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Appropriating Japanese Manga: Disability, Pop Culture, and New Ways of Articulating Experiences

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Abstract

Theorisation of disability has remained limited to Western or South Asian countries, creating a substantial gap in popular academic understanding of how other Asian countries imagine and create the ideas of non-normative bodies. Looking further east, towards Japanese manga(s), this paper seeks to understand how its popularity with younger generations articulate experiences of disability and circulate the shaping of popular opinions. Briefly, this paper also examines manga's focus on high-school narratives, which undercuts the dialectics of completeness that biographies offer. Primarily, it argues that the format of this relatively recent genre (combining images and prose) can work against the ableist hegemony of language that prevent enunciation of disabled experiences, thereby proving to be a fertile reactionary ground. In order to facilitate a holistic understand the politics of 'Othering' of people with disabilities, East Asian works must be studied in their contexts. This shift can substantiate the diversity of models of life that shape socio-cultural engagements with disability worldwide. Lastly, the paper makes a case for the propensity of manga format to being made tactile, which can subvert our understanding of what it means to 'read' a text and interact with it.

Keywords:
Manga; Disability; Disability Studies; Popular Culture; Disability Narratives

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Disability studies functions within the understanding that a non-normative body is an active social construction and normativity is a hegemonic assumption that is imposed onto bodies that do not subscribe to the contemporary ideals of functionality. While Garland-Thompson framed it as the 'theoretical opposite' of ablebodiness, insisting on its rhetorical creation; Kasnitz and Shuttle have constructed it as a sociocultural category of identity (1997). Within their reading, disability is that which causes a sense of 'social discomfort' (qtd. in Stevens, 5). On the other hand, Tom Shakespeare was wary of this academic tendency of separating the body's lived experiences from the physicality of the body itself and thereby alienating the body by creating it only in the realm of ideology and positing disability as a 'social question' alone. The hegemony of Western disability studies that operates within global critical space presumes a directional flow of knowledge that emerges in the West and dissipates towards the East. Carolyn Stevens has noted that Japan, too, was predominantly influenced by the 'western intellectual hegemony.' However, a sense of inadequacy emerges from such a consideration — infrastructural and social policies that govern notions of disability differ even within the 'West,' and therefore cannot be generalised as such - the way the UK constructs the subject of a disabled body cannot be similarly attested to by Mexico or the USA.

The variation then, implied similarly in the multiplicity of the 'East' poses certain pitfalls in theorisation. The implications of disability would differ greatly for a country like Japan whose population deals with higher number of old-aged citizens, and low percentage of youngsters. Moreover, the idea of 'able-bodiness' itself is not immediately translatable and transferable because of Japan being a hyper-capitalist state with differing work ethics: labour and masculinity is both determined as an opposition to *idleness* rather than the very physical act of working itself. If meanings of disability differ, so shall the blueprints for social exclusion. This paper explores the participation of East Asian popular culture in these debates circulating within the cosmopolitan digital landscape, and its hand in reconstructing and redefining the conditions of participation. We must work with the realisation that there is significant gap in communication that

emerges from the universalising tendency of western academicians and their global reception; and the East Asian limitedness of the work that does emerge, owing to language barriers and perhaps a disinterest which unfortunately results in major works remaining untranslated.

The notion of disability in Japan is tied in with what Ishikawa Jun has delineated as a focus on 'consideration' — individuals are directed through rigid social obligations of responsibility not only towards themselves, but also towards the community they consider themselves to be a part of. Emphasis only on one's own *individual* responsibility is taken as a '*wagamama*' (selfish/self-centred) position (Stevens, 16). Disabled bodies must consider *others* in as much as it considers itself in its personhood. This is further reinforced by the prominence of the medical model position. Yoshiko Okuyama relayed in 2020 that 'rehabilitation' is a central term in understanding disability: people with disabilities are accepted based on their proclivity towards able-bodied behaviour. This is highlighted through the fact that one of the most prominent institutions in Japan is named as a rehabilitation centre (JARM: Japanese Association of Rehabilitation Medicine). The burden of this performance of ability falls entirely on the body, but it is done so not out of the need for the body's stake in capitalistic labour production, but out of a consideration for the community's conditional acceptance of them. This brings forth the paradox of (in)visibilisation — the disabled body is kept conveniently out of the circle of vision, but once rehabilitated *enough*, can be considered appropriate for being viewed by others.

