

ABLEISM EAST VS. WEST: ANALYZING COETZEE'S *SLOW MAN* AND T. V. PADMA'S *A TIME TO DANCE*

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Abstract

*Ableism, a pervasive form of discrimination against individuals with disabilities, is manifesting deeply and differently across cultures. This paper examines the depictions and implications of ableism in two culturally distinct novels: J. M. Coetzee's *Slow Man* from a Western context and T. V. Padma's *A Time to Dance* from an Eastern perspective. This research analyzes how these literary works portray disability within their respective cultural contexts, analyzing the subjective experiences of protagonists revealing the influences of the representations. By juxtaposing Eastern and Western literary traditions, the study highlights the importance of support systems agency and the need to challenge ableist structures. While exploring these narratives the article contributes to a deeper understanding of disabilities diverse reality realities and advocates for more inclusive and equitable literary representations. Drawing on phenomenological perspectives articulated by Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Tanya Titchkosky and Anita Ghai, this research underscores the nuanced ways in which disability and ableism operate in diverse cultural milieus. It emphasizes the significance of support systems and agency in challenging ableist narratives. Ultimately, this comparative analysis contributes to a deeper understanding of the multifaceted realities of disabilities and advocates for more inclusive and equitable literary representations.*

Keyword: *ableism; coetzee; disability; individualism; collectivism;*

Introduction

The portrayal of disability in literature has evolved significantly, mirroring wider society perspectives and cultural circumstances. Disability studies has become an important area of academic research, offering valuable methods to examine how literary works depict handicapped persons and either question or support narratives that discriminate against them based on ability. This study examines the connection between disability, identity, and societal attitudes in different cultural settings by analyzing two important works: J.M. Coetzee's *Slow Man* from a Western context and T.V. Padma's *A Time to Dance* from an Eastern viewpoint. These works provide valuable insights into the topic. Through the utilization of phenomenology as the methodology, we examine the subjective encounters of the main characters, uncovering

how cultural settings influence the portrayal and understanding of disability.

Phenomenology is a field of philosophy that probes into the structures of consciousness as they are subjectively perceived by individuals. Maurice Merleau-Ponty's focus on embodiment is very pertinent to disability studies since it enables an examination of how persons see their physical selves in a society that frequently marginalizes them. According to Merleau-Ponty, the body is the main locus of knowledge about the world. The objective is to depict the firsthand encounters of individuals, offering a comprehensive and personal narrative of the experience of living with a handicap. It also aids in understanding Intentionality, which pertains to the purposeful nature of awareness, indicating that our thoughts are consistently focused on something. Within the realm of disability, this can facilitate an examination of how

persons with disabilities strategically guide their ideas and behaviors in order to navigate a society that favors able-bodied individuals. Hence, this idea is crucial in the comprehension of the way individuals with impairments see their bodies and engage with their surroundings.

Ableism

Disability studies is an interdisciplinary field that explores the social, political, and cultural dimensions of disability. Key theorists in this field include Lennard J. Davis, who argues that disability is a social construct shaped by societal norms and attitudes (Davis, 1995). Another significant figure is Tom Shakespeare, who emphasizes the need for a social model of disability that recognizes the role of societal barriers in disabling individuals (Shakespeare, 2006). Ableism is the discrimination and social prejudice against people with disabilities, based on the belief that typical abilities are superior. This framework often results in systemic and structural discrimination, marginalizing disabled individuals. According to Fiona Kumari Campbell, "a network of beliefs, processes and practices that produces a particular kind of self and body (the corporeal standard) that is projected as the perfect, species-typical and therefore essential and fully human. Disability then is cast as a diminished state of being human" (2001), ableism is deeply entrenched in societal norms and practices, perpetuating the marginalization and devaluation of disabled people.

