



## TO BE OR NOT TO BE IN THE CLASS: TUSSELS WITH TOURETTE SYNDROME

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### ABSTRACT

In the United States and the U.K., the inclusion of disability studies under the discipline of humanities and social sciences is based on the notion that political rights and academic discourses are intricately linked. According to Lennard J. Davies, the “problem” of disability does not lie with the person with disabilities but rather in the way that normalcy is constructed. The paper analyses critically the representation of Tourette syndrome in the movies *Hichki* and *Front of the Class*. Both these movies are adaptations of the autobiography of Brad Cohen, *Front of the Class: How Tourette Syndrome Made Me the Teacher I Never Had*. The paper also investigates how the teachers diagnosed with Tourette Syndrome (TS) become role models to their students by articulating the exact message of education. The films *Hichki* and *Front of the Class* have portrayed the discrimination, isolation and alienation which Naina and Brad Cohen were subjected to. While Brad Cohen works with kids who have TS, Naina works with a group of underprivileged students and becomes successful in transforming them into better students of refined character and behaviour. With her constant suggestions and training, she is able to improve the academic performance also of these students. These teachers become real role models who make a difference in the lives of others.

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## INTRODUCTION

Everyone of us has some sort of disability. Some disabilities, like mine, are more visible to the outside world. Other disabilities, such as, a fear of heights, a lack of confidence, or not being a great reader, are harder for people to see. (Brad Cohen xiv). In the United States and the U.K., the inclusion of disability studies under the discipline of humanities and social sciences is based on the notion that political rights and academic discourses are intricately linked. According to Lennard J. Davies, the “problem” of disability does not lie with the person with disabilities but rather in the way that normalcy is constructed. Rosemarie Garland Thomson states that all the devalued bodies which do not conform to the cultural standards are considered to be disabled. In the broad sense, the sick, the deformed, the abnormal, the ugly, the old and the crazy are unfortunately included in this group.

A person who is different from the norm of the majority is treated as the other. Hence, a person who does not articulate or behave in the standard set by society is termed disabled. There are many speech disorders like tongue –tie, dyslexia, autism, aphasia and many others. Tourette Syndrome (TS) is a neurological disorder characterised by repetitive, involuntary movements and vocalisations called tics. In 1885, the French neurologist, Dr Georges Gilles de la Tourette, described the condition for the first time. In the preface to his book *Front of the Class: How Tourette Syndrome Made Me the Teacher I Never Had*, Brad Cohen states: TS is a neurological disorder of the brain that causes uncontrollable vocal and muscular tics. Depending on my stress level and the host of other circumstances, I may utter a series of loud “WAH, wah, wah” sounds or an individual “woop” several times a minute. My face may be relatively passive, or parts of my body may be convulsed with that look like spasms (xiii) Disability Studies has not obtained much prominence in the Indian scenario. With the publication of books and the release of movies related to the theme of disability, many thought-provoking discussions take place, which in fact has changed the attitude of society towards the disabled. The movie *Hichki*, directed by Sidharth P.

