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Embracing Brokenness: Disability and body image.

Body image stems from cultural messages and our bodies become our main instruments for expressing ourselves. By definition body image is the inner picture of outer appearance. But in reality this view from inside tends to be shaped by the outside world. Body image is influenced by how our culture(s) defines attractiveness and ability—social value placed on our bodies, including our looks, differences, and abilities. Body and self-images are created in the interplay between people’s internal views of themselves and the views of others that they internalize.

Disabled bodies are part of spaces outside the mainstream society and therefore become a reason for gaze. They view their bodies and lived experiences as different from others, and disregard their own knowledge and strengths. Ableism plays a vital role in distortion of their body image and becomes the main driving force behind internalizing disability, leading to lack of confidence.

People with disabilities encounter judgmental comments, intrusive stares, and questions about their bodies. These occur not only during the interactions with family, friends, strangers, teachers and colleagues but surprisingly even with health care professionals.

Though individuals with disabilities adjust to their different bodies and increasingly accept their disabilities over time, at the same time disabled bodies are reduced to their biological lack of functioning both by medical and paramedical practitioners. There is objectification of a ‘disabled body’ in medical discourse with an aim of finding treatable solutions for their disability. Quite often these bodies are photographed, pictured and labelled to serve as a ‘text’ for giving practical lessons to the medical students without even having miniscule consideration about the human mind, human soul and human psyche living inside the same living bodies. They are subject to invasion and remodelling for ‘fixing’ or ‘regulating’ by the surgeon’s knife. Stress is often laid on medicalization in order to ‘normalize’ and even become subject of state intervention. Consequently, there is a disassociation of their minds and bodies resulting in a numbing of all their needs and natural desires.

The educationist Palmer rightly said: “Wholeness does not mean perfection: It means embracing brokenness as an integral part of life.” Patients’ bodies speak to us, and our bodies speak back. The Image theatre as part of the Theatre of the Oppressed can break these attitudinal barriers and create change.