

Embracing Disability: A Study with Reference to Barbara Kingsolver's *The Poisonwood Bible*

DR. NANTHINII M.*

Assistant Professor, Department of English and Foreign Languages
Karpagam Academy of Higher Education (Deemed-to-be-University)

Coimbatore – 641 021. Tamil Nadu. India.

Email: nanthinii1548@gmail.com

Abstract

The primary objective of the paper is to theorize the various facets of disability presented in Barbara Kingsolver's *The Poisonwood Bible*. Disability in the novel is both visible and symbolically presented by the author. While the novel is an ambitious critique of the turmoil undergone by the Kilangans under the colonizers, the author approaches the disabled section in the novel in a different light. Kingsolver through her characters legitimize disability and treats disability as a unique characteristic feature of an individual. Besides, it is a form of 'acceptance' and 'resistance.' The Kilangans in the novel accept their disability as part of their everyday life. Similarly, they also equally accept the Congo's harsh environmental conditions, the apparent cause of their physical deformity and the brutality of the colonizers that keep them impoverished. Moreover, it is also to be noted that the acceptance of the latter is only but pretence, a mode of resistance. On the other hand, Kingsolver presents a non-native character Adah Price to elaborate as to how one can seek personal growth by embracing disability. The paper condenses the study as how the characters in the novel accept, resist and grow beyond the confines of physical and mental disability and conclude that disability is 'not a disgrace,' but a 'byproduct of living.'

Keywords: disability; acceptance; resistance; personal growth

I. Introduction

Disability studies is an emerging field that by and large incorporate ideas from several theories like feminism, postcolonialism, sociology, women and gender studies, and queer theories. One of the various dimensions of disability studies emphasizes that disability is a social construct, and disability is mostly demarcated within an even broader social context. To substantiate, “disability studies regard impairment as being a relevant starting point for the analysis of disabling social relations” and “it offers a distinct critical perspective on the mechanisms society has used to exclude disabled people” (Cameron and Moore). Hence, like the crucial bodily conditions and physical factors, disability is also influenced by social factors. Over the centuries, innumerable terminologies define what disability is such as ‘incapacity,’ ‘monstrosity,’ ‘deformity,’ ‘cripple,’ ‘invalid,’ and ‘abnormality’ among which the present paper specifically employs Lennard-Davis’ 1995 conception that disability is but a “by-product of the concept of normalcy” with reference to Barbara Kingsolver’s *The Poisonwood Bible* (Adams et al. 5-6).

II. Embracing Disability

Disability in *The Poisonwood Bible* is both visible and symbolically presented by the author. While the novel is an ambitious critique of the turmoil undergone by the Congolese under the brutal clutches of the colonizers, the author approaches the disabled section in the novel in a different light. The primary objective of the present paper is to throw light on the characters in the novel that accept, resist and grow beyond the confines of the various facets of disability. The paper also intends to present as to how Kingsolver legitimatizes disability and treats disability as a unique characteristic feature of an individual. The paper also highlights how disability becomes a form of ‘acceptance’ and ‘resistance’ in the novel. The Kilangans presented in the novel accept disability as part of their everyday life. Besides, they equally accept the Congo’s harsh environmental conditions, the apparent cause of their physical deformity and the rough treatment of the colonizers that kept them impoverished for ages. Their acceptance, as such, turns out to be an act of resistance because the so-called submissiveness is only but pretence as explained by Leah Price in closing pages of the novel. In addition, Kingsolver also presents a non-native

character, Adah Price, to elaborate on how one can seek personal growth by embracing disability.

While the idea of disability has been conveniently employed by the author to highlight or under a specific section, Kingsolver also professes a plethora of meaning to disability in the novel. It is through her intricately drawn characters Adah, Nathan, Methuselah, Orleanna, and the Kilangans, the author voices for the disabled. Furthermore, instead of fractionating the disabled, the novel seeks an alternative angle to study the characters through which various themes like marginalization, racism, alienation, oppression, patriarchal attitude, resource abuse, Otherness, and imperialism are also explored. Moreover, the entire village comes around with some form of physical deformity or the other. For instance, Kingsolver pays closer attention to the abandoned parrot, Methuselah, whose wings that symbolize freedom, is not of “any count” (*PB* 133) and ends its life with “no words at all” (*PB* 212). Having forgotten to fly, Methuselah even after being set free depends upon the Price family for food and takes refuge in their bathroom scared of predators thus choosing to remain voluntarily disabled.

