

Gender and Disability in English Writing: A Psychological Study of Intersections

Goswami, Anita

Assistant Professor, Department of English, Allied Sciences and Humanities, COER University
Roorkee, Uttarakhand

Abstract

This research paper examines the intersection of gender and disability in literature, exploring how these identities are represented and how they intersect to shape characters' experiences. Through an interdisciplinary lens, the study analyses various literary works to highlight the complexities of gender and disability, their social implications, and the broader cultural narratives they reflect and challenge. This research paper explores the intersection of gender and disability in the works of English writers. It examines how disabled characters, particularly women, are portrayed and how these portrayals reflect and challenge societal norms. The study focuses on selected works by English writers to highlight the complexities of gender and disability and their broader cultural implications.

Keywords: Discrimination, Intersectionality, Marginalized, Empathy, Normalcy

Introduction

The intersection of gender and disability in literature provides a rich field for examining how societal norms and values are constructed, reinforced, and contested. This paper explores how gender and disability intersect in literary works, shaping characters' identities, narratives, and the perceptions of readers. By analyzing a selection of literary texts. This

study aims to understand how these intersecting identities influence the portrayal of characters and the themes of the works. The intersection of gender and disability in literature provides valuable insights into societal attitudes and cultural norms. This paper examines how English writers depict disabled characters, analyzing the themes, narrative strategies, and social contexts that

shape these portrayals. By exploring a range of literary works, the study aims to understand how gender and disability intersect in literature and what this reveals about societal views on both identities. Intersectionality is a concept used to describe the interconnected nature of social categorizations such as race, class, and gender, which can create overlapping and interdependent systems of discrimination or disadvantage. This framework recognizes that individuals experience multiple, layered identities and that these identities interact in complex ways that can exacerbate social inequality. The term "intersectionality" was coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw, a legal scholar and civil rights advocate, in 1989. Crenshaw introduced the concept in her paper "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics." She used the term to explain how black women face unique challenges that are not adequately addressed by single-axis frameworks that separate issues of race and gender.

Theoretical Framework The study employs an interdisciplinary approach, drawing on feminist disability theory, intersectionality, and literary analysis. Feminist disability theory

challenges traditional notions of normalcy and ability, emphasizing the social construction of disability and its intersection with gender. Intersectionality, a concept developed by Kimberlé Crenshaw, highlights the interconnected nature of social categorizations such as race, class, gender, and disability, which create overlapping systems of discrimination and disadvantage. The intersection of disability and gender is an important aspect of intersectionality. It recognizes that people who experience both disability and gender-based discrimination face unique challenges and forms of oppression that are not fully understood when these identities are considered separately. Here are some key points to consider:

1. **Social Stigmas:** Individuals who are both disabled and gender minorities (such as women or non-binary people) may face compounded social stigmas. For instance, disabled women might be seen as less capable or less feminine due to societal expectations and stereotypes about both disability and gender.
2. **Access to Services:** Gender and disability can impact access to healthcare, education, and employment. For example, women with disabilities might have less access

to reproductive health services or may be overlooked for job opportunities due to biases against both women and disabled individuals.

3. **Violence and Abuse:** Disabled women and gender minorities are at a higher risk of experiencing violence and abuse. They may be more vulnerable to domestic violence and sexual abuse, and they may face additional barriers when seeking help or justice.

4. **Representation:** The voices and experiences of disabled women and gender minorities are often underrepresented in both disability advocacy and feminist movements. This can lead to their specific needs and issues being overlooked in policy-making and social programs.

5. **Economic Inequality:** Disabled women are more likely to experience poverty due to the combined effects of gender pay gaps and the economic disadvantages associated with disability, such as higher medical costs and lower employment rates.

Understanding the intersection of disability and gender helps in creating more inclusive and effective policies and practices that address the needs of individuals who belong to multiple marginalized groups. It also promotes a more comprehensive approach to social justice and equality.

Literature Review

1. **Historical Context:** The historical portrayal of gender and disability in literature often reflects societal attitudes and prejudices. Historically, disabled characters, especially women, have been depicted as pitiable, dependent, or evil, reinforcing stereotypes and social hierarchies.

2. **Modern Perspectives:** Contemporary literature increasingly challenges these stereotypes, presenting more nuanced and empowering representations of disabled individuals. Works by disabled authors and those incorporating feminist perspectives provide critical insights into the lived experiences of disabled individuals, particularly women.

Modern Perspectives

Contemporary literature increasingly challenges these stereotypes, presenting more nuanced and empowering representations of disabled individuals. Works by and about disabled individuals offer critical insights into their lived experiences, advocating for greater empathy and social justice.