The *koseki* family registration system recognises a Japanese individual only as a part of a family system, rather than a subject on their own. This presents an inherently different conception of a 'singular self.' Attached even in birth, marriage, and death to others, the system requires both compulsory heterosexuality and compulsory ability since it must be updated every two years. Legal documents as early as 701 C.E. categorise 'perceived levels of impairment' in relation to a body's ability to labour. This labour was an aggregate of the entire family unit's (the '*ie*') labour which granted no legal status to the individuals within the family, but the whole unit with which they were recognised. Labour is already a contentious point in Japan where notions of retirement remain infamous. A body must always be able to 'work' in all implications of the word, across all ages. As one of the countries that mandate a disability ID, people in Japan carry a

passbook (*shogaisha techo*) — a literal passport to their conditional existence in everyday 'normal' world, a constant reminder of their difference from other unconditional 'complete' citizen. The governing body does understand disability is both relative and a spectrum — different people of different age groups and different situations, it seems to understand, encounter the idea of disability differently. However, the passbook addresses them all in one collective swoop, precluding the emergence of individual experiences.

Popular anime and manga series like *A Silent Voice* and *A Sign of Affection* both work in tandem with this contention - while both are celebrated works concerning women who cannot speak, their romance with able-bodied men presents a problematic everyday reality. *A Silent Voice*, set amongst highschoolers, covers Nishimiya's experience of being bullied as she makes her way in adjusting to her new school. Curiously enough, the theme of being bullied is glossed over as the plot moves to cover rather the growth of the bully himself, as he comes to harbour a newfound affection for Nishimiya and deal with his own inner qualms. Forgiveness is demanded by the end of the movie, not as an act of accepting accountability for his actions, but rather as a matter of consideration for all that the bully himself has gone through. Nishimiya's passivity aligns with the image that surrounds women with disabilities: they must maintain feminine ideals of innocence and kind-heartedness. Shoya's guilt is dissipated by the virtue of Nishimiya's unending empathy because harbouring hate or the prospect of unforgiveness cannot be entertained. She exists purely as a prop to facilitate the *real* protagonist.

In *A Sign of affection* disability becomes the prosthetic extension of a communication gap. To an extent, the series documents the sense of paternal condescension and infantilisation that people with disabilities are addressed with. This is seen best through Yuki's childhood friend Oshi's insistence that deaf people can only be cared for, thus denying Yuki any sense of agency and autonomy. Furthermore, Oshi's aggressiveness in his sign language points to the appropriation of language by the able-bodied in order to project their own understanding over others. Interestingly however, the show covers a kind of 'mutual' consideration: Yuki's friends do not know sign

language, but communicate through texts; while her love interest, Itsuomi, is singled out precisely because he makes the effort to know the language in which she feels comfortable communicating. To the mile Yuki covers by considering others ability to access her thoughts, her friends only walk the step of waiting for her responses — the idea of 'consideration' is tipped against people with disabilities such that normative bodies are painted with brushstrokes of benevolence.

Both series presents the rehabilitation of women within heterosexual social norms, the overarching message being that the world is 'generally accommodating' to people with disabilities so long as they accept that they can only occupy the boundary. This understanding is a part of the practice of wilful ignorance which attempts to gloss over any complexities that disabled bodies highlight in the functioning of community values — manga often presents a reconciliation, hence, between the ones who are made outcasts, and ones that carry the authority to outcast. It is not that they are asked to overcome their disabilities entirely, they are instead asked to accept their status as the 'other' and employ a sense of gratefulness upon being considered an acceptable 'Other.' It is not simply an *institutional* gap in comprehending experiences of disability in Japan but also a chasm in popular consciousness towards the effort it takes to present oneself as "well-adjusted."

