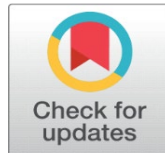
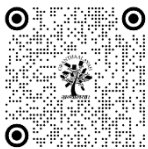


FROM PERSONAL NARRATIVE TO SOCIAL CHANGE: REIMAGINING ABILITY IN MALINI CHIB'S ONE LITTLE FINGER

Varun Gulati ¹✉

¹ Associate Professor, Department of English, University of Delhi, India



Corresponding Author

Varun Gulati, vgulati@english.du.ac.in

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ABSTRACT

This paper offers a multidimensional reading of Malini Chib's memoir *One Little Finger*, situating it at the intersection of disability studies, literary analysis, and Indic philosophical thought. Drawing on frameworks from Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, Lennard J. Davis, and Martha C. Nussbaum, the study examines how Chib's narrative challenges entrenched hierarchies of ability and redefines notions of "normalcy." Philosophical parallels with *Ekatva* (the unity of existence) in the Upanishads and the inclusivist ethos of the Bhagavad Gita inform a reading of the memoir as an exploration of interconnectedness, resilience, and shared responsibility. The discussion foregrounds Chib's reflections on education, mobility, and relational bonds, treating them as sites where personal agency converges with collective goodwill to create possibilities for social change. Literary allusions, from Shakespeare's calls for empathy to the subversion of fatalism in Julius Caesar, amplify the memoir's cultural depth. By rejecting binaries such as inclusion versus exclusion, Chib reframes challenges as opportunities for creative adaptation, illustrating how lived experience can inspire structural rethinking. Ultimately, *One Little Finger* emerges as both a personal chronicle of growth and a philosophical invitation to reimagine the social fabric, where equity, dignity, and mutual flourishing are central to the human experience.

1. INTRODUCTION

Malini Chib's *One Little Finger* is an uplifting celebration of human determination, hope, and possibility. Through her moving autobiography, Malini shares her extraordinary journey with cerebral palsy, facing obstacles with grace, courage, and optimism. Raised in both India and the UK, Malini Chib grew up in environments that exposed her to diverse perspectives, refining her understanding of the world and igniting her determination to carve out her own path. She pursued independence with strong determination, making higher education not just an academic goal but a statement of her belief in her own potential. Alongside her personal achievements, she became a passionate advocate for disability rights. She dedicated her life to creating a society where inclusivity and accessibility are not privileges but rights enjoyed by all.

2. BETWEEN TRAGIC WISDOM AND HEALING VISION

The title *One Little Finger* elegantly captures the essence of her life: while her body may have placed limits on physical movement, her vision, passion, and spirit remained boundless. Her journey is a stark reminder that barriers, be they physical, social, or systemic, can be challenged and ultimately transformed. More precisely, she argues if the human spirit is supported and empowered, it can reach at the zenith of its destination.

Far beyond the confines of a traditional memoir, Malini Chib's *One Little Finger* presents itself as a bold rebuttal to society's limiting perceptions—a stirring tribute to the boundless nature of the human spirit. With cerebral palsy as both her reality and her backdrop, Malini crafts her narrative with the unyielding will of a Shakespearean protagonist locked in a noble contest with destiny:

To be, or not to be: that is the question:
Whether 'tis nobler in the mind to suffer
The slings and arrows of outrageous fortune,
Or to take arms against a sea of troubles,
And by opposing end them?" (Hamlet 3.1.56–60)

Her voice carries the stark honesty of King Lear's storm-borne reckonings, where illusion is torn away and truth stands exposed in its most elemental form. At the same time, it shares in the radiant optimism of Prospero's "brave new world"; of course, not a naïve yen, but a deliberate cultivation of hope tempered by adversity. By fusing Lear's tragic wisdom with Prospero's healing vision, her words become more than self-expression; they enact a dialogue between pain and possibility, defiance and renewal. In doing so, her life's story rises beyond memoir but becomes a refusal to be diminished, and a declaration that hard-fought ideals can be won against all odds.

3. DEFIANCE IN A SINGLE FINGER: REIMAGINING ABILITY AND AGENCY

The title *One Little Finger* functions as a potent metaphor for quiet and determined defiance. With the solitary use of a single functional finger, Malini Chib overturns expectations, achieving what many might deem impossible. Her story affirms that human agency is not defined or diminished by any physical form, but rather amplified by creative will and determination. In doing so, her memoir furthers the arguments of disability studies scholars such as Lennard J. Davis and Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, who contend that the greatest barrier to inclusion lies not within the body itself but in society's deeply ingrained constructions of "normalcy" (Garland-Thomson 6).