On the other hand, Methuselah holds a direct bearing to Patrice Lumumba, the newly elected Prime Minister of the Republic of Congo, and the Congo itself with reference to the momentary liberation. If the former fall prey at the hands of a predator, the latter falls under the conspiracy of its colonizers. Furthermore, the characters Adah and Orleanna symbolically share the same characteristic features as Methuselah. Adah, as a hemiplegic, identifies herself in a similar state as Methuselah and calls the bird a “cripple: the wreck of Wild Africa” (*PB* 157) much like her. Likewise, Orleanna, the mother of Adah, who suffers a failed marriage with Nathan, like Methuselah, ends up in a caged domestic life. Even when the chances of freedom are viable she does not have the courage to choose it. Ruth May, the last of the siblings, rightly describes her mother’s disabled condition as “something” that is “even worse hurt than what Adah’s got” (*PB* 268). As the novel progresses, both Orleanna and Adah exacerbate their disabling condition. If Orleanna believes that, like Methuselah, she has “no wings” to spare (*PB* 228), Adah, delves in “a great lifelong falsehood” (*PB* 496). Likewise, Nathan “represents the crippling of his soul as well as his body.... [And] remains culturally and spiritually sightless” (White 133).

Nathan, the abusive minister and one-eyed missionary, who after losing his vision in the left eye during World War II is both physically and symbolically blind. While his physical blindness fails him to treat his family and the natives with respect, his symbolical blindness fall short to notice the culture, spirituality, and environment of the Congo. Ironically, Nathan strongly believes that the people of Kilanga are deformed and “broken in body and soul” (PB 61). While it is the native’s repulsiveness towards Christianity, because it is a foreign religion, the impaired spiritual sight of Nathan compels him to view it as ignorance. Nathan enrages in a fit of fury that both their body and soul are put in danger and they “don’t even see how they could be healed” (PB 61). As Leah, rightly mentions Nathan’s use of the Congolese word ‘*bangala*’ to refer Jesus, which refers something valuable and the poisonwood tree, makes “even his good right eye swollen shut” (PB 47). Consequently, Nathan’s metaphorical blindness also becomes a reason for his lack of ability to amass religious awakening.

Moreover, the demonstration garden of Nathan, remains fruitless, stands barren and his foreign agricultural methods do not stand a chance in the ‘wild’ Congo. Nathan ventures innumerable ways to mend the land, but the land remains inept. While the land is fertile in its own way, it does not bend to Nathan’s arrogance. Instead, it shows resistance by not favouring Nathan’s foreign invasion. Like Nathan’s demonstration garden, the entire Congo seems to be a captive and victimized because of the colonizers. Even though the colonizers destroy the Congo’s abundant mineral resources, exploit and make it disable, it still accept the foreigners that invade it. As a result, even the shortly promised freedom let the country encumbered in the future with no possible hopes of recovery. Precisely, the native Anatole’s scarred face, for example, turns out to be a symbol of the painful remnants of colonial ransacking that pillaged Congolese’s language, culture, rights, resources, wealth, and education. Besides, Anatole, the only educated adult in Kilanga, chooses to remain submissive in the novel. But it is to be noted, that his acceptance is a way of resisting the patriarchal power which is later evidently seen through his support for Lumumba, active involvement in politics, standing against Mobutu’s dictatorship and his strong belief in providing education to his people.

Likewise, Mama Mwanza, who walks with her hands having lost her legs to a fire accident, furtively leaves food to the Prices when the latter run short of ration. Mama Mwanza whose valuable lesson of kindness and the importance of sharing is not something that Nathan

cannot entertain for he neither loves his family nor respect the villagers. Ruth May, comments upon Mama Mwanza, who is also a representational figure that exposes the mentality of the Kilangans, in the following lines:

She [Mama Mwanza] goes right on tending after her husband and seven or eight children. They don't care one bit about her not having any legs to speak of. To them she's just their mama and where's dinner? To all the other Congo people, too. Why, they just don't let on, like she was a regular person. Nobody bats their eye when she scoots by on her hands and goes on down to her field or the river to wash clothes with the other ladies. (*PB* 60)

