

DISABILITY AND NORMALCY AS CONSTRUCT IN JUDITH THOMPSON'S THE CRACKWALKER

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ABSTRACT

*This article inquiry into Judith Thompson's play *The Crackwalker* to bring to light the idea that normalcy or disability is socially constructed. These concepts are not innate but a product of socio-cultural construction. The present play is a fine example of how social institutions with power define certain people as normal or abnormal and disabled. The very title of the play suggests the idea of being outside the normative space or discourse. This discourse labels the central character Theresa as mentally retarded and decides not to let her go for motherland because the children that come from her will also be abnormal and disabled. This comes as a result of the fear that the birth of such children will add to the number of unhealthy babies. This is the reason why the doctors want to tie her tubes thereby preventing her from the joys of motherhood. Theoretical ideas about normalcy and disability will be used to show that disabled or able-bodied are categories that are socially constructed and can be challenged and deconstructed.*

KEYWORDS: *Disability, Normalcy, Construct, Power, Social Institutions, Challenge, Deconstruct*

INTRODUCTION

Disability is a fundamental aspect of human society that is marked by diversity. For people who are different from hegemonic identity, a single impairment may work as their basic defining feature. The idea of disability is constructed on the basis of physical and mental impairment but it has more to do with who constructs such identities and for what reasons. These kinds of people with disabilities are viewed as deficient, defective, and deviant from the so-called normal or able-bodied people who are supposed to comprise the norm or the standard. The theory of eugenics is a clear example of how disability is constructed and how it functions in human societies. Holocaust offers a glaring example of how mass murder is carried out in the name of racial purity and normalcy. Non-Aryans were seen as a deviation from the norm of the purity of blood which the Aryans represented.

Different forms of cultural production are full of images of disability. Literature, one of the dominant modes of such productions, is replete with such images. The literary production of disability has served to misrepresent the disabled as well as to challenge and deconstruct such (mis)representations. This article looks at the play *The Crackwalker* to show that the representation of Theresa as disabled and mentally retarded is a perception of the people whose views endorse the mainstream discourses that construct such truths and identities of the people who are not disabled but differently able in their own ways. For this purpose, the paper uses the theoretical insights developed by Lennard J. Davis, Michel Foucault, Alice Hall, and others. Their insights are employed to question the discourses about disability because there is not always an agreed-upon definition of disability. Lennard J. Davis, therefore, calls disability a, "porous category" whose borders are always permeable ("Identity Politics" 537). So, it is always open to change and resistance.

Textual Analysis

The main problem in the play relates to why is Theresa deprived of her right to motherhood. The hospital, which is a social institution with power, has given her a tag of being a mentally retarded person. It is for this reason that she will be prevented from begetting children as they too will be unhealthy like their mother. The social workers threaten to cut off her pension if she violates the rules of the state. The character Sandy, supposed to be a more sane and normal, addresses Theresa as a hounddog that shows how the so-called normal people treat people with disabilities.

Sandy: I don't want no hounddogs callin on me. (continues scrubbing)

Theresa: I not a hounddog!

Sandy: Yes, y're

Theresa: No I not. (16, 17)

Sandy uses the term hounddog to refer to Theresa which connotes that the people who belong to the mainstream society and represent sanity and normalcy belittle those with certain physical and mental differences. The very word hounddog evokes animal imagery which implies that in the view of Sandy her friend Theresa is an animal who follows and torments her. More than physical and mental defect, disability has to do with the perception of the people. For Koven, the construct of disability doesn't so much depend on the physical impairments themselves but on the social attitudes towards them which the disabled persons often internalize ("Prisoners" 236). This is revealed when Theresa admits her helplessness in conversation with her husband Alan.

Alan: Slow? I don't think you are slow, who told you that?

Theresa: I ain't a good mum, Al. I can't help it. (51)

When people gossip about Theresa being slow she comes to realize that she may really be slow. If she is slow she won't be able to take proper care of her children. The discourse society created for disabled people is so powerful that it begins to make the victims feel that the whole thing may be true. This shows the power of the negative images that society creates about people who fail to meet the norm set by the same society. Theresa's helplessness is a vivid indication that she has internalized the social constructs about disability and abnormality like what Koven says, disability is not inherent in the people themselves and it is more a product of people's (mis)perceptions and socio-cultural constructions ("Prisoners" 236).

Another critic Gerschick terms people without disabilities "temporarily able-bodied" (1264) which draws our attention to the disabling processes that render people incapable of doing what normal people can do. It is not that only a few people suffer from disability. In course of living life all human beings experience one kind of disability or the other. People are able-bodied only temporarily and with the onset of old age, all will undergo different sorts of abnormalities and disabilities. So, there is no such fixity and permanence that we can associate with normality and able-bodiedness. It supports the assumption that the truth about disability is open to change and resistance. Theresa is denied the opportunity of experiencing motherhood not because she is incapable of it but because society has created a discourse of normalcy on the basis of which it creates the binary of normal/abnormal and controls the desires and decisions of people who are different from the so-called normal and able-bodied people.