4. THE MEDICAL GAZE AND THE REVOLT OF SELFHOOD

This critique is brought into sharp focus in her unflinching recounting of the bleak prognosis she received as a child: "I would be a vegetable and nothing could be done for me. The doctors confidently told them that the damage to my brain was irreversible" (Chib 4). Such stark words exemplify the medical gaze that renders disabled bodies as 'other', objectifying them, stripping away complexity, and presuming hopelessness. But Malini's life and work dismantle this reductive framing. By reclaiming her identity and asserting her voice, she transforms this narrative from one of limitation into one of resistance, agency, and possibility. Through *One Little Finger*, she not only challenges the oppressive weight of normative assumptions but also offers a living example to the transformative reach of human flexibility and the boundless scope of self-determined potential.

She shows how the smallest resource, one little finger, can defy society's prejudiced definitions of ability. In her hands, the very limitations imposed by her condition become instruments of expression and agency, recalling Shakespeare's Cassius who declares, "Men at some times are masters of their fates. The fault, dear Brutus, is not in our stars, But in ourselves, that we are underlings" (Julius Caesar, 1.2.139–41). This is no mere quotation but a spear aimed at the heart of fatalism, a line that cleaves through centuries with undiminished force. It rejects the comforting lullaby of predestined paths and the seductive whisper of inevitability. Instead, it sounds a call to arms, a rallying cry to awaken the sleeping titans in us all.

The message here is clear: to reject the fatalism of a preordained destiny and shoulder the responsibility of shaping one's own future. We hold far more control over our lives than we often admit. "Life is what you make it," the saying goes; but Malini Chib transforms this aphorism into lived truth through the force of her determined agency. Reflecting on her evolving self-awareness and the quiet defiance that grew within her under the weight of societal expectations, she writes:

I began questioning myself. Did I have my own personality? Was I just another disabled girl who needed things done for her? ... I eventually realised that I must be determined to fight. I would show them that, except for my body, I was just like them. I was not going to give up." (Chib 54–55)

This is not merely a statement of intent; it is a manifesto of self-definition. Chib's declaration marks a turning point, a conscious decision to seize opportunities, forge meaningful connections, and distance herself from influences incongruent with her values. Her choices, though deliberate, are not immune to imperfect outcomes. But it is the very act of choosing, of asserting her will even when results diverge from expectation, that constitutes the purest affirmation of personal agency. By doing this exercise, she renders agency not an abstract ideal, but a lived, breathing practice of resilience.

5. UNITY OF BEING: FAMILY, SELF, AND THE INDIC VISION OF LIBERATION

The memoir also reflects the Upanishadic wisdom central to Indic thought, particularly the concept of Ekatva—the unity of existence. Her journey harmonises with the declaration of the Isha Upanishad: "All this is pervaded by the Divine" (Isha Upanishad, verse 1). This powerful vision speaks to the intrinsic value and sacred purpose of every being, irrespective of ability or circumstance. By refusing to allow societal norms to confine her spirit, Malini personifies this ethos of interconnectedness and self-realisation that is celebrated in ancient Indian philosophical texts.

A notable and striking aspect of Malini's narrative is the full support of her family, who stand as dedicated allies throughout her journey. Their presence exemplifies the Upanishadic understanding that the self's realisation is fostered through harmonious relationships. This principle expresses the Brihadaranyaka Upanishad's depiction of the mutual support between self and world, microcosm and macrocosm, a dynamic relationship that nurtures growth and liberation. In *One Little Finger*, Malini poignantly writes: "My family stood by me every step of the way. They were my biggest strength, never letting me feel that I was less than anyone else" (Chib 18).

This alliance between personal resolve and relational support mirrors the Indic view that true liberation (moksha) is not a solitary escape but a profound realisation of oneness, a transformation that turns human bonds into spiritual anchors. Malini's story, therefore, offers a vivid example of individual courage and determination intertwined with ancient wisdom about unity, support, and the transformative power of love and community.

6. INTERDEPENDENCE, EMPOWERMENT, AND THE TRANSFORMATIVE ETHOS OF INCLUSION

The support Malini Chib receives from her family reflects Rosemarie Garland-Thomson's concept of the "normate," a figure whose privilege, when consciously used, can amplify the voices of marginalized individuals. In this light, the memoir highlights familial love as a powerful and transformative influence; Chib's educational achievements and growing independence do not happen in isolation but are nurtured and sustained through her family's lasting confidence in her abilities.

As the narrative progresses, it broadens its focus to invite readers to contemplate society's collective responsibility toward inclusion and empathy. This call seems similar to Shakespeare's poignant reminder in *The Merchant of Venice*: "The quality of mercy is not strained" (Merchant of Venice 4.1.184), urging a compassion that flows freely and without reservation. Through this perspective, Chib's story becomes both a personal journey and a wider reflection on the need for solidarity, understanding, and shared commitment to creating a more inclusive world.

