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Internalised Psycho-Emotional Disablism In Pat Barker's Toby's Room

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Abstract:

The disabled have always been looked at through an alien lens by the non-disabled bodies. This had led to an exclusion or complete invisibility of them in the societal structure. Evidently, the disabled suffer from two major forms of disablism. This paper attempts to analyse how the disabled suffer damage to their emotional well-being that arises from various factors which become internalised over a period. The constructed 'disabled identity' and the 'abled gaze' push the disabled towards the margins and makes them lose their self-esteem and identity. They are made to believe that they are inferior to the constructed normative ideal body. Psycho-emotional disablism isolates the disabled individual from the mainstream society. This paper hence argues that disability is a cultural construct as much as it is physical phenomenon, which ultimately leads to an internalised psycho-emotional disablism. As an interdisciplinary discourse, the novel 'Toby's Room' by the British novelist Pat Barker is taken to situate and analyse the aforementioned ideas.

Keywords: ableism; disablism; internalised oppression; sub-human.

INTRODUCTION

Human life centres around lot of binaries. It is impossible to surpass the constant binary that is associated with the disabled and the abled, affiliating the 'flawed, tragic' to the disabled and 'perfect, heroic' to the abled. As Michalko (2002) asserts that the idea of disability is constituted on the contradictions of idealised individuals and demonic alternatives. There is a clear psychological implication to disability. The paper argues that this binary is constructed on the prejudice of fear, shaming and pity on the disabled by the non-disabled community. The paper uses identity-first language (disabled person) and not person-first language (people with disability) for the reason that first person language separates the disability from the identity which will continue to emphasise the idea that disability is a negative and despised thing.

RESEARCH GAP

Hence, the roots of such ideologies have to be explored so as to learn it's connection in the current scenario. In spite of the interdisciplinary nature of disability studies, there has not been much research

done on disability studies through an interdisciplinary lens. There is a wide research gap when it comes to the application of disability studies to literature.

METHODOLOGY

The current paper aims to fill the research gap to an extent by applying critical disability theory to the novel written by the contemporary British novelist Pat Barker. This paper, hence will be a new and valid contribution to the new emerging field of disability studies.

LITERATURE AND DISABILITY

Once upon a time, in a faraway kingdom there lived a beautiful princess and an ugly, deformed evil Queen/woman who plotted against the princess. The above statement precisely sums up the common theme of the most fairy tales. Be it the ugly beast in the Beauty and the Beast, the evil queen in Snow White who eventually is transformed into a hunchbacked old lady, and the many evil characters presented in the fairy tales have always been either disabled or deformed in some form or another. Evidently, what are such tales feeding the tabula rasa of the little children's minds with? The answer is outrightly simple: a false notion that disabled and deformed are demonic and are to be feared. It comes as a shock to realise that disability and deformity act as a synonym to evil nature in most of the fairy tales. The mainstream media reaffirms this false notion by projecting disabled and deformed people as sinister and dangerous. Literature is no less participant of this negative representation of disabled and the deformed people. Shakespeare's Richard III is a significant example of how the author projects Richard III as deformed both by mind and body. Shakespeare's Richard and his twisted body is presented as an embodiment of deceit thus inculcating a cynical representation of disabled to the readers (Barker & Murray, 2017, p. 2). In Stevenson's *Treasure Island*, when the character Long John Silver is projected in a positive way, there is little mention of his impairment. Interestingly, when his evil nature is revealed, his wooden leg begins to gain excessive reference in the text indirectly relating the disability to his evil nature. *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* is another classic example of the binary of goodness associated with handsome Jekyll and evil associated with ugly, mad Mr. Hyde. Sara Wasson states that in Gothic literature, the disabled have always been represented as "toxic, limiting, and corrosive" and she questions "How, then, might there be a case for resurrecting the term as of potential value in the discourse of critical disability studies?" (Wasson, 2020, p. 70)

GENEALOGY OF DISABILITY STUDIES

The word 'disability' hints at something missing either fiscally, physically, mentally or legally (Davis, 1995: xiii). In the recent times, the disabled people have found their source to fight for their rights through several political movements aiming for inclusivity in all sectors. Disability Discrimination Act (DDA) in Britain describes the disabled person as) 'anyone with a physical or mental impairment, which has a substantial and long-term adverse effect upon their ability to carry out normal day-to-day activities' (HMSO, 1995: section 1.1). This is inclusive of physical and mental impairment such as disability by birth and through accidents. People who are affected long-term with hindrance to their everyday functioning are considered disabled. According to Jung, "Disability is a label, a signifier, that inaugurates consignment to an identity category, which signifies disadvantage and oppression" (Jung, 2002, p. 179). The disabled occupy only a marginalised space in social, cultural, political and economic facets. The ratio of the disabled people differs with the geographical spaces owing to the condition such as war-zones, poverty, child labour and violence etc. As Dan Goodley (2014) explains,

