A person with bodily or psychological difference may feel insecure and marginalized in the dominant cultural matrix of able-bodied-ness. In this regard, Nolan Boyd observes, "ableism is a cultural power structure that oppresses and dehumanizes a marginalized group of people" (1322). Ableist ideology also tends to minimize a disable person's potentiality as a human being. Ableist perspective, however, is rooted in the marginalizing gaze of the 'able-bodied' people.

Gaze means looking or staring. Originating in the film theory in 1970s and in later critical perspectives, gaze refers to how someone looks at a visual discourse. Mashrur Shahid Hossain and Tania Tasneem Hossain define gaze as "a spectating mechanism through which the subject looks at and objectifies what is gazed-at" (Hossain and Hossain 162). They contend that gaze has two aspects: voyeurism – pleasure in viewing others, and exhibitionism – pleasure in being viewed by others. In "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema", Laura Mulvey appropriates these concepts to develop her concept of "male gaze". Mulvey argues that gaze is essentially masculine since it privileges male point of view, while man is always the active bearer of the look and woman is the passive image to look at. Mulvey further refers to Sigmund Freud's idea of scopophilia or the pleasure in looking that take "other people as objects, subjecting them to a controlling and curious gaze" (16). The audience derives sexual gratification by gazing at the objectified (female) body. Gaze can also be a subjectivizing mechanism. To Freud and Lacan, the process of subjectivization is predominantly gaze-based. The act and art of gazing determine an individual's subject-position in the discursive regime. The object of display or a person has certain visual qualities that can construct or reconstruct his/her identity. Gaze is also linked to psychological aspects of power relations between the self (the viewer) and the other (the viewed), as

Jonathan E. Schroeder puts it, "to gaze implies more than to look at – it signifies a psychological relationship of power, in which the gazer is superior to the object of the gaze" (58). Gaze is, however, more than a spectating, subjectivizing and controlling mechanism; gaze can also determine a person's bodily ability, disability and also, carnality.

Gaze can construct dis/ability. The gaze towards the dis/abled can validate or invalidate the individual's sense of able-bodied-ness. Loja et al. argue that "the gaze is the medium through which ableism invalidates the impaired body and at the same time sustains its own authenticity" (194). The dominant non-disabled gaze considers people with impairment as strange, deviant. They become 'other' and outsiders. They are subject to stigmatization, pity and oftentimes, oppression. According to Hughes, the non-disabled gaze for disabled people is an experience of power relations for the latter, as he contends, "to be looked at is to experience a loss of power and the feeling of the play of power on the surface of the body" (162). Ableist gaze or non-disabled gaze has a direct relation to desire formation especially towards the able-bodied people. It has a carnal point of view. 'Perfect' or 'normal' body happens to be potential source of sexual feeling, and therefore, is primarily desirable. Kirsty Liddiard calls this sexual ability as "sexual ableism" which is also rooted in normalcy, i.e. how 'able' people experience sexual desire. The ideology of sexual ableism exercises discrimination against people with disabilities in dating, intimacy, and relationships, suggesting the very presence of disability implies inferiority. Sexual ableism, then, merely serves to "marginalize a diversity of bodies and minds" and decides "who is to count as a sexual subject" (Shuttleworth and Mona 42). However, Liddiard refers to Robert McRuer's work on able-bodied-ness. McRuer observes that sexual ableism propagates a normalcy, a perfection of body, self and pleasure, which no one can ever achieve in reality. The idea of compulsory able-bodied-ness, thus, has strong sexual underpinning. In Bandyopadhyay's *Padma Nadir Majhi*, the readers' and the spectator's (Kuber's) gaze at able-bodied Kapila formulates sexual desire on the part of Kuber. The non-disabled gaze normalizes the female body's "looked-at-ness" as a source of visual pleasure. Kuber's ableist point of view directs the readers' attention to Kapila's 'normal' body and highlights the cripple-legged Mala's inability to evoke sexual attraction.

