Lapis Lazuli: An International Literary Journal *(ISSN 2249-4529)*
Vol. 12, No. 1,SPRING, 2022.

Published : 18/09/2022

Investigating the intersections and interventions of race and (dis)ability within African-American literary corpus

Chandra S

Sri Guru Tegh Bahadur Khalsa college
University of Delhi, India

E-mail address: sanyachandra6@gmail.com

Abstract

Disability studies scholars concede that disability akin to gender, race, class and caste is a category with a contested history and material ramifications, such as; it merits attention within other analyses of inter-sectionality. Disability scholars and activists have comprehended the operations of Ableism and its conjunction with other structures of oppression. Moreover, it is necessary to discern that disability is completely entangled in the histories, experiences and denotations of age, class, caste, gender, race as well as sexuality, citizenship, nationality, religion and other categories of "difference" and "otherness". The hegemonic culture's consistent conflation of these diverse identities has provided a political intention; disability has historically functioned to rationalize inequality for disabled people themselves, the intrinsic conceptualisation of disability has been used to justify discrimination against other groups by ascribing disability to them.

Therein this paper deeply delves in analyzing as how non-white races are habitually coupled to people with disabilities, both of whom were portrayed as evolutionary 'laggards' or 'throwbacks'.

Concomitantly, this paper aims to understand the "constitutive relationship" between race, violence and disability and intends to engage with a reading of race and disability pertaining to the larger African-American fiction through the analysis of *Toni Morrison's "Beloved" and "Sula"*. Conclusively, this paper strives to conciliate the unnoticed, yet essential, binary between these two categories of "difference" and "otherness".

Keywords:
Disability; Race; Gender; Gender-Race dynamics; Intersectionality; African-American literary corpus

---

In the larger purview of investigating the intersections between race, gender and disability in Toni Morrison's *beloved*, violence assumes a focal position. Racist violence debilitates the corporeal-psychological frame of people of color, particularly Black, brown, and indigenous body-minds. Racism, ableism, and sanism are deeply entangled and seem impossible to segregate from one another. It is essential to realize as how race plays a significant part of becoming disabled or being diagnosed with disabilities, or how other life options are structurally narrow at the intersection of race and disability. Disabling effects of racist violence further concretizes as a place where black disability theorists have contended the traditional disability studies and have engaged in the juxtaposition of racial violence and disability: including unnecessary over or under diagnosis, hypo- and hyper-medicalization of bodyminds.

Sami Schalk affirms that structural racism and ableism [impacts] the entirety of Black population, and not merely those who are disabled (Hinton,pp; 3-5). The lack of access to healthcare, incarceration, violence, war and other social concerns which disparately impact people of color, Schalk underscores how structural racism therefore disproportionately positions people of color to be(come) disabled. Racism and ableism collude in a multiplicity of ways in contemporary society, not exclusively in the

lives of Black disabled population but Black people collectively as and in discourses of disability persist to be exploited as means to constrict and harm racialized populations. The centrality of violence in Toni Morrison's *Beloved* further emphasizes racial violence as a potent mechanism which induces (dis)ability in the body-minds of the colored community.

"No, no. That's not the way. I told you to put her human characteristics on the left; her animal ones on the right. And don't forget to line them up."(71)

The active impulse of the schoolteacher in *Beloved* to equate and evaluate the corporeal and cognitive features of Sethe with beastlike instincts does not solely underscores the dehumanization of a "Black woman" under a systematic structure of oppression but evenly engages with a pseudo-scientific appropriation of the "Blacks" with evolutionary (dis)ability. Arguments have surfaced that African American writer, predominantly the women writers and black feminist theorists have often violently imbricated disability as a central aspect for the black identity construction. Drawing chiefly from black feminist theory, disability studies and the nascent discipline of Black disability studies, it can be contended that though the employment of the term "(dis)ability" still garners a sense of apprehension amongst the women writers, but much of their theories espouses current conversations about disability and in turn attempts to make early interventions in how we confer bodies and minds that are considered to be (dis)abled.

