

Deformity and Disability Transposed: Dynamics of the Periphery Identities in Oral Narratives

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Abstract

Most studies done on the subject of deformity and gender always seek to investigate the extent to which society generates and sustains biasness against minorities. They highlight the conditions and factors that engender biasness and segregation plus the resultant stigma. This study however, takes the view that oral narratives do go beyond the mere exposure of cultural/social limitations; that they, in effect project more vibrant, incisive and radical alternatives to matters oppression. The essay takes cognizant of the fact that language is a formidable force in social construction that shapes identities and influences perceptions. Language is not only a purveyor of social attitudes but a crucial tool in engineering and sustaining created attitudes. In this study, I use two oral narratives, "Simbi Nyaima" recorded by Onyango-Ogutu (1974) and "Simbi" recorded by Jane Nandwa (1983), to reflect on deformity and disability as a form of marginalization. Both narratives are centered on women with some form of physical disability or limitation, which inspires socio-cultural distancing, fear or revilement. Both are doubly marginalized: as women and as deformed. They suffer open and hostile discrimination. Specifically, the essay seeks to: First, analyze the dynamics of social construction and labeling. Second, analyze the tension/ironies between the dynamics of good and evil as they are given physical identity and value. Thirdly, demonstrate how the selected oral narratives transpose the dominant/minority relations and images in society.

Key Words: Deformity, Disability, Identities, Dynamism, Periphery, Oral Narratives

Introduction

Literature is a mirror of culture. It is an important instrument for social construction that helps in setting and instilling social values. In some cultures, disability is a taboo topic and this explains their comparatively limited depiction in oral texts.

The deformed and the disabled constitute a unique subject for literary inquiry. In studying the deformed, amongst other fringe identities, we realize the complex importance of individuality and how its representation in art enforces biased attitudes. That notwithstanding, disability is an evolving phenomenon and an important theme in literature. It affords us with a rich watershed for dissecting intimate human perceptions and attitudes.

Carrol (1990) discusses how, over time, deformed characters are used in literature purely to create emotionality. Having no other significant role, they largely remain peripheral as in real life. Miles (2009) augments this position by pointing out that such characters are either feared, misunderstood or pitied. Their primary function in literature and society is limited to elicit pathos and hatred. In part, this explains the very little presence of deformed and disabled characters in modern literature in general.

Somodev (2016) argues that the disabled largely act as prop to the main character or as villains because disability is equated with evil and hence treated negatively. Perceived as the images of evil in many cultures, the deformed are usually assigned subsidiary roles in fiction. Examples abound in literary texts where the disabled are primarily used to frighten, amuse or sadden readers and viewers. Many are presented as worthless, alien, wicked, pathetic or harmful, hence unwanted.

Silvers (2000), demonstrates how characters with disabilities are cast either as subordinates or dependents in literary texts. She shows the subtle intersection between one's body, gender and role, and concludes that in a wide number of cases, characters with disability are alleged as unqualified for the gendered roles usually adopted for individuals of their sex. Mwai (2012), builds on the foundational position that attitudes towards disability are deeply rooted social and cultural attitudes of the people and demonstrates how Gikuyu oral tales delineate the agonies that the disabled and their caregivers suffer in life.

The two stories under study focus on characters that overall, are portraits of evil. In "Simbi Nyaima" the protagonist is an old, ugly, smelly and dirty woman who destroys an entire village and creates a lake, "Lake Simbi", in its place. In other variants of the story, she is for the emergence of the statue of *Nyamgondho woud Obare*. This is as a consequence of Nyamgondho's harshness/callousness to her. The Old Woman's provident spirit

notwithstanding, she is remembered for the atrocities she leaves in her wake. In the story "Simbi", the hunchback is isolated and despised. It is instructive to note that both the repulsive old hug in "Simbi Nyaima" and Nasikufu in "Simbi" are denied a place in social gatherings save for their ingenuity and the hand of mysterious forces later in the narratives.