Disability studies take as their bread and butter an oppositional stance to the ubiquitous individualisation of disability within the solitary individual. . . . Our

obsessions with our own bodies and biology, fuelled by institutional, expert, scientific discourse and the fascinations of popular culture trains our thoughts on to our individual selves, our minds and our bodies to check how we match up to a normative model of humanity (Goodley, 2014, p.4).

Disability can be of various forms however, predominantly disablism is experienced through two forms of social oppression such as structural and psycho-emotional. Structural disablism is when the disabled people experience blockades through the social structures by being denied access to various facilities and impracticality in using many infrastructures and segregation. These fall under the physical and social forms of exclusion through which the disabled become doubly disabled. For instance, when a building does not have accessible doorways for the disabled ultimately excludes them at a structural level. The system has failed to consider the different body into consideration hence, making the disabled body a 'sub-human'. These said forms of disablism acts from the outside circle while the second and most important form of disablism is the psycho-emotional disablism which operates from within. The Union of the Physically Impaired Against Segregation (UPIAS) initially although looked at the inner barriers, it did not include the psycho-emotional disablism which ultimately is an indication of how the emotional experiences of the disabled are unheeded.

It was Joyce Carol Thomas, an African-American poet, playwright and motivational speaker who first introduced the term 'psycho-emotional disablism' in her book *Female Forms* (1999). According to her "Disablism is a form of social oppression involving the social imposition of restrictions of activity on people with impairments and the socially engendered undermining of their psycho-emotional well-being" (Thomas, 2007, p.73). Fortunately, in the emerging field of disability studies in the recent times, there has been a growing interest in emotional and psychological effect of disability. Psycho-emotional disablism is also identified to be effectuate in two forms such as direct psycho-emotional disablism and indirect psycho-emotional disablism. In the present fast-moving world, disabled people are pushed towards the margin for they are believed to be unfit for the mechanised space. Henceforth, they experience isolation which eventually leads them to a form of existential crisis.

Apart from the social seclusion, negligence in support and basic amenities for the disabled people, what Carol Thomas calls as 'non-disabled gaze' disturbs them beyond measures. The overly attentive gaze or the ignorance are the two sides of the same coin with the disabled are looked at the by non-disabled people. They are often considered to be sub-human and inferior and henceforth violated of their dignity and are ostracised. Dan Goodley puts forth many valid questions based on the social undercurrents of disability.

Why is disability understood as a problem that resides in the individual? What is 'the individual' and what kinds of individuals are valued by contemporary society? How have the social and human sciences contributed to common-sense understandings of what it means to be an individual? When we think of the 'disabled person' what frames of reference do we draw on to judge that personhood? What dominant 'other' is the disabled individual expected to judge themselves against? (Goodley, 2012, p.84).

According to Reeve, direct psycho-emotional disablism arises from the relationship with others and from the terror, pity and disgust that is directed towards the disabled. The disabled individuals are expected to follow the set of ways that are to be followed by the institutions such as schools, hospitals, religious institutions, etc. which eventually makes them confined to such set of

rules (Braginsky and Braginsky, 1971). Miro Griffiths states from his personal experiences that, the barriers that the disabled experience did not arise from the limitations of the disabled bodies but from the way the society is structured and the norms of expectations thrust upon the abled and disabled bodies. (Griffiths, 2019).

DISCUSSION

There have been very little literary representation of the reality and life of the disabled and deformed. In the novels of Pat Barker, a British novelist who primarily focuses on the themes of the effects of war, one can find a significance ground to analyse the effects of disability on the psychological well-being of the affected. Pat Barker, born in Thornaby, near Middlesbrough on 8th May, 1943 attended King James Grammar School, Knaresborough and Grangefield Grammar School, Stockton-on-Tees and the London School of Economics. She captures the climate of the world war period in her novels, which reflects the devastation, loss and pain of the zeitgeist. Millions of people including young men, women and children were killed and terribly injured. The Literature produced many decades later continued to be fascinated with the themes of war. In the recent decades, the themes of war predominantly dealt with the post-traumatic effects on the veterans. Pat Barker, began her writing career in the late 20th century, influenced by the unspoken terrors her veteran grandfather suffered with post-war. She began to give voice to his voiceless sufferings and pains that sprung from his trauma of the trenches.