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Malhotra and produced by Maneesh Sharma, is the Indian adaptation of Brad Cohen's *Front of the Class: How Tourette Syndrome Made Me the Teacher I Never Had*. The book is co-authored by Lisa Wysocky. Rani Mukherji performs the role of Naina Mathur, a beautiful young lady who suffers from Tourette Syndrome. During the time of the interview, Naina makes involuntary sounds. Naina very confidently says, "I have Tourette Syndrome, a neurological syndrome. Sometimes when the wires in the brain have a loose connection, they give a shock." (*Hichki*) When the interviewer asks her to try a different job as the teaching job might be difficult to get with 'this', she replies, "I was born to be a teacher" (*Hichki*). Society wants a teacher to be a perfect being with a perfect body and character. To err is human, but if a teacher commits an error, the whole society finds fault in him. Naina Mathur gets the placement as a teacher in St. Notker's, one of the elite schools. Surprisingly, as part of the right to education, the school has given admission to fourteen kids of the municipal school. Naina is posted on the condition of improving the standard of the students both in knowledge and behaviour. The students of the municipal school are placed in a separate classroom- 9 F. Hence, there is strong isolation within the school. Naina strongly believes, "kids cannot be bad". Naina realises that these students from the municipal school have turned out to be rebels because the teachers and other students never accepted them. "They don't belong here; they never did, they never will" (*Hichki*). The isolation, alienation and discrimination these students have faced actually make them fight with the existing norms. Though Naina shows great sympathy, students insult her saying, "You can't even get through two words without four hiccups" (*Hichki*). They try all means to avoid learning. Out of frustration, Naina even bites her palms and bangs on the metal windows without the notice of others. Naina is not ready to accept failure. She believes that there are no bad students, only bad teachers. She learns that there is a dominant group in the school waiting for the termination of Naina and her students.

*Front of the Class* is a movie released in 2008, directed by Peter Werner and produced by Andrew Gottlieb. It is based on the book *Front of the Class: How Tourette Syndrome Made Me the Teacher I Never Had* by Brad Cohen, who is a motivational speaker and the recipient of Georgia's First Class Teacher of the Year Award. His journey from a helpless boy with TS to a highly inspiring teacher motivates the people who face hurdles in their life. The movie and the book successfully portray the discrimination Brad experienced in his life. The tics Brad produces unknowingly causes much disturbance within the family and outside. According to the doctor, he has become a victim of TS because of the tension caused by the divorce of his parents. Brad was turned down in twenty-four interviews. Despite all the hindrances he has faced, Brad Cohen states:

I have learnt that Tourette's is not always a hindrance; the coping skills Tourette Syndrome forced me to learn have also given me the confidence to make my dream of being a competent and compassionate teacher a reality. Because of my years Tourette-based isolation as a child, I believe that staying relentlessly involved in a child's day-to-day well-being is the greatest skill a teacher can bring to the classroom. Today, I tell my student's that Tourette Syndrome is my constant companion and that without it, I just wouldn't be me. (xiv) Brad Cohen and Naina Mathur have disabilities. However, they have an unwavering determination to accomplish the extraordinary goals they have dreamt of. Brad Cohen did not

get any support from his friends and teachers. He says, "Because I did not get the support and understanding from my peers and teachers growing up, you might predict that would make me think about a quiet job I could do at home- away from rude stares. The lack of support, however, fueled my desire to become the positive and accepting teacher I never had" (Brad Cohen xiv). The film *Hichki* revolves around the question of what is life without a few hiccups. The hiccups could be a metaphor for any obstacle one faces in life. In the foreword of the book, *Front of the Class: How Tourette Syndrome Made Me the Teacher I Never Had*, Jim Eisenreich, former Professional Baseball player states, "Like Brad Cohen, I also have TS, which is the neurological disorder that causes repeated and sometimes debilitating vocal and muscular twitches called tics." Jim Eisenreich and Brad Cohen try to educate people about TS and help those who have TS. He has been a spokesperson of the National Tourette Syndrome Association, and in 1996 he began Jim Eisenreich Foundation for Children with Tourette Syndrome.

The audience feels totally disgusted when the punishment of different types are loaded upon the disabled. Brad's father brutally beats him when he opposes the father's suggestion of the kids living with their stepmother. His father is irritated also with the knee-knocking behaviour of Brad. "The shock of taking a slap, and the fear of getting another, was enough to halt my range of tics for a short while" (Brad Cohen 6). He is constantly asked from school and home to stop tics. Brad says, "Telling people with Tourette's to stop a behaviour is like ordering someone with allergies not to sneeze" (6). During the closing ceremonies of camp Sabra, Brad is given a "Froggy Award" for having amused everyone with funny noises. He accepts this tongue in cheek award without feeling any awkwardness. Later in school, the teacher asks Brad to apologise in front of the class for disturbing the class with his tics. Brad apologises, "You can't study because of me. I will not make silly noises ever again" (*Front of the Class*). The mother's support that Brad receives is really commendable. His mother researches on the illness and realises that her son has Tourette Syndrome for which there is no cure. However, she is optimistic that one day a cure will be found for the disease. The mother's words, "Don't ever give up. You have to connect with other people" inspires Brad to face even the worst situation in his life.