'Wilful ignorance' is a stance that is further substantiated by the changing attitudes towards people with disabilities. Long having occupied roles of artists, whether as composers, or of as part of practitioners of traditional arts, disabled characters also dot the records of Japanese mythologies. However, as Groemer discussed in 2016, the criteria for understanding a disabled identity is ever-changing. Japan boasts of a low occurrence of disability not because bodily presence of disability is fewer in number, but because a declining population necessitates a different definition. Disabilities gets conflated with old age, which simultaneously ignores the recording of disability in younger generations. Japan also registers low diagnosis of learning and intellectual disabilities out of stigma alone (Okuyama, 14). Many concepts of disability are only commonly spoken of through borrowed words (for example, '*normarization*' instead of normalisation). Constraining words pertaining to disability can be reminiscent of the Japanese pre-war censorship policies in terms of the suspicions it raises when discussed

openly — it points to a "self-censorship" and a loss of freedom of expression (Stevens, 57).

Furthermore, the understanding of disability is predominantly shame oriented. 'Shame' pushes the responsibility of creating the political category of identification as 'disabled' away from the state thus also its hand in proposing equal opportunities. It instead burdens the individual and their family. This creates a sense of '*docho atsuryoku*' or peer pressure wherein the whole family is considered an outcast hindering social harmony of the locale, thus magnifying the pressure on the individual person with disability both at school, and immediately in the workforce as they move into adulthood. In turn, the question of disability becomes connected to concerns over notions motherhood and the role of the parent mother. In Ivry's contention, Japanese mothers do not "falter on the readiness to bear a body that is considered disabled" (251). This is displayed also in *A Silent Voice*, wherein Nishimiya's mother is shown as deliberately insistent on her roles as caregiver despite all situations, in order to get her daughter accepted within the society, and by extension, re-enter society themselves. The failure to do so however highlights the fallacy of promoting 'reintegration' within society. agency of motherhood changes. A questioning of the morality of aborting a non-normative body presumes that the agency of carrying forth the pregnancy rests solely in the hands of the mother and perhaps the family. The problem here is almost singular. We question if the mother has the child out of the expectation of forcing the idea of normalcy on the child, or if she would raise the child regardless. When we move the across from the West towards the East however, the prospective parents making the decision based on eugenics do not have the sole power to make such a decision — the power rests also in the hands of the clinicians (particularly in China). Moreover, the social conflation of the disabled child with the mother herself that considers her disabled by proxy also raises the need for further deliberation. The 'disfigured child' is a result of a disfigured motherhood — the mothers must prove themselves as a *capable* custodian by 'curing' the child through the love of motherhood. Aborting a disabled foetus seals their position as 'bad mothers,' but so does a potential failure in being unable to rehabilitate them within society as adults. This is therefore deeply tied with the question

of feminism in as much as it highlights the complicated idea of having a child out of the expectation of their future adherence to norms. The question of agency, when raised, points instead towards a serpentine endeavour.

Aging population somewhat works to dispel superstitious beliefs that surround disabled bodies. The Buddhist idea of a lingering bad karma that manifests itself in disability cannot sustain itself when they occur later in life as it cannot provide a substantial justification. In Japanese folklore, *oni* characters who represent a sense of otherworldly monstrous and uncanny human body have been previously read as metaphors for disability. Works like *Blue Exorcist, Mushishi,* and the *Monogatari* series charts the changes undergone in the idea of a monster in popular culture. While popular consciousness might retain the sense that *oni* is a fearful deity, they become beloved protagonists or love interests within fan-culture and are susceptible to the practice of textual poaching (to borrow from Henry Jenkins) as subjects of fan-fictions. The dialectics surrounding disability continually changes as people root for precisely the differences that mark these characters as ‘Other’ instead of asking them to adhere to normative ideals. In Okuyama’s reading, *oni* metaphor emerges as anti-hegemonic (26). Therefore, we can posit that *manga* can negotiate the connotations of negativity attached to disability through these metaphors by reworking the values associated with it in popular imagination. *Monogatari* series and *XXXHolic* prominently presents the idea of monstrous within the body being a result of either a distortion of the soul or its weakness, but it negates the demeaning associations by *not* curing it. Rather, it presents them as what must be lived with and is inevitable for every social body — that, when seen as an inescapable part of the self, a matter of everyone’s reality, it will no longer cause discomfort and alienation once openly accepted.