Modern discussions have widely recognized the concept of ableism, which refers to the act of discrimination and societal biases against individuals with impairments. Social systems and cultural standards frequently deeply root this type of prejudice, sustaining the belief that persons without disabilities are of higher status, thereby excluding and disadvantaging those with disabilities. Gaining comprehension of ableism is essential for cultivating a culture that is more inclusive and equal. This idea is complex, involving many attitudes, actions, and structural obstacles that impact the lives of those with disabilities. Western societies frequently analyze ableism by considering individual rights and social fairness. Lennard J. Davis asserts that the standard body organizes Western cultures, resulting in the marginalization of individuals who deviate from these standards

(Davis, 1995). Conversely, cultural, religious, and societal conventions that shape attitudes towards disability may influence Eastern viewpoints on ableism. Several Eastern cultures often interpret disability within the framework of karma, or spiritual destiny, which shapes the treatment and perception of individuals with impairments (Ghai, 2003). Multiple thinkers have examined and debated the subject of disability studies, for instance: "power is exercised rather than possessed; it is not the 'privilege', acquired or preserved, of the dominant class, but the overall effect of its strategic positions" (Foucault, 1979). His *Discipline & Punish*, on power and discourse provides insight into how ableism operates as a form of social control and normalization. He emphasizes the ways in which societal institutions enforce norms and marginalize those who deviate from them. Similarly, Garland-Thomson's concept of the "normate" illuminates how ableism operates by privileging certain bodies and experiences as "normal" while marginalizing others. According to her the normate is constructed as the standard by which all other bodies are judged, a tacitly assumed ideal that can be variously embodied, she also advocates for a critical examination of societal norms and the recognition of disability as a natural aspect of human diversity.

Ancient societies often linked physical and mental infirmities to divine retribution or moral inadequacy, giving rise to ableism. The medical paradigm of disability has reinforced ableist perspectives in contemporary times, primarily viewing disability as a challenge that requires resolution or healing. Disability activists and researchers introduced the notion of disability in the social model. In this model, the focus has shifted from individual impairments to societal establishments that pose significant obstacles to people with disabilities. Here, societal change should be sought in order to create space for various abilities, hence placing a lot of emphasis on access, inclusion, and equity. Tom Shakespeare, a renowned scholar in disability studies, asserts that comprehending disability via the social model is crucial for tackling the systemic character of ableism. Shakespeare (2006) emphasizes that the social model elucidates the role of societal attitudes and inaccessible surroundings in perpetuating handicapped people's isolation and marginalization.

Literature has had a substantial impact on both mirroring and questioning societal perspectives about disability. Authors and characters with disabilities have distinct viewpoints that can either reinforce or challenge narratives that discriminate against people with disabilities. Gaining a comprehensive understanding of ableism is crucial in order to effectively tackle the institutional and cultural obstacles that sustain discrimination against individuals with disabilities. Through analyzing the different forms of ableism and its effects on individuals and society, we may strive to establish a more inclusive and fairer world. Literature, by amplifying the perspectives of disabled writers and characters, serves as a vital tool in questioning and countering ableist myths while also fostering a more profound comprehension of disability. Its discrimination and societal bias against those with impairments and prevalent in communities throughout the world, but its manifestations vary across different cultural settings. Understanding these discrepancies is crucial for a thorough examination of how various contexts understand, show, and encounter disability. In Western countries, ableism frequently centers around the values of self-sufficiency, efficiency, and conventional physical norms. Medical theories of disability, which emphasize individual deficits, support this. In contrast, several Eastern cultures prioritize community and communal well-being, which greatly impacts the integration of disability into society and familial frameworks.

Analysis

J.M. Coetzee's *Slow Man* centers on Paul Rayment, an elderly man who loses his leg in a cycling accident and struggles to come to terms with his new identity as a disabled person. The novel provides a profound exploration of ableism, both internalized and external, as Paul navigates his altered life. The novel takes us through his challenges with disability, identity, and social isolation. Paul's encounter in *Slow Man* underlines the ubiquitous nature of ableism. Since the accident, Paul has had difficulties understanding himself as a disabled person, amidst both internalized ableism and societal prejudices. Coetzee writes, "*panic sweeps over him*" (Coetzee, 03). Paul's experience of his body post-accident is fraught with a sense of loss and alienation. His

prosthetic leg becomes a symbol of his disconnection from his former self. Merleau-Ponty's notion of embodiment is evident in Paul's struggle to integrate his prosthetic limb into his sense of self. He describes his prosthesis as "*monstrous object*" (Coetzee, 09), highlighting the dissonance between his body image and his physical reality (Coetzee, 45). Paul's reflection on his condition reveals the depth of his internalized ableism: "*losing a leg is no more than a rehearsal of losing everything*" (Coetzee, 15). In this quote, it is clear that disabilities are associated with negative perception and shame, and so is Paul, which makes his need for self-respect more demanding to attain. This internal conflict is what Campbell calls the internalization of ableist standards, where one becomes self-stigmatized and hence lowers his self-image (Campbell, 2009).