Theoretical Reflections

Theoretical discussions on disability in literature are primarily concerned with key questions of the historical and cultural context of disability. The meaning, nature and consequences of disability occupy a dominant stage in these discussions. Critical Disability Theory (CDT) provides an overarching framework under which a broad spectrum of issues is discussed. The central tenet of CDT is the view that "disability is not fundamentally a question of medicine or health: nor is it just an issue of sensitivity or compassion: rather it is a question of politics and power(lessness), power over and power to (Delvin, Pothier 2006:2). The theory assumes that language is inherently political and has far reaching ideological implications. It is in this regard that one can look at oral narratives with a view to discovering the attitudes to disability that are embedded therein and the mechanisms underpinning their entrenchment.

Geethu (2021) identifies four major approaches to the study of disability in literature: identification of narratives of disability, analysis of representations of disability, challenge of researches on disability and writing or re-writing histories of disability. Each of these methodologies opens vistas to great research work on diverse aspects of disability.

Mitchell and Snyder (2001) provide one of the most insightful reflections on studying disability in literature. They conceive of disability as a "narrative device" that gives fiction energy and reaffirms the normalcy of the work. They outline a chain of events that attend such a narrative: disability calls for explanation; offers an account for the causes and consequences for the disability; brings disability from the margins and centralizes it; rehabilitates or eliminates the deviances, restoring "a sense of order".

Borrowing from the insights highlighted above, this study seeks to address two primary questions: First, how is disability defined and given meaning in oral narratives? and two, how do oral narratives raise awareness, spark debate, shape perceptions of the lives of the disabled people?

Transposing Deformity/Disability

The narratives under study point to the important role played by the images we create and the stories we tell versus our sense of identity and self-worth. They indeed underscore the power of images and how names craft identities. It is observed quite clearly that Nasikufu, for instance unlike her beautiful sister, Simbi, has no proper name. She is known, marked and defined by her physical nature and its accompanying shortcomings. She is “Nasikufu” meaning hunchback. Just as deformity is a marked deviation from the standard, Nasikufu is excluded from normal societal engagements. Her identity is not only distorted but also utterly disfigured. Equally true, the Old Woman in “Simbi Nyaima” is displaced in the story. The story, for example, can singularly be considered as an etiological tale explaining the origin of Lake Simbi. These two narratives demonstrate how language/naming demarcate and enforce borders/peripheries in society. Social interactions and biological realities are firmly practiced in line with the voiced boundaries. Their deformed/deficient physical traits are equated to and imply underlying personal deficiencies or hidden evil natures. And this is the source of the aura of gear that is attached to them. It is worthwhile to note here that disability is located in the *observer* rather than the *observed*.

At the onset of the narratives both Nasikufu and the Old Woman are estranged, unwanted, detested and even feared. This is directly related to the limitations inherent in their natures. It is also a fact indicative of the dysmorphobia their entire societies suffer. We see how the deep fear of being or appearing physically deviant affects the normal people even more. As a result of its morbid fear, the society would rather repel or confine the deformed.

Mitchel and Snyder (2001) correctly observe that disability has a disruptive potentiality that allows for analytical insight and that the disabled are dynamic entities that resist or refuse the cultural scripts assigned to them. Oral narratives involving deformed and challenged characters do indeed demonstrate this fact. By distancing the disabled, society inadvertently places them at a vantage point from which the very society and the disabled, can be viewed and assessed in novel ways.