Garland Thomson employs Judith Butler's work on gender essentialism and performativity in *Gender Trouble (1990)* and *Bodies that Matter (1993)* to attest disability as a socio-historical construction: "the self concretizes in response to an embodied interaction with its environment, both social and concrete. The disabled body is a body whose diversities or transformations have rendered it out of sync with its immediate surroundings, both corporeal and the attitudinal environment. In other terms, the body becomes disabled when it is incongruent both in space and in the milieu of social expectations" (Thomson, 84). In this sense while tracing the inter-sectionality of race and disability Garland strikes a balance between social and phenomenological experience.

Ato Quayson apostles a similar binary between social and phenomenological experience. Quayson in the *"Aesthetic Nervousness"* succinctly prints the potent binary between "impairment" and "disability." Impairment refers to the particular bodily or cognitive lack which results in a reduced capability to completely actualize all aspects of one's life while "disability" refers to the socially governed parameters that exacerbate the effect of the impairment (Quayson, PP; 302-303). In common practice, it is rather difficult to segregate the two terms, since "impairment" is intrinsically placed within a social discourse which construes it and "disability" is constructed by the interaction of impairment and a gamut of social discourses on normality that serves to instruct or specify what can be reckoned as disability in the primal position. Disability has been the object of negative comparison to what can be characteristically construed as "corporeal normality." Even though the outlooks that has traditionally attended people with disabilities has modified over time but reiterated in all "epochs" is the idea that they hold an excess of meaning which consequently offers an adamant invitation to a number of interpretative framings. Rosmarie Thomson concisely puts it "By its very presence, the exceptional body seems to compel explanation, inspire representation, and incite regulation (Thomson; 101)"

Toni Morrison's *Beloved* sinuously puts forth a dyad of race and disability and her choice of multifarious marginalities establishes affinities between historically peripheral characters in order to salvage "difference" as a vehicle for reconfiguring the established orders of value and conformity. Rosemarie Garland Thomson persuasively adduces that the (re)presentation of (dis)ability by Morrison are both wide ranging and capricious, embracing cognitive and mental disorders along with corporeal, physical disabilities, which Thomson calls signs of "formal particularity".

In *Beloved,* it becomes extremely pertinent to discern the trajectory of (dis)ability, the lack of corporeal and cognitive functioning which at times is a consequence of the structure of oppression involving physical violence and psychological trauma inflicted by the (in) group on the "other" and simultaneously it can be conceded as a disability which is self imposed or inflicted, as an endeavor to evade this methodical oppression. Toni Morrison expressively transforms "memory" as" rememory" –

a strong, liberated narrative strategy, counter hegemonic storytelling device and multi standpoint discursive measure in *Beloved* in order to fulfil as what Black feminist literary theorists have termed as 'the alternative reconstruction of the past with the aid of narrative strategies of subversive representation' to articulate the utter misery and trauma of slavery. It delves deeply with phrasing the terrifying impressions of rape, sexual assault, dehumanising forms of violence and sheer psychological ordeal of an individual in unarranged forms of remembrances – which are triggered abruptly and are often more excruciating than the actual experience. However, it becomes imperative to understand that this innate disfigured temperament of Sethe's memory, her (dis)ability to actualize, remember and articulate her emotions in the narrative further supports the idea of self-inflicted disability.

"All I can remember of her is how she loved the burned bottom of bread. Can you beat that? Eight children and that's all I remember."