"Sexual ableism", Ableist Gaze and Infidelity: Kuber's Attraction towards Kapila

Mala's younger sister Kapila is an unhappily married young woman. She is abandoned by her husband Shyamadas time and again. Kapila has also lost her only daughter who died in her labour room. Kapila is portrayed as a physically and mentally independent woman, with a special concentration on

her restless personality. Her independence, as Bandyopadhyay hints at, partly comes from her freedom of movements unlike her crippled sister Mala. Madhumita Roy observes, "while Mala's paralyzed body is destined to accept her confinement at home, Kapila's extreme agility can only find its comparison to the mobility of the ever flowing Padma" (6). As a 'physically able' woman, Kapila enjoys the privileges of sexual ableism. In practice, Kapila represents sexual ableism. Kapila is physically able, therefore, sexually able. Kapila's 'normal' body carries the agency that evokes or activates Kuber's desiring gaze. Her body symbolizes freedom, desire and fantasy. Kapila teases and tantalizes Kuber with sexual innuendos, but Kuber cannot grasp her endless mystery and unpredictability. Since Kuber's marriage with Mala, Kapila has earned a significant place in Kuber's mind. Kapila's complicated relationship with her husband is intricately related to Kuber's adulterous love interest for her. The so called family person Kuber visits Mala's house at Chardanga and gets to see Kapila at times. Kuber falls for Kapila's youth, her restless mind and her beautiful way of walking. When Kuber visits his in-laws at Chardanga during the season of flood, he reminisces their early interaction,

> Kapila was a very unruly girl at the time of Kuber's marriage. Perhaps because he had married the crippled Mala, her unruliness had seemed so striking to Kuber: one who lives in darkness is dazzled even by mild light; in dazzling light, he is blinded.
> (Bandyopadhyay 59)

Kuber's life with Mala is the darkness – the immobility – which also indicates his sexual dissatisfaction. In comparison to Mala, Kapila is the mild light turning into dazzling light, thus her appeal is magnified to Kuber hundred times more than her 'normal' appeal. However, it is not only Kapila's "unruly" nature that attracts Kuber; her physical movements and acts of care play important roles in Kuber's desire formation. When Kapila visits Kuber's house at Ketupur, she pampers and offers domestic care to Kuber – something that he has not experienced before in his entire life. Without even asking, he timely gets water to wash his feet, gets his favourite soaked rice to eat, and finds his tobacco near his hands, his modest bed ready for sleep. All these sources of comfort are new to Kuber. As Kapila brings him his tobacco at the riverside, Kuber subconsciously begins to compare Kapila's mobility with Mala's immobility, "But she could never come running to the riverbank to get him his tobacco on a dark evening or stand erect in a defiant attitude like the twig of a bamboo" (Bandyopadhyay 63). The twig of a bamboo is a significant motif of the novel. Bandyopadhyay repeatedly uses this expression to describe Kapila's physical perfection as well as to suggest Kuber's masculine gaze towards

her. The bamboo twig refers to phallic imagery –tall, erect and firm – like Kapila's perfect, non-disabled body.

The role of dis/ability is significant in Kuber's desire formation towards Kapila. Ableist gaze is both distinct from and imbricated in patriarchal dynamics of mediation and watching. Kuber's ableist gaze has a masculine underpinning that wants to see the able-bodied Kapila as an object of sexual desire. Kuber's gaze personifies society's dominant gaze that standardizes able-bodied-ness as the marker of sexual attraction that marginalizes disable people in the process. Inevitably, ableist viewpoint cannot avoid the fact that the social constitution of perfection has a carnal viewpoint of non-disablement. "The gaze is a carnal point of view:" Hughes contends, "The carnal point of view of the seer, not the seen" (163). This non-disabled point of view creates a sense of perfection that constructs a hierarchical observation. Kuber looks at Kapila with awe and admiration, but a large part of his male gaze unveils his desire to discover her sexually. His ableist gaze involves an erotic viewpoint that catches even the details of Kapila's body. His gaze also includes a scopophilic instinct and its voyeuristic and fetishistic components. "The determining male gaze projects its fantasy onto the female figure," observes Laura Mulvey, where "women are simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact so that they can be said to connote *to-be-looked- at-ness."* (19) For instance, Kuber remembers Kapila's purple saree and her oil-soaked hair – which is her signature style. Bandyopadhyay uses some metaphors to describe how Kuber's eyes stare at Kapila's young body: her "lissom adolescent body" (59), her "delectable grace" like the "spinach leaves in the field" (123), her body "as full as the Padma in the monsoon" (126) and the like. Kuber suffers from internal dilemma because of his attraction for Kapila. He constantly fights to hide his feelings, as he tries to negotiate between his extramarital desire for Kapila and social codes of being a loyal husband of Mala. In the poverty-stricken, culturally backward fishermen community of Ketupur village, the social and moral codes are strong. Kuber suffers from inner turmoil especially when, because of Gopi's fractured leg, Kapila and he happen to stay one night at a hotel near the hospital at Aminbari. Kuber feels afraid of the panoptic eye of the society – he confronts an ethical dilemma. However, totally unaware of his own ableist perspective, Kuber continues to develop his adulterous attraction for Kapila. In short, Kuber's ableist gaze sexualizes Kapila and determines her desirability.