Paul often encounters more cultural barriers than his physical condition. The social model of disability refers to Shakespeare's (2006) idea that society ultimately bears responsibility for the existence of disabled individuals. His life demonstrates both the presence of physical barriers such as a building's structure and the absence of companions, underscoring how societies promote his disability. His journey also involves challenging and opposing ableist attitudes. He endeavors to establish his individuality and autonomy in spite of cultural norms. His encounters with Marijana, his caretaker, and her family demonstrate his resistance as he strives to form significant connections and clarify his identity. Paul's reluctance to accept help and his embarrassment about relying on others clearly demonstrate his internalized ableism. He senses an immense loss, not just of a limb but also of independence and dignity. This struggle within himself is a positive example of how society devalues people with disabilities, according to Hehir (2002). Consequently, it scrutinizes the victimization associated with ability, concentrating on the psychological stressors and environmental barriers that Paul encounters. Coetzee depicts Paul's progression through a society that frequently excludes and underestimates handicapped people, therefore offering a dramatic analysis of the widespread prevalence of ableism. Paul's encounters with others frequently demonstrate the cultural unease and patronizing

attitude towards his impairment. The user's internalized ableism is apparent in his desire to return to his pre-accident state and his difficulty in embracing his new identity. The tale challenges readers to examine their own prejudices and contemplate the necessary societal transformations to promote genuine inclusivity and respect for handicapped people.

Ableism is a wide-spread problem manifesting itself differently within various cultures and communities that involves systemic discrimination and social prejudice against people with disabilities. In the western context, Coetzee delves deeply into ableism, providing invaluable insight into what individuals suffering from any type of impairment go through on a societal level as well as on the psychosocial and existential planes. He often reflects on his past, yearning for the days when he was physically whole and self-reliant. This sense of nostalgia emphasizes the fundamental idea that his value and sense of self were inherently connected to his physical ability. The individual's hesitance to accept their new circumstances, together with their ongoing self-criticism, demonstrate the internalization of social biases towards handicaps. The work explores the concepts of reliance and self-governance, which are significant topics in the discussion of ableism.

Paul's reluctance to receive assistance, namely from his caregiver Marijana, emphasizes the negative perception attached to relying on others. His need for assistance in a society that values independence and self-sufficiency is a cause of embarrassment and irritation. The connection between him and Marijana is intricate, characterized by a blend of appreciation, bitterness, and an implicit power imbalance that highlights his susceptibility. Paul's interactions with Marijana illustrate the tension between his desire for autonomy and the reality of his dependency. He idealizes Marijana as a nurturing caregiver and imagines a romantic relationship with her, projecting onto her his desires for companionship and intimacy, *'Marijana watches...as he flexes, extends, and rotates the stump'* (Coetzee, 63). His amorous sentiments towards her, influenced by his need for both emotional and physical assistance, further complicate the complex nature of their relationship. The plot presents a critical analysis of the ableist belief that reliance on others reduces one's

humanity and dignity, urging readers to reassess the importance attributed to self-sufficiency. His relationships with others mirror the wider cultural attitudes about handicaps. The responses of those in his vicinity, who frequently regard him with sympathy or unease, intensify his feeling of seclusion. Davis argues that the normative body organizes Western societies, leading to the marginalization of those who do not conform to these standards (Davis, 1995). This argument aligns with the concept under discussion.

Coetzee also explores the portrayal of handicapped bodies in art and culture. Paul, a former photographer, struggles with the integration of his own disabled body into the visual stories he used to produce. This struggle symbolizes the wider cultural hesitancy to recognize and appreciate handicapped bodies. The novel offers a critical analysis of the omission of disability from popular depictions, pushing for a broader and more authentic portrayal of varied physical forms. Cultural ideals of beauty and normality significantly influence Paul's self-perception. The protagonist's unease with his prosthetic limb and the alterations to his physical appearance exemplify the psychological struggle between his altered circumstances and the cultural norm of physical ability. Coetzee investigates how Paul's creative background perpetuates ableist standards in visual culture, further marginalizing handicapped people. Titchkosky and Michalko's paradigm scrutinizes Paul's unique experience, emphasizing how societal norms and expectations mold his perception of his body. The individual's challenge to incorporate his artificial limb into his own identity mirrors society's expectations to adhere to standards of physical ability (Titchkosky and Michalko, 1970). Martiny's phenomenological model of disability facilitates understanding the impact of society's perceptions on Paul's own experience. The user's hesitance to receive assistance and their feelings of guilt about relying on others are examples of the internalized ableism that arises from society's devaluation of disability (Martiny, 2015).