Chib's critique of societal barriers is as incisive as it is necessary. She confronts systemic inequities with the sharpness of a theorist dismantling ableist structures. Her narrative echoes Michel Foucault's ideas about the body as a site of power and control, challenging the societal mechanisms that marginalize people with disabilities. Our infrastructural and attitudinal gaps are laid bare as Chib demands a paradigm shift; from apathy to accountability, from tokenism to genuine empowerment.

Amidst this critique, *One Little Finger* celebrates education and self-expression as tools of liberation. Chib's pursuit of higher education mirrors the emancipatory potential that thinkers like Paulo Freire associate with critical pedagogy. Her academic achievements and articulation of lived experience are not just personal victories; they are political acts, dismantling stereotypes and expanding the discourse on what it means to thrive.

Her story rings out as a clarion call, urging society to recognise and value the full spectrum of human experience. It compels us to question shallow perceptions and, as Shakespeare might entreat, to "see better" (*King Lear* 4.6.139). Chib's life, mirroring Prospero's vision, reminds us that "We are such stuff as dreams are made on" (*The Tempest* 4.1.156–57). Through the quiet force of her one little finger, she affirms a universal truth: that every life, regardless of physical form, carries intrinsic worth, purposeful direction, and the capacity to bring about profound change (Chib 202).

As Malini Chib matures, her life becomes a luminous thread integrated into the broader matrix of a more harmonious and conscious society. Her advocacy for equitable access to education and meaningful life opportunities reflects not a rebellion against existing systems, but a thoughtful effort to participate in and improve them. She shows that life, when nurtured by goodwill and equanimity, can flourish into progress that is genuinely collective. The memoir resists portraying challenges as fixed barriers; instead, it reframes them as calls to devise creative solutions. Chib's journey encourages a re-examination of ingrained social attitudes, inviting a perspective in which everyone's contributions are acknowledged as essential strands in the fabric of society, rather than as roles defined by preconceived norms. Her boarding school experiences provide vivid lessons in resilience and adaptability. While the environment lacked some comforts of home, it became a crucible for learning how to navigate relationships and develop self-reliance. This blend of personal growth and community living reflects the Vedic ideal of "the world as one family." Gently and persuasively, these chapters reveal how societal structures can be reoriented to include individuals more fully—not through rigid binaries of inclusion or exclusion, but through recognition that shared understanding enriches both individuals and the collective.

Chib's time at Oxford, a defining milestone in her journey, illustrates how new environments can become springboards for growth. Her reflections on charting independence and cultivating relationships convey a dynamic interplay between personal ambition and collective harmony. As she recalls, "Oxford was a different world for me. It was the first time I was living on my own, managing my studies, my daily routine, and my social life. I learnt that independence comes with responsibility, and responsibility brings growth" (Chib 143).

Rather than framing Oxford through a binary framework of inclusion versus exclusion, Chib's account celebrates adaptability and creative engagement as forces that can enrich any space. This outlook reminds with the Bhagavad Gita's insight: "All actions, O Partha, culminate in knowledge" (Bhagavad Gita 4.33). In her narrative, knowledge emerges not merely as academic attainment, but as an integrating force—dissolving divisions, deepening self-understanding, and strengthening the bonds between the individual and the community.

7. CONCLUSION

To conclude, *One Little Finger* is a radiant narrative that affirms the deep interconnectedness of all life. Malini Chib's journey invites us to recognise every individual as an essential part of the greater whole. Her memoir also reflects what Rosemarie Garland-Thomson describes as the ethical imperative of "misfit encounters," moments where human variation engages with social space in ways that spark transformation (Garland-Thomson 13).

Her story inspires not through rigid binaries or an exclusive focus on critique, but by presenting a life shaped by dignity, joy, and purposeful direction, building the idea on Lennard J. Davis's view that disability narratives have the power to redefine prevailing notions of normalcy (Davis 41). Chib's attention to education, mobility, and sustaining bonds parallels Martha C. Nussbaum's "capabilities approach," in which justice is assessed by the tangible opportunities individuals have to thrive (Nussbaum 78).

As Simi Linton observes, disability life writing holds a distinctive capacity to connect the personal with the political, bridging individual narrative and cultural critique in ways that awaken public consciousness to equity and empathy (Linton 527). In this light, Chib's memoir functions both as a record of personal growth and as a philosophical prompt to re-envision the social fabric in richer, more inclusive terms. Her reflections challenge readers to confront entrenched hierarchies of ability, probing the ways language, infrastructure, and social attitudes can perpetuate exclusion. By anchoring her lived experience within expansive ethical and cultural frames, Chib transforms her autobiography into a

potent catalyst for social change, illustrating how resilience, allied with a clear vision of collective flourishing, can inspire shifts in both thought and practice.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

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