Garland Thomson, Professor of Women's Studies and English at Emory University speaks about the four aspects of disability. Firstly, it is a system for interpreting and disciplining bodily variations. Secondly, it is relationship between body and its environment. Thirdly, it is a set of practices of the able bodied and the disabled. Fourthly, it is a way of describing the inherent instability of the embodied self. As a woman, the disability of Naina really matters. Brad has many friends and he gets married to Nancy Lazarus. Brad and Naina try to get accustomed to the bodily variations. The question of disabled teachers teaching abled students create problems in society. They confront problems related to the body and its environment. Brad suggests a few ways to cope up with disabilities. One has to accept the disability. It is not always possible for one to undo the disability they have. However, they can try to make use of the best possible way to live with it confidently. After accepting the disability, one has to figure out how one can be successful. Acceptance is the best way to deal with something different. The people who have disability should find a simple way to explain the disability to others.

The way in which Naina informs to strangers her disability really portrays her confidence. She is not embarrassed. Another important thing is to consider the disability as a friend as Brad has done. "TS has made me who I am today and I have no desire to change that. In fact, I like to call TS my best friend. It has been with me during the good times and the bad. Just like the best friends, we experience everything together, and I don't think I would know how to live life without Tourette's" (Brad Cohen 236). During his first interview for the post of a teacher, Brad states that TS is his constant companion, something which is as natural as a sneeze. The confidence of Brad is reflected when he says, "On the one hand, it would be nice to get rid of it and see a movie in peace, or enjoy a meal at a restaurant without everyone looking at me, but on the other hand TS has given me the challenges and personality that make me Brad. Having TS has made me the person I am today - it is part of me. I just needed to figure out how to move forward along with it. So, I decided to become a partner with Tourette's and not let it stop me from being me". It is also very essential to recast disability as an opportunity. Brad and Naina have made use of the opportunities they got. When Naina takes up the post of the teacher, she was given the responsibility of a class which was notorious for the misbehaviour of students.

The worst thing to do to the disabled is to pity them. Brad states that he does not require sympathy from anyone. He also suggests laughing about the disability. "Laughing also shows that you are comfortable with your disability and if you are comfortable, others around you will relax" (238). He also advises people with disability to educate themselves about their disability and ways to overcome it. Brad states that some opportunities come more easily than others. He has made a choice not to look at them as the disability and he does not want others to look at it as a disability. One should accept it as something normal. "I always tell children that they should never give excuses, and I have credibility with them because they see that I don't give excuses for Tourette's. One girl in my class had difficulty reading and wanted to give up or blame it on other things. I confided to her that I, too, was a bad reader. I even confessed that I still have difficulties, because when I read, my eye blinking and head jerking tics start, and I lose concentration.

It was an interesting concept for her to comprehend – a teacher who had trouble reading." He also convinces her that if he had not taken the effort of reading, he would not have graduated from a college, or obtained a good job and home (Brad Cohen 223).

The films *Hichki* and *Front of the Class* have portrayed the discrimination, isolation and alienation Naina and Brad Cohen were subjected to. While Brad Cohen works with kids who have TS, Naina works with a group of underprivileged students and become successful in transforming them into better students of refined character and behaviour. With her constant suggestions and training, she is able to improve the academic performance also of these students. These teachers become real role models who make a difference in the lives of others. They have obtained the ability not to be embarrassed at and they have taught their students that ability. They also have the leadership qualities to make everyone at ease. The boy, Brad Cohen who was insulted in front of the class becomes a successful motivational speaker.

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