Ableism's psychological impacts are the most important concern. Paul's journey through life raises profound existential questions about what matters in life and personal identity, particularly in situations where a

disability exists. He uncovers the serious psychological scars that arise from thinking about disability and the struggle to find purpose and self-esteem when tied solely to physicality. Paul's relationship with Elizabeth Costello, who acts as his confidante and intellectual mentor, bring these existential inquiries to the forefront. They discuss topics such as the essence of pain, the state of being human, and the social frameworks that influence our perception of impairment. Through Costello, Coetzee asks if it is possible to find anything valuable or rewarding about life on wheels. This disputes prejudice that regards disability as less satisfactory than normal life. This volume has looked into ableism in depth, bringing out useful viewpoints on how societal norms and mental aspects affect individuals living with disabilities. Paul illustrates the perception of societal perspectives on disability, highlighting the profound influence of ableist norms on an individual's identity, self-determination, and the assessment of self-worth or worthiness by others. This work invites us all to think critically about our own prejudices while imagining an alternative world that supports differences in bodies and points of view.

A Time to Dance tells the story of Veda, a young dancer who suffers the loss of her leg in an unfortunate incident, but perseveres in pursuing her ardor for dance. The work delves into the topics of fortitude, individuality, and society's perspectives on disabilities. The prevailing conventional ideas on disability in the cultural setting of India shape Veda's experience with disability. The protagonist's experience emphasizes the convergence of societal norms and discrimination against those with disabilities. Her unwavering will to dance in spite of her disabilities defies cultural assumptions and conventional conventions. This viewpoint aligns with Ghai's (2003) position on the cultural construction of disability in non-Western cultures, where disability often faces stigma and is associated with concepts of karma and fate. Veda's tale also exemplifies the social concept of disability. The challenges she faces are not just a result of her physical disability; they also stem from a lack of easily accessible facilities and attitudes that provide assistance. The endeavor to obtain recognition and prospects in a culture that frequently marginalizes those with disabilities

reflects Shakespeare's focus on social obstacles (Shakespeare, 2006). Her path is characterized by her ability to gain power and overcome challenges with determination. She adamantly rejects being characterized by her impairment and exerts a relentless effort to persist in her pursuit of dance. This resilience confronts and undermines ableist beliefs and emphasizes the autonomy and power of handicapped people. As she asserts, "*I don't want to walk fine. I want to dance*" (Venkatraman, p. 54), emphasizing her determination to transcend societal limitations and pursue her passion. Her path is characterized by the difficulties of surmounting conventional norms and biases. The story highlights the significance of perseverance and self-acceptance while also criticizing the cultural frameworks that restrict opportunities for people with disabilities. The work challenges the idea that disability means incapacity by emphasizing Veda's determination and aptitude, thus promoting a more nuanced comprehension of disability. To thoroughly examine the depiction of ableism in T.V. Padma's text is essential to go into the complex relationship between cultural beliefs, structural obstacles, and the personal encounters of handicapped people, with a specific focus on the main character, Veda. The story meticulously explores Veda's odyssey as a gifted dancer struggling with the consequences of a limb amputation, diving into topics of internalized ableism, cultural and structural barriers, and the perpetuation of stereotypes. Through providing a detailed and subtle representation of these processes, it illuminates the widespread influence of ableism on the identities, ambitions, and interactions of handicapped people. Her journey exemplifies the cultural perspectives on disability within an Eastern framework. Despite encountering social expectations and stigma, she receives support and acceptance from her community, which demonstrates a multifaceted and subtle depiction of ableism. This is consistent with Ghai's conclusion that cultural and religious standards have a substantial impact on attitudes towards disability in Eastern civilizations. Central to the work is her battle with internalized ableism, which refers to the process by which individuals absorb negative cultural attitudes about disability, resulting in feelings of inadequacy and self-doubt. After her injury, she

struggles with serious inquiries regarding her identity and value as a dancer, challenging deeply rooted convictions that associate disability with insufficiency. These ingrained prejudices impede her self-assurance and self-esteem, influencing how she sees herself and her skills.