Analysis of Literary Works

1 Helen Keller's Autobiographical Works

Helen Keller's writings, including "The Story of My Life" and "The World I Live In," offer a powerful narrative of a disabled woman's experience. Keller challenges the societal expectations of women and the disabled by showcasing her intellectual achievements and activism.

Her works emphasize the importance of education and self-advocacy, portraying disability not as a limitation but as a unique perspective. Helen Keller (1880-1968) lost her sight and hearing at 19 months old due to an illness, likely scarlet fever or meningitis. Despite these profound disabilities, Keller became an accomplished author, political activist, and lecturer.

Her breakthrough came with the help of her teacher, Anne Sullivan, who taught her to communicate through sign language and Braille. Keller's education at the Perkins Institute for the Blind and later Radcliffe College equipped her with the skills to articulate her thoughts and experiences.

Literary Contributions

Keller's most famous work, "The Story of My Life" (1903), is an autobiographical account of her early years and her triumph over adversity. The book is not just a narrative of her experiences but also a reflection on broader

themes of resilience, education, and the human spirit. Keller's writing is characterized by its vivid descriptions and emotional depth, offering readers a unique perspective on the world from the viewpoint of someone who could neither see nor hear.

In addition to her autobiography, Keller authored several other works, including "Optimism" (1903), "The World I Live In" (1908), and "Out of the Dark" (1913). These writings delve into her philosophical views and advocacy for social justice, further showcasing her intellectual depth and commitment to improving society.

Impact and Reception

Keller's works were groundbreaking in their portrayal of disability. They challenged societal perceptions and highlighted the potential of disabled individuals to lead fulfilling and impactful lives.

Her writings continue to inspire readers and advocate for the rights of disabled people globally. Keller's achievements in literature and activism have left a lasting legacy, underscoring the importance of accessibility and inclusion in all spheres of life

2 John Milton: Visionary Beyond Sight

Early Life and Career

John Milton (1608-1674) was an English poet, polemicist, and civil servant for the Commonwealth of England. Milton's early career was marked by his work in poetry and political prose. He is best known for his epic poem "Paradise Lost" (1667), a work that delves into themes of rebellion, redemption, and human frailty.

Milton's life took a dramatic turn when he became completely blind in 1652. This loss of sight occurred during his most productive years and was a significant challenge for a man whose life was deeply intertwined with reading and writing.

Literary Contributions Post-Blindness

Milton's blindness had a profound impact on his literary output, yet it did not hinder his creativity. In fact, some of his greatest works were composed after he lost his sight. "Paradise Lost," written in blank verse, is a testament to his imaginative power and his ability to overcome personal adversity. The poem, which explores the biblical story of the Fall of Man, is notable for its complex portrayal of Satan, its theological depth, and its reflection on free will and obedience.

In his later works, such as "Paradise Regained" (1671) and "Samson Agonistes" (1671), Milton continued to explore themes of faith,

perseverance, and divine providence. "Samson Agonistes," in particular, is often interpreted as an allegory for Milton's own struggles, drawing parallels between the blind Samson and Milton's own experiences.

Impact and Reception

Milton's work has had a lasting impact on English literature and has influenced countless writers and thinkers. His ability to produce such profound and enduring works despite his blindness is a testament to his resilience and genius. Milton's legacy is a powerful reminder of the potential for artistic and intellectual achievement regardless of physical limitations. Lord Byron, one of the most influential figures of the Romantic movement, was born with a congenital foot deformity, often referred to as a clubfoot. This condition affected the structure of his foot and his gait, causing him to walk with a noticeable limp. Despite his disability, Byron's physical condition did not hinder his vibrant personality, adventurous lifestyle, or prolific writing career.

Impact on His Life and Work

1. Personal Challenges:

Byron's disability was a source of personal torment and self-consciousness throughout his

life. He often felt that his deformity made him a subject of mockery and pity.

His clubfoot influenced his perception of himself and his interactions with others, contributing to the development of his complex and often contradictory personality.

2. **Themes in His Poetry:**

Byron's sense of being an outsider or different from others is a recurring theme in his works. This is evident in characters like Childe Harold and Don Juan, who often reflect Byron's own feelings of isolation and difference.

His exploration of the human condition, personal suffering, and the quest for freedom and acceptance can be partially attributed to his experiences with his disability.

3. **Romantic Hero:**

Byron's disability arguably contributed to the creation of the "Byronic hero," a literary archetype characterized by a brooding, passionate, and rebellious nature, often with a dark past or inner struggle. This persona resonated deeply with readers and became a defining characteristic of the Romantic era.

4. **Physical and Emotional Resilience:**

Despite his physical limitations, Byron was known for his adventurous spirit and physical exploits. He was an avid swimmer, and his famous swim across the Hellespont (the

Dardanelles) in 1810 demonstrated his determination to overcome physical challenges. Byron's resilience and determination to defy the limitations imposed by his disability are evident in both his life and his poetry.