Pat Barker, as a novelist has continuously explored the unexplored arenas of human psyche through her literature. Her novel *Toby's Room* (2012), is a sequel of her 2007 novel *Life Class*. The characters repeat in the second novel with focus on the times of First World War itself contrasted to the focus on pre-war London in the first part. Like a ripple effect, Barker's *Toby's Room* focuses not much on the warfront itself, but on the effect, it has on the people and their lives. The novel centres around the group of arts students at the Slade School of Fine Art in London. Elinor Brooke, Paul Tarrant and Kit Neville are the prominent characters in the novel. With the breakout of the war, both Paul and Kit Neville volunteer at the Belgian Red Cross. Unfortunately, Kit ends up losing his arm and also is unrecognisably injured in his face. A famous artist in town, and extremely popular among fellow artists, the disfiguration and loss of arm makes him completely shattered and isolated. He, being excluded from the non-disabled community, believes that he has become an invalid individual. Kit Neville explains his dream to his friend Paul about walking past the horses in a stable. "It's just I have this recurring dream. . . And there's something wrong. Nothing obvious, just something. It's quite dark, one oil lamp, I think. And suddenly I realize what it is, the horses are watching me and they've got human eyes. You know, white showing all the way round, not just when they're startled" (130).

Neville's dream is a reflection of his internalised psycho-emotional disability where he becomes growingly obsessed with his disfiguration. He believes that he is constantly being stared at and is definitely 'not a sight to behold'. This internalised disgust over his own self makes him unconsciously dream of even the horses being startled at the sight of his disfigured face. The non-disabled gaze makes the disabled body as invalid and insignificant. Such a perception is derived from the established form of 'perfection' and 'normal bodies' (Hughes 1999). The novel being set in the times of First World War, Barker consciously puts forth instances of the reality of war-struck England. The hospitals are painted blue and the benches outside the hospitals are set apart at regular intervals, also painted in blue. "Evidently the colour was intended as a warning: Don't look this way, if you don't want to see horrors" (130). When Paul and Elinor enter the hospital to pay a visit to Neville, they witness a small incident where a mother and her child were walking close to a hospital. The mother crosses to the other side of the road, the very moment she sees the soldier. Such isolating

behaviours from the adults, unconsciously affect the understandings of the children making them fear the disabled considering them as harmful and to be secluded.

He smiled; the child screamed. Her mother bent down to smack the backs of her legs, and then yanked her – crying inconsolably – away. The soldier got stiffly to his feet and strode off down the road, back to the hospital grounds where he knew he would be safe. The whole ugly little incident had taken no more than a minute, but it confirmed Paul in his view that they should not be here (130).

Barker places this incident in the novel as a representative sample of the harsh reality of the disfigured and disabled war veterans who fought for their country. When Elinor meets Neville, unlike the small girl in the novel, who is terrified by the sight of disfigured soldier, she stays untroubled. Even though Elinor does not outrightly show ‘fear, pity or disgust’, Neville continues to feel all the more insecure.

Elinor came towards him. ‘Hello, Kit.’

She stretched out her hand. Neville took it as one might grasp a dead and decomposing fish. Then he retreated to an armchair as far away from her as possible and, even then, turned it a little to one side so the wing would cast a shadow over his face (132).

Neville stays away from Elinor and Paul as far as possible even though they do not tend to offend him and accept him the way he is. This voluntary isolation and withdrawal clearly send out the message that Neville has internalised psycho-emotional disability owing to his bitter experiences and encounters with many people. Neville’s retraction from Elinor signifies how the disabled people eventually isolate themselves as much as they are isolated by the non-disabled community. Paul tries to strike a conversation about the current scenario only to find Neville “. . . began to talk about old times, before the war, before the trauma” (134). Neville’s attachment towards his times before the trauma, the disfiguration and disability convey the message loud and clear that Neville is detached to his life post disability. He yearns for his past life and henceforth, refuses to talk about the present reality.