The story powerfully depicts the significant influence of internalized ableism on handicapped people's perception of themselves and their feeling of fitting in as they go through personal exploration and acceptance. It effectively portrays the numerous social and institutional obstacles that hinder Veda's involvement in the realm of dance. Veda faces a multitude of challenges that jeopardize her objectives and ambitions, including inaccessible dancing studios and biased attitudes from instructors and classmates. These impediments highlight the wider structural disparities and social standards that marginalize people with disabilities, restricting their chances for complete engagement and inclusion. The story highlights Veda's challenges with these obstacles, emphasizing the pressing necessity for systemic reform and cultural transformation to provide a more inclusive and equal environment for those with disabilities. This work extensively examines the maintenance of preconceptions and misconceptions regarding disability, which in turn reinforces ableist attitudes and views. During her travels, Veda encounters cultural beliefs that depict handicapped individuals as powerless, reliant, or deficient in ability. These prejudices not only diminish her self-assurance but also contribute to wider cultural views that underestimate the capabilities and potential of handicapped people. The literature aims to undermine ableist narratives and encourage understanding and acceptance of diversity by questioning stereotypes and providing a more nuanced representation of disability. The work presents a captivating and intellectually stimulating examination of ableism, focusing on its main character, Veda. The novel offers unique insights into the widespread influence of ableism on the lives of handicapped people, exploring issues such as internalized ableism, cultural and structural obstacles, and the continuation of stereotypes. *A Time to Dance* challenges readers to confront ableist myths, fight for social change, and promote a more inclusive and fair society for persons

with disabilities by portraying Veda's path of perseverance, self-discovery, and empowerment.

Veda's journey explores the intersection of disability and cultural identity, pulling out lessons from the book *Embodying Difference* by Simon Dickel. Her story expresses how societal perspectives on disability shape their individual experiences and ability to bounce back after facing challenges. Thus, her community's validation reveals the social frameworks that define disability (Dickel, 2023). However, in contrast to Paul's experience, she accepts and rejoices in her new artificial leg. For him, his prosthetic is a sign of his own deficiency while for her, it represents a way of showing her unique outlook and talent in arts. It may even integrate this into a dance performance, demonstrating how society can either empower or marginalize individuals further. She first faced the challenge of overcoming internal ableism, which led her to believe she would never be able to again dance or recognized as such. However, external assistance was where she found refuge. Indeed, Titchkosky argues that people with disabilities are unable to create themselves internally because everything they do must be supported by someone else (Michalko 4).

Comparative Analysis

For many years, diverse cultural, historical, and philosophical elements have influenced the vast literary heritages of the East and the West. They both produce profound literary works, however frequently differ in subjects, styles, and literary devices used. Below are the key features that define Eastern and Western (Western refers to Anglo-Saxon Europe) literatures within their own traditions: Eastern literature often presents a holistic world view that accentuates connectivity between different entities in the universe. It frequently employs symbolism and allegory to convey profound philosophical or moral truths, while also employing figurative language to stimulate universal truths and stimulate introspection. The articulation of feelings and self-reflection is highly important and characters depict complex emotional struggles in their attempts to understand love, grief, or existential distress. These depictions are subtle and indirect, allowing readers to interpret and contemplate. Authors often employ implication and suggestion instead of

providing specific descriptions, encouraging readers to actively interact with the text.