5. **Legacy:**

Byron's work continues to be celebrated for its emotional depth, lyrical beauty, and exploration of the human condition.

His ability to channel his personal struggles and experiences into his poetry has left a lasting impact on literature and continues to inspire readers and writers alike.

Lord Byron's life and work illustrate how he transformed personal adversity into a source of artistic inspiration, creating poetry that speaks to the complexities of the human experience.

3. **Fyodor Dostoevsky: Exploring the Human Psyche Through Epilepsy**

Early Life and Struggles

Fyodor Dostoevsky (1821-1881) is best known for his complex characters and exploration of psychological and existential themes. Diagnosed with epilepsy in his twenties, Dostoevsky's experiences with the condition profoundly influenced his writing. His early life was marked by financial difficulties, the death of his parents, and his own health

struggles, all of which shaped his worldview and literary themes.

Literary Contributions

Dostoevsky's novels, such as "Crime and Punishment" (1866), "The Idiot" (1869), and "The Brothers Karamazov" (1880), delve deeply into the human psyche. His portrayal of characters with epilepsy, most notably Prince Myshkin in "The Idiot," reflects his intimate understanding of the condition. Dostoevsky used his own experiences to create characters who grappled with issues of morality, faith, and human suffering. "Crime and Punishment" explores themes of guilt, redemption, and the moral consequences of crime, while "The Brothers Karamazov" tackles questions of faith, free will, and the existence of God. Dostoevsky's ability to weave his personal experiences into his narratives gave his works a profound depth and authenticity.

Impact and Reception Dostoevsky's exploration of epilepsy and its effects on the human mind brought attention to the condition and contributed to a greater understanding of it. His works have been praised for their psychological depth and remain influential in both literature and psychology. Dostoevsky's ability to transform his personal struggles into

universal themes has secured his place as one of the greatest novelists of all time.

Comparative Analysis

Helen Keller, John Milton, and Fyodor Dostoevsky each brought their unique experiences with disability into their literary works, offering diverse perspectives on the human condition. Keller's writings focused on overcoming physical limitations and advocating for social change, Milton's poetry delved into spiritual and existential themes, and Dostoevsky's novels explored the psychological and moral complexities of life. While Keller and Milton faced physical disabilities, Dostoevsky's challenge was neurological. However, all three writers demonstrated remarkable resilience and creativity, using their personal experiences to enrich their literary contributions. Their works not only provide profound insights into their respective conditions but also challenge readers to reconsider their views on disability.

4. Toni Morrison's "Sula"

In "Sula," Toni Morrison presents a complex intersection of race, gender, and disability. The character of Eva Peace, who amputates her own leg, embodies resilience and strength in the face of societal and physical challenges. Morrison's portrayal of Eva subverts

traditional notions of disability, depicting her as a powerful matriarch who defies expectations and norms.

5. Ruth Ozeki's "A Tale for the Time Being"

Ruth Ozeki's novel explores the intersection of gender, disability, and mental health through the character of Nao. Nao's struggles with depression and suicidal thoughts highlight the often-overlooked aspect of invisible disabilities. Ozeki's narrative delves into the complexities of living with mental illness, emphasizing the need for empathy and understanding.

6. Jane Eyre by Charlotte Brontë

In *Jane Eyre*, Charlotte Brontë introduces the character of Bertha Mason, Mr. Rochester's first wife, who is depicted as violently insane and kept in the attic. Bertha's disability (mental illness) and her confinement serve as a stark contrast to Jane's character. While Bertha's portrayal has been criticized for reinforcing negative stereotypes about disability and mental illness, some interpretations suggest that Brontë uses Bertha's character to critique the oppressive conditions faced by women, particularly those who are marginalized due to their mental health.

7. Wide Sargasso Sea by Jean Rhys

Jean Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea* serves as a prequel to *Jane Eyre* and provides a backstory for Bertha Mason, whom Rhys renames Antoinette Cosway. Rhys's novel offers a more sympathetic and complex portrayal of Antoinette, exploring her descent into madness within the context of colonialism, racism, and patriarchal oppression. These reimagining challenges the simplistic and negative portrayal of disability in *Jane Eyre*, emphasizing the social and psychological factors contributing to Antoinette's condition.

8. To the Lighthouse by Virginia Woolf

Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse* features the character of Lily Briscoe, a female artist who struggles with societal expectations and her own sense of inadequacy. While Lily is not explicitly disabled, Woolf's depiction of her creative process and social marginalization resonates with themes of disability. Woolf, who experienced mental health issues herself, often explored the constraints placed on women by society, subtly linking gender and mental health in her narratives.