Paul and Neville decide to go out one day to a restaurant that they used to visit regularly before Neville’s injury. “Outside the Domino Room, Neville hung back; it was Paul who pushed open the door and walked in. Treading on his heels, Neville stumbled and almost fell” (191). Neville, becomes estranged to the once familiar space and feels insecure to enter the restaurant with the fear of being stared at. “The medical gaze plays a crucial role in invalidating bodies that do not conform to the norm. Impaired bodies are regarded as abnormal, deviant, inferior and even sub-human” (Campbell 2008). People believe that the disabled are inferior to them and assume them to be an object of their ‘gaze’ and violate their privacy even in a public space by intruding through their non-disabled gaze. “Once again, they were the centre of attention, though nobody openly stared” (191). The curiosity with which the disabled or the deformed are being looked at as one would look at the antiques in a museum has been an integral part of human history of disability. The non-disabled gaze or arises from the curiosity and unwritten rule that the able have the right to intrude into the privacy of the disabled in a public sphere. To stare is to ‘enfreak’ (Garland-Thomson 1997) and gain a form of control and power over the disabled.

Neville realises that he is not being recognised even in his familiar space which yet again reaffirmed his fear that he has been forgotten as an artist and has become an “yesterday’s man” (191) and his self-pitying deepens. Neville’s return to London post-injury was reported in major newspapers however, the emphasis fell on his admission at the Queen’s Hospital for facial injuries which clearly intended that Neville had suffered a facial deformity. “The rumours had begun almost at once. Some people said he was so hideously disfigured his own mother had run screaming from the room; others that his brain was affected too, that he was either mad or a cabbage” (191). A significant plight of the disabled or the deformed is that, many stories, myths and stigmas are attached toward them.

Disabled or deformed people have always been projected as dangerous, evil, creepy or eccentric in the mainstream media. Any anti-hero for that matter, is chosen to be a physically deformed or huge and a scary figure. Demystifying this relationship between physical features and characteristics is and will remain a great challenge for the disability studies approach. As in the case of Neville, “They were still, covertly, the focus for every eye in the room” (191) proving the presence of non-disabled gaze in every space. “And now here he was, or here somebody was” (191). Neville’s disconnectedness, a feeling of being a stranger in the familiar space is rooted in his internalised psycho-emotional disablism. The corporeal identity is demolished which eventually leads to a shattered self-esteem and existential crisis. “People glanced at the mask and quickly away. Was it him? It had to be, but nobody was confident enough to come forward and speak to him” (191). Even though some of them in the restaurant managed to recognise Neville, nobody dared to come speak to him. The uncertainty on how to react to a disabled person remains an unexplored facet in the social spectrum. When people begin to withdraw themselves from the newly disabled or deformed people, it not only leads to isolation but also adds on to their already deep insecurity and a feeling of self-pity. These forms of crisis fall under the psycho-emotional disablism which has not been given the due attention.

Neville as much as filled with self-pity, also becomes uncontrollably furious and “Suddenly, without any warning, Neville began to roar, the bellow of a wounded bull with the full force of his lungs behind it. Paul tried to grab his arm, but he was too late: Neville was on his feet. He waited till every eye in the room was fixed on him, and then he took off the mask” (191). Neville’s frustration towards the crowd which fails to acknowledge him for what he truly was- a war artist whom they once cheered for, turns into agitation. “One or two people cried out. Others were blank with shock” (191). Abruptly after his small episode of resentment, “Neville started to cry, a puppy howl of abandonment and loss” (idib). The state of Neville after his expression of anger is a state of defeat. Being at loss of words for what he felt Neville begins to cry like a lost child, who had lost its identity, recognition and even worse, the self-control. The entire process of coming in terms with their disability can be difficult and complicated especially for people who acquires impairments in adulthood because they have to shift from being ‘normal’ to ‘Other’ according to the societal norms. This creates a form of guilt with regards to their own prejudice over the disabled when they were a part of the non-disabled community (Reeve 2008) as in the case of Neville, for instance.

Paul looks at Neville and was sure of one thing that all of it had been Neville’s genuine outlet of mixed emotions. “If he knew anything at all, he knew this – that every part of Neville’s anger and distress had been genuine. The brooding, the resentment, the rage, the ‘Look at me!’ of the abandoned child or the slighted artist, the tears, the sobbing ... It had all been real” (191). Paul thinks about the state of Neville before his injury, where he would walk into the same room and how he would get recognised by everyone and was hero-worshipped being a popular war-artist. “Two or three years ago, he’d have walked into this room as if he owned it” (191) remembers Paul and a feeling of empathy for

Neville naturally creeps in. In the present, Paul observes that nobody in the community speaks about Neville and he has eventually become a non-existent figure.