"That's all you let yourself remember" (6)

This exchange between Baby Suggs and Sethe heightens the intensity of "Rememory" as a mechanism of coping trauma, which Pukayastha in her essay labels as 'willful amnesia'. Baby Suggs deliberately forgets her children who have been sold under the institution of slave trade in order to break away from the trauma. Sethe adopts this willful amnesia when she's encountered with the question about her mother. This has been referred to as "defensive exclusion" as per John Bowlby who defines it as a "form of subjugation in which certain information of significance to the individual being systematically excluded from further processing." This idea of "willful amnesia" in accordance to Sigmund Freud can be described as "repression". Repression primarily relates to the unconscious blocking of unlikable emotions, impulses, memories and thoughts from the conscious mind. Freud characterized "repression" as a defense mechanism which intrinsically minimizes feelings of anxiety and trauma (Hutton; pp 149-150). Morrison's rememory employs similar psychological machineries in order to condense the intensity of the trauma. Sethe and Baby Sugg's 'willful Amnesia', the (dis)ability of the cognitive faculty takes place as a result of the racial violence.

In Toni Morrison's *Sula,* body usurps a central position, as the root of meanings: one is compelled to "comprehend" the self in the nuances and traits of the body. The cardinal emphasis in *Sula* has been laid on embodiment and disembodiment. It surfaces as a narrative where bodies are confiscated and then reclaimed. The puissant account of Shadrack, who is drafted into military service and returns after the war to his hometown in a frenzied state, is attributed with madness in the narrative. The account of Eva peace, abandoned by her husband, voluntarily embraces corporeal disability in order to cater to her children presents an equally potent picture of disability impregnated with the overtones of gender, race and class inequalities. Morrison carefully deals with the complexities affixed to motherhood, the child being the part of the mother's corporeal and emotive body and how the demise of the child depicts the mutilation of the "womb". Both Sethe and Eva Peace confront selective mutilation of the" womb", the defilement of the faculty of motherhood, precisely as a consequence of the racial oppression.

"The best thing was, was her children. Whites might dirty her all right, but not her best thing (121)"

"Collected every bit of life she had made, all the parts of her that were precious and fine and beautiful, and carried, pushed, dragged them through the veil, out, away, over there where no one could hurt them." (287)

Sethe's act of ultimate self debasement and disembodiment portrays disability both as a consequence of the racial violence and as a means of evasion. Eva peace in *Sula* affirms "there wasn't space for him in my womb", delineating a similar notion of (dis)ability, impairing the self as a way of eschewing the horrors of racism. Sethe's mutilation of her womb prompts a permanent disability within her inherent psychological and emotional frame. Sethe divorces herself from her youngest child, Denver and repeatedly struggles at the sight of her intrusive memories. Her negligence espoused from her innate sense of trauma further inflicts signs of impairment in Denver. Denver lives psychically paralyzed, she appropriates a kind of synesthesiac version of hysterical blindness and deafness "made me have to read faces and learn how to figure out what people were thinking, so I didn't need to hear what they said."Akin to the violation of the agency of motherhood, the infringement of masculinity primarily

casted out on Paul D and Halle in *Beloved* can be seen as product of the triad between race, disability and violence. Carefully observing the place of white violence within the system of masculinities, Connell writes: ‘‘Many members of the privileged group use violence to sustain their dominance (connell, 303)’’, he continues, ‘‘violence can become a way of claiming or asserting masculinity in group struggles.” Hysteric tendencies in the men of *Beloved* can be traced with their denial of manhood and normative masculinity.

“The box had done what Sweet Home had not, what working like an ass and living like had not; drove him crazy so he would not lose his mind”.

The violence, incarceration, assault and trauma encountered by Paul D in the ground kennel gives rise to the symptoms of disability and lack of normality in him. His intrinsic anxiety about remaining in one place for too long, and his lack of ability to contrive emotional attachments are symptomatic of his disability.