9. The Secret Garden by Frances Hodgson Burnett

The Secret Garden features the character of Colin Craven, a young boy who is believed to be disabled and bedridden. Mary Lennox, the

protagonist, helps Colin regain his strength and mobility, challenging the perception of him as permanently disabled. While the story can be seen as reinforcing the notion that disability can be "overcome" through willpower and care, it also highlights the importance of social and emotional support in the lives of disabled individuals.

10. The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time by Mark Haddon

While not written by a woman, Mark Haddon's *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time* features a female perspective through the character of Siobhan, the teacher who supports Christopher Boone, a boy with autism. Siobhan's role emphasizes the importance of understanding, patience, and support for disabled individuals, offering a compassionate portrayal of disability and its impact on both the individual and those around them

Themes and Discussions

Representation and Stereotypes

The analysis reveals that literature has the power to both reinforce and challenge stereotypes. Historical portrayals often depicted disabled characters as passive or dependent, while contemporary works increasingly challenge these portrayals,

offering more complex and empowered representations.

Intersectionality and Identity

The intersection of gender and disability creates unique experiences and challenges for characters. Understanding this intersectionality is crucial for recognizing the full scope of discrimination and prejudice faced by disabled individuals. Characters like Antoinette and Lily highlight the diverse ways in which gender and disability intersect, influencing their identities and narratives.

Empowerment and Agency

Empowerment and agency are recurring themes in the analyzed works. Disabled characters often navigate their identities by asserting their agency and challenging societal norms. This is evident in Antoinette's struggle against patriarchal oppression and Lily's pursuit of artistic expression despite societal constraints.

Conclusion

The intersection of gender and disability in literature reveals the complex and multifaceted nature of identity. Through an interdisciplinary analysis of literary works, this paper highlights how these intersecting identities shape characters' experiences and challenge societal

norms. Literature serves as a powerful tool for understanding and advocating for the rights and recognition of disabled individuals, particularly women, offering diverse and resilient voices that contribute to the literary landscape. This research paper provides an in-depth exploration of the intersection of gender and disability in the works of English writers. It underscores the importance of diverse and inclusive narratives in understanding the complexities of identity and society

References

1. Brontë, C. (1847). *Jane Eyre*. Smith, Elder, and Company.
2. Burnett, F. H. (1911). *The secret garden*. Frederick A. Stokes.
3. Crenshaw, K. (1989). Demarginalizing the intersection of race and sex: A black feminist critique of antidiscrimination doctrine, feminist theory, and antiracist politics. *University of Chicago Legal Forum*, 1989(1), 139–167.
4. Garland-Thomson, R. (1997). *Extraordinary bodies: Figuring physical disability in American culture and literature*. Columbia University Press.
5. Haddon, M. (2003). *The curious incident of the dog in the nighttime*. Jonathan Cape.
6. Keller, H. (1903). *The story of my life*. Doubleday Publishing, Page, & Co.
7. Keller, H. (1908). *The world I Live In*. Century
8. Madhu, M. (2023). Gender differentiation and women empowerment with reference to the plays of Mahesh Dattani. *Shodh Sari-An International Multidisciplinary Journal*, 02(04), 138–151. <https://doi.org/10.59231/sari7630>
9. Morrison, T. (1973). *Sula*. Alfred A. Knopf.
10. Ozeki, R. (2013). *A tale for the time being*. Viking Press.
11. Rhys, J. (1966). *Wide Sargasso Sea*. André Deutsch.
12. Kaur, M., & Sharma, J. (2023). The role of digital literacy to promote the gender equality. *Shodh Sari-An International Multidisciplinary Journal*, 02(04), 315–327. <https://doi.org/10.59231/sari7642>
13. Woolf, V. (1927). *To the lighthouse*. Hogarth Press.
14. Kumar, A. (2023). Promoting youth involvement in environmental sustainability for a sustainable Future. *Edumania-An International Multidisciplinary Journal*, 01(03), 261–278. <https://doi.org/10.59231/edumania/9012>

15. Kumar, M., & Seema, S. (2024). A STUDY RELATED TO EDUCATION SYSTEM IN INDIA WITH GOVERNMENT PROGRAMMES AND POLICIES. *Shodh Sari-An International Multidisciplinary Journal*, 03(02), 102–117. <https://doi.org/10.59231/sari7691>

Received on Aug 11, 2024
Accepted on Oct 17, 2024
Published on Jan 01, 2025

16. Bhagoji, M. D. (2024). Unveiling Hidden Traumas: Examining Freudian concepts in Mahesh Dattani's *Dance Like A Man*. *Edumania-An International Multidisciplinary Journal*, 02(02), 3–10. <https://doi.org/10.59231/edumania/9034>

Gender and Disability in English Writing: A Psychological Study of Intersections © 2025 by Anita Goswami is licensed under [CC BY-NC-ND 4.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/)