Asexuality, Disability and Gaze: The Case of Mala

The character of Mala, Kuber's crippled wife, holds the example how disability issues intersect with gender and sexuality. According to the

superstitious people of Chardanga village, Mala was born with a crippled leg as an evidence of her mother's sin of her name being linked in whispers with a Brahman's. Although she is confined within the four walls of her domesticity, her motherly skills are even better than other mothers in her neighborhood. Mala has enough time to take care of her children, as she is aloof from the harsh reality outside. Mala has fair skin like the landlords' daughters which is very rare among the women in fishermen community. Despite many qualifications, Mala's disability limits her potentiality as a human. Mala struggles with her physical handicap both inside and outside her home, as for disabled women, "public space maybe be doubly inhibiting because they must also deal with the masculine gaze as well as the ideals of beauty" (Loja et al 196). Her disability factor determines the power relations Kuber and Mala have. Kuber's ableist gaze positions Mala "in terms of corporeal difference", and the inherent power dynamics in the looking tend to "dehumanize or devalue the disabled individual as in the medical model of disability" (Dula 204). As a disabled woman, Mala is doubly marginalized by Kuber. Her position is the 'inferior other' in decision making and family planning. Even Mala's parents suffer from inferiority complex because of her disability. When Kuber visits Chardanga, Mala's father expresses his gratitude towards Kuber for accepting his crippled daughter as his wife. Though oftentimes Kuber behaves badly with Mala, inwardly he admits that Mala would never marry him if she could walk properly. Mala does not fit in the normative model of being a desirable woman as her crippled leg makes her less appealing. To Kuber, Mala is an unattractive, depressed woman because of her inaction and immobility. Bandyopadhyay describes, "Mala had not merely been born crippled; she had yet another disability: she did not know how to laugh; life had made her lethargic and melancholy" (61). Mala's depression is a sharp contrast to Kapila's laughter and liveliness. Not only that, Mala's crippled condition keeps her reduced as a mother ("Gopir Ma") only. She is not loved and valued as a romantic partner.

Mala's lame leg desexualizes her. Myths or stereotype about people with physical disabilities may be perceived as being asexual because they are considered by others "to have absent sexual needs, be physiologically incapable of having sex, or lack the opportunity to engage in sexual gratification" (Rohleder 23). They are often infantilized, as if they are not adult enough to have sexual needs and desires. The fragmentation between sexualized body (normal/ full body) and desexualized body (disabled/crippled body) causes a gap in the sexual experience. In terms of sexuality, Mala appears to be less desirable than her sister Kapila. Rohleder et al observe that disabled women are considered as "asexual, helpless and incompetent", and "undesirable in the eyes of men" (27). On psychosexual

level, desire has a close connection to mobility – movements and activities can boost up libidinal forces. As Mala cannot move, she is oppressed and marginalized by Kuber's ableist gaze. In Kuber's eyes, Mala seems asexual in contrast to Kapila, because "people with acquired impairment can feel desexualised following the transition to a disabled identity" (Shuttleworth and Mona 41). Mala suffers from inferiority complex because she is not 'desired' like Kapila. She blames her deformed body for Kuber and Kapila's adulterous interactions. She brokenheartedly observes Kuber and Kapila's intimacy – she finds her disability as the inevitable reason behind it. Bandyopadhyay elaborates on Mala's agonizing condition:

> Perhaps in her effort to stretch out her lame leg, her face briefly contorted. Ever since Kapila went away, Mala had grown conscious of her disability. Often enough she tried to straighten her thin shriveled leg; sometimes she would keep rubbing it hard with both hands. Inured to her deformed limb since birth, it particularly distressed Mala now so long afterwards. (150)

Since childhood, Mala feels traumatized because of her disabled leg. She remembers how badly she was treated by her local friends. But Mala experiences a surge of self-awareness when a bamboo stick penetrates her daughter Gopi's knee. Kuber takes Gopi to the Aminbari hospital. Upon seeing Kuber's efforts to cure Gopi's injured leg, Mala begins to wonder if her own leg can be cured too. She pleads to Kuber to take her to the hospital for a leg checkup. As Kuber denies to do so, Mala starts for Aminbari hospital with Mejo-babu. When Mala returns home, Kuber lashes out on her, and calls her a "wretch, wicked woman" (Bandyopadhyay 142). This moment is significant because it reveals Kuber's continuous negligence and his lack of empathy towards Mala's pain. Kuber has never taken Mala outside the confinement of four walls; and that now she has taken initiatives to cure her lame leg, she is treated as a dishonest, characterless woman.

De/constructing the Ableist gaze: Internalization and Subversion

The tendency to appreciate able-bodied people comes up with the sense of perfection. The internalization of ableist gaze is often inspired by personal as well as sociocultural surroundings, i.e. how someone perceives and acts on the social construction of ableism. In *Padma Nadir Majhi*, this internalization of ableist gaze happens in two ways. Firstly, it is important to mention the co-existence of two women in Kuber's heart, (which can also be read as polyamory). In Kuber's mind, Mala and Kapila are inseparable – they happen to exist in Kuber's mind as a joint identity. The two women in Kuber's life represent his search for wholeness and completeness. "The carnal flaw of the impaired other," Hughes contends, "is perceived not only as hard evidence of identity but also as testimony to the wholeness of self" (166). Mala's physical imperfection or impairment creates a sense of

discontentment in Kuber's sexual experience. Kapila has those traits that Mala does not have, and Mala has those features that Kapila does not have. In Kuber's eyes, they appear as each other's binary, oftentimes as antagonistic forces: "after all she was Mala's sister; moreover, she took far more care of her appearance than Mala" (Bandyopadhyay 123). According to Fiona Kumari Campbell, disability is always present in the discourses of normalcy, able-bodiedness and normalization; ableism is not divorced from disability. In the same way, Kapila, metaphorically, represents 'disabled' Mala's other part – the 'able' part that Kuber has always missed. And Kuber wants both – Mala's domestic, peaceful company and Kapila's adventurous, restless excitement. Mala and Kapila respectively signify the psychosexual dichotomy of "disability and ableism" that rest on the "idea of symbiosis, an 'unavoidable duality'" ("Refusing" 7). Secondly, Kuber's internalization of ableist gaze has much to do with the social point of view towards disabled women. His gaze represents the `scopic regime' of the ableist social architecture and structures. This gaze is influenced by "the stereotypes and prejudices about disabled people, and so the power of the gaze is intimately linked and nourished by knowledge from within the social domain" (Reeve 499). Gopi, Kuber's daughter, is a striking example of how knee injury undermines the sexual appeal of a girl in marriage market. Gopi injures her leg while surviving the onslaughts of the Norwester. Her accident is like a generational trauma that has been passed down to her from her mother Mala. Kuber's attitude towards injured Gopi reveals much about his internalization of the society's ableist gaze. Madhumita Roy observes, "Kuber's hasty move to take her to the hospital and initiate her treatment without hesitation is primarily guided by the thought of Gopi's marriage after her recovery" (5). Kuber knows very well that nobody wants to marry a crippled girl – she will fall behind in the crude competition of marriage. He ardently prays and hopes for Gopi's recovery so that he can 'sell' Gopi to the better suitor in the marriage market:

> Kuber summoned Gopi. He asked her to walk holding a stick. It took Gopi some effort to get to her feet and to take a painful step or two. Watching intently, Kuber said, 'It'll be cured, Gopir Ma; Gopi's leg will be perfectly cured. Why should I marry her off to Rasu?'
>
> 'But did you not give him your word?'
>
> Kuber grinned broadly. 'You're a woman, Gopir Ma. You understand nothing. Rasu has been kept in reserve; if Gopi's leg isn't cured, it's Rasu I'll get her married with. And should it be cured, Gopir Ma, should Gopi's leg be cured –' (Bandyopadhyay 137)

For Gopi, Kuber keeps two suitors in hand – Rasu and Banku. Kuber agrees to marry her off to Rasu after her injury. But as her knee begins to show signs of healing, Kuber's ambition heightens; he selects Bonku as Gopi's groom who would pay more than Rasu.