Judith Thompson treats characters on the margins of society with great love, care, and sympathy. She challenges the discourses about disabled people and gives them a voice of their own. A noted critic Wilson remarks, “words like ‘disturbing’, ‘brutal’, and ‘dark’ pepper the reviews of her work” (25). Different critics highlight the brutalized lives of marginalized people who live in the shadows of social rejection and ostracism. Thompson’s play tries to move the readers outside the narrow comfort zones and challenge their understanding and morality through a presentation of violent and brutal dialogues that reveal the intensity of characters’ lived life. This is the reason for Robert Nunn’s observation that Thompson is “the greatest playwright this country has seen, now or ever” (Spatial metaphor 3). This is because of her powerfully moving portrayal of marginalized characters in their honesty and simplicity.

The language used in *The Crackwalker* is fluid and captures the flow of raw energy in those characters who dwell on the periphery of mainstream society. For Richard Knowles, “each of these monologues reveals a divided, fragmented subject trying to contain itself through a narrative meta-commentary that allows that “self” to fit more comfortably into what seems to be a largely alien symbolic order” (35). The language used by the characters flows freely without the restrictions of grammatical rules which is opposed to the symbolic order that represents the discourse of the dominant society. These people can resist the dominant discourse through their raw and fluid language. To make sense of their disability we also have to know the norm on the basis of which the difference is constructed. Lennard J. Davis claims, “to understand the disabled body, one must return to the concept of the norm, the normal body” (8). Without understanding the norm we cannot understand whatever is deviant from the norm. It is this supposed deviation that causes the marginalization of disabled people.

The government or the state controls the population of the disabled people through its own restrictions and regimes of truth. The social workers intimidate Theresa and will cut off her pension if she decides to give birth to children. The state exercises its power and prevents disabled people from begetting children for the sake of keeping the population healthy. Theresa’s “But, Al, she says she gonna cut off my pension cheque if I don’t get my tubes tied” (53) is a shocking revelation about what the state does to stop abnormal and retarded people from getting children. These people can experience love and joy as other normal people do but social discourses keep them subdued. These people understand how they are being treated when normal people bully them through abusive language.

Sandy: pretty bad combination, Trese, a retarded whore.

Theresa: that’s a load of bullshit, Sanny, I *not* retarded

When Sandy calls her a retarded whore Theresa responds curtly and denies the truth of what Sandy is saying about her mental condition. Sandy’s treatment of Theresa echoes the implications of the state discourse that doesn’t allow the retarded people to have children. Ruth Hubbard remarks that “the eugenic measures were to be regarded as health measures pure and simple” (97). Denying Theresa the right to bear children was purely a health issue for the state.

Theresa: The sosha worker, she says I gotta get my tubes tied

Alan: What’s that?

Theresa: Operation up the hospital, they tie it up down there ya won’t go having babies. (51)

The hospital is a part of state institutions that implement the rules and regulations issued and maintained by the government. Some countries hound the so-called retarded and disabled people and sterilize them to destroy the

possibility of unhealthy and retarded children polluting the healthy and normal population. So far as the relation between the doctor and the patient is concerned, the latter is treated with the same controlling and supervising gaze of the doctor who represents the mainstream society. In the words of Michel Foucault, “Doctor and patient are caught up in an even greater proximity, bound together, the doctor by an even more attentive, more insistent, more penetrating gaze, the patient by all the silent, irreplaceable qualities that, in him, betray - that is reveal and conceal - the clearly ordered forms of the disease” (16).

The unequal relationship between the doctor and the patient helps to define the reality of the patient’s mental and physical condition. The doctor exercises the power that his very position gives and defines the patient with the help of his medical knowledge, which in complicity with the doctor’s power, creates and constructs truths about the patient and his body. Do such constructs reveal the inner truths about disabled people? No, and the people who are represented as retarded are capable of understanding the world around them and have a sense of what is socially acceptable or appropriate. The following dialogue between Alan and Theresa brings this to light.

Alan: I love screwin with ya. Do you like it with my?

Theresa: Shut you mouth, people are looking, don’t talk like that, stupid face. (48)

When Alan teases Theresa about having sex, she replies that people are looking at them and it is inappropriate to talk about such erotic matter in public. If Theresa were dumb and retarded she wouldn’t be able to respond to Alan’s call for having sex with such acuteness. By presenting Theresa as a character who is capable of deep emotions of love, and sympathy and also able to resist other people’s misrepresentations about her, Judith Thompson is using literature to give voice to the voiceless and subvert the power of different social discourses about the disabled and the so-called abnormal people. For the critic Alice Hall, literature has the potential to change disability into a social phenomenon, not something physical or medical (5). Thompson accomplishes this through the play which for Diane Bessai is “an unsettling mixture of domestic black comedy... sexual intrigue, social deception and surreal dramatic action” (109). If some literary texts misrepresent disability, some others like *The Crackwalker* can expose and challenge those misrepresentations.

CONCLUSIONS

Judith Thompson’s play *The Crackwalker* puts Theresa, a retarded figure from the margins of society, at the center of the play and reveals as constructs the discourses about her disability and mental condition. Disability and normalcy have less to do with the real physical and mental condition of people and more with the discursive formations that create truths about such people. State institutions exercise their power and control the desires and choices of disabled people. Disability is less about a lack of ability and more an ability to do things differently. These people have their own unique ways of making sense of the world around them. Different cultural productions are full of images about such people where misrepresentations and resistance to those misrepresentations can both be found. The present play discloses that disability is a construct and thus is always open to challenge and resistance.

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