At the restaurant, Paul realises that a group of men and women were talking about an arts exhibition which also included Paul's paintings. Paul was sure that the group recognised him yet they did not acknowledge his presence nor did they come talk to him because "the cordon sanitaire round Neville obviously included him too" (191). A 'cordon sanitaire' is a guarded line usually created to cut off an infected area. Paul uses the term to signify the relative space around Neville because as for the general public, Neville and anything associated with him has become an object of disgust such that they tend to keep away from it. This act of rejection and invalidation has been naturalised and normalised instead of placing focus on such exclusion as creators of existential anxiety (Hahn, 1986). This attitude with which the non-disabled look at the disabled, destroys the self-esteem, shatters their connection with the community and they begin to internalise the false notion that they are ugly, and non-existent.

When a person with an impairment encounters a discriminatory gaze- be it institutional or personal . . . encounters- not a pure look- but an act of invalidation. I want to argue that this act is constituted by a deficit which I will call the perceptual pathology of non-disablement. . . It is pathological because these interconnecting discourses are immersed in mythologies of normality, truth, beauty and perfection (Hughes, 1999, p.164)

Dr. Tonks shares an experience with Neville where in one of the convalescent Homes of his patients, the neighbours had asked the patients to be not allowed outside the premises so that they don't have to look at their faces. It comes as a shock and also is an violation of their basic rights. The men who had fought for their country, for their fellow citizens but post-injury, are treated as sub-humans. Pat Barker, ultimately uses the character of the disabled and deformed Kit Neville to represent the harsh reality of the disabled and the deformed in the individual and social level. This connection between stereotypes on disability and the eventual oppression has been linked with reference to cultural imperialism, which became an integral part of the cultural construct such that it became unnoticed and unchallenged (Young 1990). Having pushed to the margin in various ways throughout their life, they eventually end up developing internalised psycho-emotional disablism.

RESULT

The experience of disablism is a process in which the disabled are either ill-treated or completely ignored. This attitude destroys the psycho-emotional well-being of the disable people. Additionally, the disabled people are constantly in a hypervigilant state of alertness, precarious of how a stranger would react to their disability which in due course damages their self-confidence and self-worth. As observed in Neville's life, internalized oppression or internalised psycho-emotional disablism arises from one's own belief about their disability and the consequences of such beliefs. The disabled person internalises the stereotypes, prejudices and isolated themselves from the rest of the world based on it. Acts of exclusion and isolation often leads to psycho-emotional disablism making them constantly made to feel that "you are out of place", "you are different" (Kitchin 1998, p.351).

Even though psycho-emotional disablism can seem relatively insignificant compared to structural disablism, it has intense effect on the psychological well-being of the disabled. Over a period, psycho-emotional disablism leads them into, to borrow the Marxist term 'false consciousness' which leads to negative perception of themselves making them to believe that they are not of any importance. In the recent times, disability studies scholars have begun to expand the boundary of

disability studies by focusing on the cultural constructs of abled and disabled bodies, thus paving way for a holistic approach to disability studies (Waldschmidt et al., 2017). Psycho-emotional disablism is critically associated with the cultural representations of disability within the media and wider society. To bring about a change in this non-disabled perspective and construction of disabled identity, deconstructing the ableism is quintessential (Loja et al., 2012, p.190).

CONCLUSION

Like sexually abused people who blames themselves instead of the victimisers, the disabled tend to blame themselves for the exclusion and not the socially constructed false ideas surrounding disability which excludes the disabled body from a normative social structure. "There are many routes to transforming personal into political consciousness. At the core, however, is a rejection of disability as personal tragedy" (Campbell & Oliver, 2013, p. 115). Leane Mc Rae says that the scholars of disability studies, tend to place the disabled body beyond the constructed boundaries and formulations of the disabled body. Thereby, it "encode celebration of human diversity and the persistence of difference. Its experience can be understood across a whole range of discourses including health, well-being, and aging. Disability, they contend, is a product of social environments and attitudes that predominantly embrace ableism" (Rae, 2019, p.220). Without mincing words, the truth is that, society that needs 'fixing' from their stereotypical attitude and not the disabled individual. In the recent times, many changes have been brought about to eradicate the structural disablism due to the unrelenting efforts of disability rights movements. However, the psycho-emotional disablism is and will remain a deep plight that the disabled have to fight as an unseen demon.

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