Conclusions

Elliptically, It can be seen as welcome development in the overall literary corpus of the disability literature that researchers have started analyzing nexus and interaction between disability and poverty in context of developing countries (Braithwaite and Mont, 2009; Barnes and Sheldon, 2010; Grech, 2011; Mitra et al, 2013). But so far the gendered lens on disability relationships has overwhelmingly remained overlooked. Importantly, a South African perspective on gendered relationship between poverty and disability could provide useful insight how an interplay of poverty, disability, race and gender compound negative outcomes for an agent or individual agency such as a black women. But understanding to these interlocking systems of oppression has largely remained hazy because such relationships have been primarily investigated by previous researchers in isolated manner. Interestingly, theory of intersectionality can be helpful in lending a useful lens to understand the mutually reinforced process of marginalization and exclusion that pertain to conjuncture of multiple identities such as disability, poverty, race and gender. Intersectionality can be also seen as a better

analytical tool to recognize multiple identities of an individual and how these multiple identities shape various experience of advantage or disadvantage (Moodley & Graham, 2015).

Sula deals with a complex understanding of how the nexus between poverty, race and gender foist corporeal, cognitive, emotive and social disabilities upon the characters. On the other side In Beloved, disability assumes myriad forms – divaricating from the post-traumatic syndrome induced as a result of sexual violation, emotive paralysis due to the infringement of motherhood, psychical paralysis as a consequence of child disintegrative disorder to emotional estrangement stemming out from the brutal negation of conventional masculinity. Therein, the interaction of a plethora of characters in Morrison's novels with "ascribed" or "achieved" disability under a frame of racial oppression vividly projects the constitutive relationship between race, gender, violence and disability.

Works cited

1. Connell, R.W.(1995). Masculinities. Berkeley: U of California P
2. Hinton, Anna, "Refusing to Be Made Whole: Disability in Contemporary Black Women's Writing" (2018). English Theses and Dissertations. 5. https://scholar.smu.edu/hum_sci_english_etds/5
3. Hutton, Patrick H. (1994) "Sigmund Freud and Maurice Halbwachs: The Problem of Memory in Historical Psychology." *The History Teacher*, vol. 27(2), Society for History Education, pp. 145–58, https://doi.org/10.2307/494716.
4. James, Jennifer C., and Cynthia Wu. "Editors' Introduction: Race, Ethnicity, Disability, and Literature: Intersections and Interventions." *MELUS*, vol. 31 (3), pp. 3–13, http://www.jstor.org/stable/30029649.

5. Kafer, Alison, and Eunjung Kim. (2017) "Disability and the Edges of Intersectionality." *The Cambridge Companion to Literature and Disability*, edited by Clare Barker and Stuart Murray, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, pp. 123–138. Cambridge Companions to Literature.
6. M, Purkayastha.(2013) "Rememory as a Strategy of Subversive Representation: A Feminist Reading of Morrison's Beloved" Department of English, D.H.S.K. College, Dibrugarh, Assam, pp.2-4
7. Moodley, J. & Graham, L. (2015) The importance of intersectionality in disability and gender studies, Agenda, 29 (2), PP. 24-33.
8. Morrison, Toni. (2007) Beloved. Vintage Classics.
9. Morrison, Toni. (1987) Sula. New York: New American Library, Print.
10. Quayson, Ato. (2007) *Aesthetic Nervousness: Disability and the Crisis of Representation*. New York: Columbia University Press, Internet resource.
11. Rody C. (1995) Toni Morrison's Beloved: History, "Rememory," and a "Clamor for a Kiss" American Literary History, Oxford University Press, Vol (1) (Spring, 1995), pp. 92- 119, https://www.jstor.org/stable/489799
12. Schriempf, Alexa. (2001) "(Re)Fusing the Amputated Body: An Interactionist Bridge for Feminism and Disability." *Hypatia*, vol. (16/4), [Hypatia, Inc., Wiley], pp. 53–79, http://www.jstor.org/stable/3810783.

Author's bio-note

Sanya Chandra is currently a 3rd year B.A English hons. Student of Sri Guru Tegh Bahadur Khalsa college, university of Delhi. As a student of literature her research interests are feminist studies, subaltern literature and sociology of literature. Consequently, she has been a part of student seminars and has published student research essays concentrated on topics around disability, race and gender relations and queer studies.