The other characters that juxtapose Nathan's blindness are Mama Tataba, a neighbour, and Tata Kuvudundu, the witch-doctor. Mama Tataba whose eye that looks like "an egg whose yolk has been broken and stirred just once" (*PB* 46), unlike Nathan, has the ability to predict heavy downpours and identify the life-threatening poisonwood tree. Tata Kuvudundu, on the other hand, who has an extra toe in his feet, offers both spiritual and moral guidance to the Kilangans. Therefore, Nathan is not only impaired physically but also psychologically, culturally, spiritually, and ecologically. Apart from Nathan, it is Adah whose disability is to be noted in terms of bodily deformity.

Adah, the hemiplegic, is the only character that arrives at the Belgian Congo and finds out that her physical dysfunction is nothing but something the people in Kilanga embrace in every walk of life. Breyan Strickler rightly points out that, in such a way, Adah emerges as the "poster child for disability studies" (109). Adah, one of the twin sisters, who was born with a 'fetal mishap' feels that she has been incurred injustice by her sister Leah, Adah's twin, whilst she was in her mother's womb. Just like the villagers who seem to be not affected by any foreign culture and remain 'normal,' Adah chooses to remain silent and considers it advantageous even though she is affluent with words. Likewise, it is her disability that lets Adah detach herself from her 'perfect' sister Leah as well as the rest of the family members. Even though she is seen different in Georgia, Adah turns out to be the only one to escape the awkward gazes by the natives because "nobody cares that she's bad on one whole side because they've all got their own handicap children or a mama with no feet, or their eye put out" (*PB* 61). Adah, remarks that in

America she was seen only as a “failed combination of too-weak body and overstrong will,” whereas in the Congo “those things perfectly united: *Adah*” (PB 390).

Of all the characters, *Adah* shares disability as the most crucial part of her identity. It can be seen when she questions herself that “will I lose myself entirely if I lose my limp?” (PB 499) and also when she mentions how she yearns to read poems backwards. Similarly, *Adah* also longs to get back to her state of being ‘cripple’ when she willingly limps in her apartment so as to bring back the old ways of life and her old self. *Adah* also mentions how she tries, again and again, to read backwards or form anagrams and palindromes in regular words. Through *Adah*, it is uncovered that disability is often conceptualized by physical deformity while mental dysfunction is hardly noted as a disability. Hence the definition of disability depends entirely upon the perception of the person who defines it. After learning that her limping is more of a “great falsehood” of her life, she says that, “I was unprepared to accept that my whole sense of *Adah* was founded on a misunderstanding between my body and my brain” (PB 496). At the same time, *Adah* embraces her previous state and holds it like a traumatic memory. For the same reason, she refuses marriage proposals from suitors and thinks that it is a betrayal to the former *Adah* because the men only fancied her perfected body. Moreover, her insecurity that people will always choose the ‘perfect’ Leah or the ‘darling’ Ruth May like her mother Orleanna, she dissects her identity into two. Even though *Adah* becomes ‘straight’ and perfectly cured she still prefers to identify herself as “a crooked little person trying to tell the truth” (PB 562) by which she ambivalently romanticize her disability and remains a paradox thus accepting and resisting disability at the same time.

III. Conclusion

To sum up, Kingsolver’s characters rightly demonstrate that on the surface level disability surrounds physical deformity but it is more of “a process of thinking about bodies and minds rather than as something that is wrong with bodies and minds” (Strickler 111). Kingsolver’s characters are “neither stigmatized nor marginalized by disability” (White 131) because of which she is able to pose such constructionist ideology that shatters the culturally stereotyped notions of disability. Such Kingsolverian attitude towards disability is once again seen in Ruth May’s observation that “when you take a look out the door why, there goes

somebody with something missing off of them and not even embarrassed of it. They'll wave a stump at you if they've got one, in a friendly way" (PB 61). Kingsolver thus uses disability for a variety of reasons. Moreover, she tries to project the perfected version of Africa, through the physically Othered section. The author also reasons that the use of disability is an act of resistance against the innumerable social evils casted upon the Congo and its people by the colonizers. The study thus casts light on the disabled characters in the novel that accept, resist and grow beyond the confines of physical and mental boundaries and concludes that disability is "not a disgrace," but a "byproduct of living" (PB 84).

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