The cat and tiger spirits that inhabit Tsubasa Hanekawa, or the crab spirit that changes Senjougahara Hitogi permanently are not entirely removed. Neither are ‘cured’ of their disability or rehabilitated. There is further a consideration not of the society when they *are* entertained in their ‘monstrous’ form, but of themselves alone in the lingering capacity of friendship. During the exorcism ritual equivalent, Araragi is presented as a mediator not only because he is the protagonist, but because as a half-vampire and therefore somewhat relationally disabled as well, he presents a new forging of communities that accept disabilities and do not ask one to overcome it. Living with

disability seems only possible when others support unconditionally the status as an equal. Anime like *In/Spectre* and *Full Metal Alchemist* both feature main characters with prosthetics, imagining them with these detached, either an eye, a hand or a leg. The presence of these in mainstream narratives where disability is not a sprinkle of addition to characters' personalities but rather a condition of life, works to normalise the idea of disability as a neutral state, or what Barnes calls 'a mere-difference.' Because they are protagonists not by the virtue of their disability alone, these works can help chart an extension of self even with people who are not disabled. Disability is of course, also presented as a form of supernatural ability in other works — *Mushishi, Natsume Yuujinchou*, and *Durarara* have characters who occupy a liminal zone and experience Otherness because of their 'superpower' that allows them to see or experience life differently: Natsume can see spirits and interact with them and is shunned for this 'oddness.' They make explicit what is implicit in Japanese culture.

Visual presentation reminds us moreover, of the fact that manga presents only aesthetically pleasing faces and attractive features. It must be noted that protagonists and characters painted positively are given disabilities that do not deform or disfigure. Pertaining to the rigid Asian beauty standards that even non-normative bodies cannot escape, this directly undercuts experiences noted by authors like Malini Chib in *One Little Finger*. While Chib echoed confessions of many people with disabilities who note that they are desexualised in the eyes of potential partners and even infantilised, characters in many manga are presented commonly as sexually available and more so, as a part of romantic plotlines as discussed above. Despite their 'disabilities,' as long as they are visually striking, they are 'worthy enough' of it. This brings under questioning what a 'non-normative' body looks like as even when 'disability' defies these markers, they can be allowed to overcompensate by suiting other visual aesthetic demands of the society.

The Japanese Manga format can be considered an alternate mode of writing, much as novels have been previously considered in the legacy of poetry and drama. The implication of using 'alternative' as a key term relays the sense of popular usage and circulation of course, but also points to a habitual disavowing of the genre by 'high-brow'

art and literary critics — it is usually considered 'inferior,' an 'unserious' business. We can contend that as novels implied a shift in the consciousness of contemporary people in its popularity, manga acquires a similar status because of its closeness with popular cultural production and through its displacement of 'Western' consciousness. It provides an 'alternate' to the centrality of the 'western' everyday sense of reality and aesthetics. Hayao Miyazaki has propounded that the mix of visual and textual elements of a manga format can be read and understood as a new language format by itself. This presumption leads to the hypothesis of appropriating the form as one appropriates language for discussion of one's lived subjectivities.

Texts function on the idea that some meanings remain implicit, are only alluded to; and although limited, through a continual interaction between the reader and the writer, these limitations can be surpassed. Graphic novels, while being similar in that they both combine the textual and the visual, provide the consumer with a surplus of meaning because firstly, they focus a lot more on prose; and secondly, because they heavily employ the use of colours. Considered to be a revisionary medium, movies are also visual, but the drastic lack of a median between a whirling rapidness of action and a complete stasis upon pausing, prevents it from being entirely accessible, especially to people with disabilities of sight. Constance Classens has elaborated on the hierarchies that art and study of aesthetics has long maintained (1998). Considered as invalid recipients of art because of a 'lack' in some sense, people with disabilities have been kept outside the sphere of high-brow art, both in creation and in deliberation - tactile museums are an entirely new phenomenon and so is an inclusion of tactile explanations of the art itself. However, even with a consideration of tactility allowing participation in discourse of art, Classens has noted that there have been arguments against touch as an aesthetic sense based on its inability to achieve "a unified and spontaneous apprehension of form" (149). A follow up argument further underlines ignorance towards colours and the use of shadows, based on the assumption that without colour and light, and on form alone, the basal sensory experience of feeling cannot be enough. The West also maintains the primacy of sight since it believes that "aesthetics lies in the (culturally mediated) encounter between a spectator and a spectacle. If the "spectator" is blind, or if the spectacle is missing, is there anything left to experience?" (Classens,

141). Further, the popularity of scratch and sniff covers for unique manga editions also implies that manga does not privilege one sense alone over the other — *none* is basal.