Though the visual appeal of Kapila's 'normal' body ignites Kuber's desire, there are moments when Kapila talks (or stares) back at the ableist gaze she encounters. Kapila is portrayed both as a support and a threat to Kuber's (masculine) ableist gaze, as, "if a woman's appearance depends on the masculine gaze, she then has the possibility of manipulating the manner in which she is "surveyed", becoming herself the one who controls this visual economy" (Sorrentino). In many cases, Kapila breaks away from the stereotypical role as a passive, eroticized woman; she actively begins to control Kuber's sight. At times she seems interested in Kuber saying that her heart burns for him, but the next moment she pulls away and urges him to forget her. This push and pull dynamics denote Kapila's unpredictable whims. However, Kapila does not fully reveal her actual intentions, she continues to play desire games with Kuber by her mischievous gestures and wanton suggestions. What Kuber does with his eyes, Kapila does the same with her body and verbosity. For instance, when Kapila follows Kuber by the riverside on a dark evening to hand him his tobacco, Kuber feels alarmed at her sound of laughing:

> Wasn't Kapila Mala's sister? Right. Holding her shoulders firmly, Kuber bent her backward like an inflexible bamboo twig, and said, 'If you try to be naughty, I'll give you a ducking in the river, Kapila.'
>
> Kapila flopped on to the mud; she laughed and said. 'Shame on you, man!' (Bandyopadhyay 62)

Kapila subverts and challenges Kuber's male gaze by posing a direct attack on Kuber's weak nervous system. She uses this expression once again; when, after staying one night together at Aminbari, Kuber pushes Kapila to go home first so that the primary dose of skirmishes and blames fall upon her. But Kapila boldly refuses, and makes Kuber go first instead. She remains not in a position to surrender in the face of Kuber's commands or requests. Kapila's statement "shame on you, man!" is a counter-gaze towards Kuber's masculine gaze. This situation holds a re-gazing moment from Kapila's part because she deconstructs the gendered notion of ableist gaze. Kapila does not care about the social stigma associated with her interaction with Kuber. Kuber helplessly tries to decipher Kapila's endless mysteries only to fall back again and again. Not only that, Kuber suffers from ambivalence – simultaneous attraction and repulsion towards Kapila because her defiant able-bodied-ness reminds him of his own moral 'disability' or incompleteness.

Maynadwip: Away from the Panoptic Gaze?

Hossain Mian's Maynadwip plays a pivotal role in gratifying Kuber and Kapila's illegitimate sexual affair. The island personifies Hossain's ableist

gaze where no disable people are allowed. Hossain's colonizing mission is strictly based upon bodily perfection. Interestingly, despite living in an ableist regime of Ketupur village, Kuber does not find his final solace here - he is constantly drawn to the utopian, fantastic land of faraway Maynadwip. Maynadwip represents Kuber's subconscious longing for materializing his dreams and desires. The island holds space for heterosexual coupling, which, according to Kirsty Liddiard, is a bedfellow of sexual ableism. It is observed that Hossain Mian encourages only heterosexual couples who will live there and populate the island with their children. Such couples will be physically able and fertile enough to produce children regularly. Some names of such 'able' pairs are Aminuddi and Nasibon, Enayet and Bashir's wife and inevitably, Kuber and Kapila. The entire project of colonizing Maynadwip is governed by Hossain Mian's heteronormative, ableist vision. According to Laura Mulvey, this heterosexual gaze can be addressed as "an active/passive heterosexual division of labour" (20) - which facilitates the ableist gaze. Maynadwip gives Kuber not only a supreme chance to escape from his alleged opium selling, but also makes space for his illicit love affair with Kapila away from the society's panoptic gaze.

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