In “Simbi Nyaima” and “Simbi”, the deformed characters challenge the social frames of status. In very iconoclastic ways they transgress and subvert cultural barriers that condemn them to the periphery. Nasikufu for instance suffers tripple tragedy; she is deformed, she’s a woman and she’s distanced from her family. She typifies the connection of disability and gender in that she is even perceived as ill-equipped for gendered roles usually reserved for individuals of her gender. While her sister Simbi works in the farm, she is

locked in the house. When the bridal party escorts Simbi to her groom, she is not allowed and only goes under disguise. Similarly, the Old Woman's ugliness and stench serve as forms of deformity eliciting exclusion. She is ugly, smelly and unwanted but she effectively enacts the motif of the old repulsive hug that emits both fortune and destruction. We notice here the clear demonstration that oppression against the disabled by the non-disabled is manifested through restricted access to social activities and services. The restricted access to social institutions is more symbolic than literal. Social institutions such as home and marriage are the source of society and denial to access them is equivalent to symbolic death.

Oral narratives on deformity engage irony to demonstrate the analytical insight at the core of the transformation and transposition in the stories. In both texts it is ironical that objects of hate turn out to be the abode of inexhaustible good. Nasikufu is the embodiment of evil and is despised: "You little thing, we don't know what is wrong with you...." (Nandwa, p.59), are the words of her own parents each time she speaks.

Nasikufu not only outwits the supernatural ogres but ultimately saves her sister and the entire community from the revenge of the ogres.

There is further irony in the duplicity of the nature of the Old Woman in "Simbi Nyaima". To those who offend her; she exposes them to heinous repercussions. They are drowned, lose property or are turned into statues like Nyamgondho Woud Obare. To those who do her bidding and show respect in return; she is exceptionally magnanimous.

I suggest that the pairing of good/evil and having them conjoined in a character helps us to unravel the contours of society at large. It makes it plain that humans by nature (and the deformed are no exception) are unpredictable and are defined by an underlying duality. Through fantasy for instance, the Old Woman is morphed into a beautiful lady and wins Nyamgondho's love. Visibly here hence is the point that in narratives fantasy and change of forms and fortune can serve as vehicles through which the handicaps erected by society are broken. This is as if to argue that the limitations are constructs that can only be dismantled by superior constructs. And since in the public memory the deformed are vile, extra human intervention redeems them. This position is made clearer in the "Simbi and Nasikufu" story: Nasikufu must triumph over the ogres and be celebrated in song, dance and symbol:

"I am Nasikufu the thorny tree,

I am Nasikufu the thorny tree . . ." (Nandwa, p.62).

The song not only marks her victory over the ogres but is also a poignant reaffirmation of her humanity.

The two narratives expose interesting patterns of transposition that work subtly to re-centre the disabled characters that had been cast to the periphery and oblivion through the urgency of voiced attitudes and actions. Below are some sets of the transpositions applicable to both Nasikufu and the Old Woman in the course of the narrative and the lives of the disabled/deformed characters:

BEFORE	AFTER
Confined	Free
Invisible	Visible
Unwanted	Wanted
Despised	Appreciated
Silenced	Voiced

Conclusion

Interacting with oral narratives on people with disabilities reveals that cultural attitudes of disability are encoded as stories, images or words in popular culture. In this form, not only are they preserved but are smoothly conveyed, both in time and space, to other spheres. As Dolby (2006) rightly notes, “popular culture is a site of struggle, a place for the negation of race, gender, nation and other identities and for the play of power (p.13). Oral narratives as part of popular culture speak to the need for studies that demonstrate the ability of oral art to carry out debates and analysis on the internal processes of socialization and intrinsic communication.

The stories of Simbi and Nasikufu can be read as narratives about centering disability identities and spaces. Unlike in other texts where the disabled are stereotypically used as “emblems of evil”, the protagonists in these narratives distort the oral narrative /society and reverse traditional hierarchies. (Kshikar 2017:18). The villains, now protagonists, have ironically been engraved into the oral memory of the very society that sought to keep them far away from the “centre”

Oral narratives dealing with deformity experiences always invite us to share and evaluate what Linda (1990) calls “other solitudes”. These are identities that have been cast in narratives as either subordinate or dependent or unwanted. In essence the sharing is twofold: First as a lived experience and two, as a literary expression of that experience. But those solitudes are at all times yearning to transpose the forces that hold them down.

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