Within such a background then, Frederic Rayar's belief in illustration techniques of texturing, thermo-proofing, and raised lines allowing a tangibility of art that makes it accessible, can be well consolidated with the idea of what manga is as a *text* — Toda et.al already are working towards creating tactile manga. Because it is hand-held, and not framed, and offers equal importance to art and word, it emerges as a certain equaliser. The meanings it offers do not come from the use of colours as most manga are black and white, save for the few editions that have a few coloured pages. Further, the visual overstimulation that Korean manhwa elicits because of its bursting use of colours is traded here for monotone colours. Colours carry no meaning; the intensity of scratches and dots do. The popularity and indeed the emergence of *shoujo* category itself which focuses on the interiority and visual silences in between actions can enact the novelistic format of a monologue in a way that is accessible to all visually as well. They become useful for displaying a richer inner life outside the 'story' through closeups of characters and their expressions. Andrea Wood's reading of 'REAL' notes the same for the protagonist whose changes of the body are tracked through his expressions and changes in shading (2013). Fujimoto et al. comment on the fact that the graphic element is best suited for visualising the experiences of people with mental disabilities, because these are harder to replicate (2022). Each fleeting change is framed and alluded to through changing sounds, challenging simultaneously the idea of realistic portrayal. The *unreal* imagination of the human body allows for a variation that can depict the unfamiliar while sufficiently familiarising it.

It replicates the Guattarian minor language, going against the sole privileging of the logocentric world and celebrating instead a symphony of communicative methods. Alluding to Spivak's and Said's terminology then, manga as a language format can be considered *catachrestic* because it is an intentional, productive misuse of both art and word, and what they feel and look like. The discourse of both together creates a different sense of language that can be appropriated by any format — with Canadian and American publishers now emerging in the manga scene as well even though it is

originally East Asian. By reimagining what 'visual' and 'textual' entails, the hyper-invisibilised bodies are provided associations with images that reframe the existing image reservoir. It paves the way for reconstruction of meanings that allows the reader to create a world through sharing via consumption of a character's fears, joys, and hopes. The multimodal reading experience perhaps offers the most significant aspect of accessibility: it can be embraced by neurodivergent students more easily (Foss, 95).

Importantly, majority of narratives that cover experiences of disability in Japan are based in high-school – running antithetical to the common refusal of Japanese high-schools to admit students with disabilities citing a lack of accommodation for them. Biographical narratives, while relaying the truth of lived experiences, are nonetheless narratives of progress. They work on principles of hindsight and chart a sense of linear development which is not infallible. The subtext that underlines a biography is that of a life fulfilled. High-school settings decentralise this focus by showcasing a life that is in the process *of*. Dealing primarily with the everyday struggles of understanding oneself and one's place in society, it is cacophonous, one moment after another – the coherency is gone and so is the sense of security. Manga like *Under the Sun Spot* deals with this fracturing of completeness, they do not *end* at adulthood. *This* life might not be 'successful.' Retrospective teleology is traded in for the prospect of an uncertain life with disability. As the readers grow chapter to chapter with the character themselves, the sense of empathy it invites comes with fear and social concern — Can we grow old together? Would society allow us to grow old together?

Conclusions

Operating within the "high contextual culture" of Japan where contextual cues such as hand gestures, eye movements, verbal grunts can suggest thoughts; and simultaneously outside it, in that manga has its own language cues where certain SFX reassign these values and change their meanings, manga becomes a fertile medium for dissemination of ideas in popular culture through its social validity. Inspired by Irigary who notably proclaimed that women's experiences cannot possibly be successfully articulated in a male symbolic realm, disability studies has often posited similarly that the normative use of language cannot be effective enough to enshrine and circulate experiences of disability. Perhaps, manga text's consideration as a new language can

disarm the baggage that normative language alone carries through its intermixing of mediums. We must remain wary, however, of presenting it as an ideal format for this new idea of 'sharing' — despite its relative detachment from the 'markedness' of language, the content itself cannot escape its context. What it does offer up by being culturally responsive is the potential of its newness, a revision. Its popularity only works in its favour.

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