Western literature frequently exalts the individual and accentuates concepts of agency, autonomy, and personal liberty. It tells the story of individuals whose main objective is to achieve agency, autonomy, and control over their own destiny by embarking on a journey—a quest for themselves. In an attempt to achieve self-realization or realize their dreams, they reject conventional thinking and defy social conventions. Mimesis adheres largely to [an imitation of reality], in which things are as close as possible to their real forms. This serves as the primary motivation for mimesis. As a result, it entails trying to imitate life accurately and in great detail from the perspective of the people involved. Authors are known for their ability to observe small things, and it is this observation of small things that informs their artwork. While writers are known for creating characters with intricate minds, this is evident in most forms of narrative fiction. Most researchers, particularly fiction writers, have based their works mainly on the exploration of human nature in terms of how it reacts to different situations. This includes the external conflict, which propels events when the hero encounters an antagonistic force that another character obstructs to accomplish a specific objective, and the internal conflict, which provides opportunities for character development. Heroism, redemption, retaliation, justice, and so on are prevalent themes; these narratives typically follow a linear path, ensuring a steady tempo until the conclusion; Western plays consistently strive to demonstrate the ethical significance of motivation in relation to morality.

Characters may undertake journeys to discover their own identity or defy the conventions of society in order to pursue their aspirations. Realism and naturalism are two critical elements of Western literary tradition, which often provide numerous meticulous representations of the ordinary lives of people in various situations. Some artists artistically represent the environment with acute psychological intricacies, while also crafting characters with depth. Western narratives often center around conflict and its resolution when the main characters confront external obstacles or ethical quandaries. Common themes in tales include heroism, redemption, and justice.

Additionally, stories often follow a linear structure. Western literature often places a higher value on rationality and logic, focusing on presenting information clearly and using logical arguments. Writers can utilize logical inference and empirical observation to investigate themes and cultivate characters. While these divisions do offer a rough sketch of the literary traditions in the Western and Eastern hemispheres, recognizing that both traditions encompass a wide range of genres, styles, and themes is crucial. Furthermore, globalization and cultural interactions between continents have led to extensive blending of east-west literatures, enhancing their quality and promoting a deeper understanding of the human condition. The contrast between *Slow Man* and *A Time to Dance* exposes cultural disparities in the expression of ableism. The first novel talks about ableism in relation to Western individualism and medical discipline regarding disability. On the other hand, the second text gives a more refined understanding of ableism that considers conventional beliefs and cultural power over people living with disabilities. Both novels provide vital insights into the portrayal of disability, but they tackle the issue from distinct cultural and narrative viewpoints. Coetzee's depiction of Paul centers on the inner and outer challenges faced by an elderly individual as he grapples with accepting his infirmity. The caretakers profoundly impact the lives of the principal characters in both works. While simultaneously signifying the possibility of connection and compassion among human beings, Marijana's character is a constant reminder to Paul about his dependence on other people, despite its symbolic relevance at another level. Marijana's character not only exemplifies the perseverance and determination to reclaim lost pleasures and self-awareness, but also exemplifies youth and dynamism, overcoming suffering in a manner that is unparalleled in teenagers such as twelve-year-old Veda. In the novel, Veda's family and her newly appointed dancing instructor offer the necessary assistance for her to handle her altered circumstances.

This exemplifies the importance of aid to people with disabilities, as well as the many details that arise from it. Paul and Veda strive to overcome societal and physical constraints in order to regain their independence and

identity. Their stories stress one thing: that it is not only about finding personal strength to stand but also confronting prejudicial standards. Davis (1995) asserts that handicapped people must regain control over their actions to prevent social exclusion and to redefine their identities based on their personal preferences.

Conclusion

Using the framework of disability studies and ableism, an analysis of J.M. Coetzee's *Slow Man* and T.V. Padma's *A Time to Dance* demonstrates how cultural circumstances influence disability representation in complex ways. Both stories provide a deep understanding of the real-life encounters of handicapped people, emphasizing the widespread presence of ableism and the determination needed to negotiate and confront social obstacles. Through an examination of these stories, we gain a deeper understanding of the many experiences of disability and the need for literature to include more comprehensive and fair portrayals. By utilizing phenomenological viewpoints, one can gain a deeper understanding of the expression of ableism in diverse cultural contexts, exemplified by Coetzee's *Slow Man* and Padma's *A Time to Dance*. The works offer divergent yet harmonious perspectives on firsthand encounters with handicaps, influenced by cultural conventions and individual fortitude. The study emphasizes the importance of understanding individuals' corporeal encounters with disability, as well as the profound influence of societal attitudes on these encounters. This comparative research emphasizes the necessity of creating societal institutions that are more inclusive and helpful, acknowledging and appreciating the different experiences of those with disabilities.

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