

Interdisciplinary Dialogues: Disability and Postcolonial Studies

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Abstract: Disability is a constitutive material presence in many postcolonial societies but remains surprisingly absent as a subject of analysis in the field of Postcolonial Studies. Through a critical reading of disability in Salman Rushdie's novel *Midnight's Children* (1981), this article develops an interdisciplinary critical methodology that pays attention to disability both as an aesthetic textual device and as lived experience.

Key Words: postcolonial literature, disability, Rushdie

A haunting visual legacy of the Iraq war was the multiplicity of media images of Ali Abbas, a twelve-year-old Iraqi boy who lost both arms in a missile attack in March 2003. Covering the newspapers' front pages for weeks, Ali became the poster child of the conflict – the representative of innocent victimhood, of loss in the most tangible sense, and of the horrific cost of British and American intervention in Iraq. Western responses to Ali's disablement were generous and economically beneficial, yet politically troubling. The Limbless Association's fund to rehabilitate amputee casualties of the war was strategically publicized as the Ali Abbas appeal, mobilizing what has been termed the "identifiable victim effect" (Small, Loewenstein, & Slovic, 2007); maximum donation was elicited by personalizing and narrativizing the experience of trauma. Lennard Davis (1995) observes that "narrativizing an impairment ... tends to sentimentalize it" in ways that "link it to the bourgeois sensibility of individualism and the drama of an individual story" (pp. 3-4). The emergency fund capitalized effectively on a sentimental individual narrative of wounding and healing, securing the support of middle-class "conspicuous contributors" (Longmore, 1997) in raising much-needed capital. It also, however, isolated Ali's plight from its political contexts and obscured the *mass* scale of disabilities generated by the war. The appeal's representational strategies encouraged donation rather than protest, ultimately failing to stage a critical engagement with the causes and atrocities of the war.

Effective analysis of this complex cultural event requires input from various disciplinary fields. Disability studies provides the tools to examine the visual rhetoric of the poster child (Garland-Thomson, 2002; McRuer, 2006), to consider the pros and cons of sentimentality (Davis, 1995), and to critique the association of disability with helplessness, victimhood, pity, and charity (Snyder & Mitchell, 2006). Probing the intersection between disability, dependency, and *international relations*, however, demands an engagement between disability studies and postcolonial studies, an interdisciplinary field adept at interrogating western constructions of non-western Others (Said, 1995). In the proliferation of media representations of disabling global trauma, disability is made the focal point of familiar narratives of disempowerment, which render non-westerners the perennial victims of either disordered, crisis-riven environments or of western nations' militaristic and (neo)imperialist activities. The imbalance between Iraqi dependency and western paternalism that is normalized by images of Ali Abbas issues from assumptions about disabled difference and *cultural* difference, centered on a fundamental notion of "damage." At the same time, disability representations participate in the reinscription of orientalist discourses of salvation and enlightenment which feed into contemporary global development paradigms: Ali's "tragic" story ends happily in the USA with a reconstructed body.

Contributing to discourses of dependency and development like this, ideas about disability are frequently co-opted to support neocolonial political agendas. In this sense the links between postcolonialism and disability are direct, dynamic and constitutive in the contemporary world. As a critical discourse, postcolonialism can offer a crucial point of departure for the analysis of disability representations when they are manifested in, or projected onto, non-western cultural contexts.

Decolonizing Disability Studies: Literature, Criticism, and Theory

The (much contested) term *postcolonial* encompasses the historical, socioeconomic, and cultural legacies of European colonialism in previously colonized nations and cultures, engaging with the impact of global capitalism, inequalities of power, and neocolonial national and international relationships today. Postcolonial criticism can thus be defined as the “analysis of cultural forms which mediate, challenge or reflect upon the relations of domination and subordination – economic, cultural and political – between (and often within) nations, races or cultures” (Moore-Gilbert, 1997, p. 12). One effect of these relations is the fact that traumatic, violent, exclusionary or impoverished environments and histories generate high levels of disability. Approximately 80 percent of the world’s disabled population lives in developing countries (Davidson, 2008, p. 170; see also *Disability in the Majority World*), and indigenous or “Fourth World” peoples living in supposedly “First World” societies experience higher levels of disability and chronic ill health than majority populations, signaling a causal link between colonialism and disability (Durie, 2003; Smith, 1999). (Post)colonial histories are punctuated by disabling events such as war, population displacement and civil unrest, as well as ongoing poverty. In such societies, disability may consequently be “as much about national and cultural power differentials as it is a matter of medicine and bodies” (Davidson, 2008, p. 175).

This article focuses on representations of disability in postcolonial literature, a cultural form which, through its representations of disabled characters, is able to mount critiques of “relations of domination and subordination” as they apply to disability in non-western societies. Postcolonial literary criticism, in turn, offers methodologies for the analysis of marginalized subject positions, which are attentive to culturally specific constructions of identity. The dual lenses of postcolonial and disability theory can therefore draw attention to the nuances of social, cultural, political and economic histories and their impact on the representation and administration of disability. I will demonstrate this point with reference to Salman Rushdie’s *Midnight’s Children* (1981), a novel often read as a paradigmatic example of postcolonial national allegory, and whose protagonist, Saleem Sinai, could be characterized as the “poster child” of postcolonial literature. Winner of the 1981 Booker Prize, the 1993 Booker of Bookers, and the 2008 Best of the Bookers, *Midnight’s Children* arguably aestheticizes, commoditizes and packages the non-western disabled figure for global consumption.¹ Through analysis of the novel’s postcolonial politics, however, I show how literary narratives can present complex and sophisticated insights into the aesthetics and politics of disability, potentially providing an antidote to the reductive image of the non-western disabled poster child. Strategies for *reading* disability narratives must therefore be updated to account for the multiple vectors of difference and the diverse cultural contexts of disability that postcolonial writing offers.

So far, research on the interface between postcolonial studies and disability studies has tended simply to advocate, rather than develop, interdisciplinary critical methodologies. For example, Sharon Snyder and David Mitchell (2006) readily admit that their own groundbreaking work, at the forefront of cultural disability studies, lacks attention to constructions of disability outside a western framework:²

“The field needs to [...] grow more international in its critique (and less Eurocentric in its models). The future of the field depends upon its ability to take up this challenge in a way that does not replicate the global commodification of other identities. This entails a thoroughgoing recognition that Western-based methodologies have limited utility for apprehending disability in other cultural contexts” (pp. 198-199).

As Snyder and Mitchell identify, the application of disability theory to postcolonial cultural productions, and conversely the theorization of disability from the perspective of non-western cultural epistemologies, is only just beginning to be undertaken within humanities-based disability studies.³ Since most of this scholarship is emerging from western, middle-class academic contexts, there is a pressing need for disability researchers to “decolonize” their critical “methodologies” (Smith, 1999). This involves deconstructing assumptions and practices central to the analysis of mainstream western literary and cultural narratives, and reframing critical readings so they prioritize indigenous or local constructions of disability.

Metaphor, Prosthesis, and Global Disability Narratives

Literary disability theorists have persuasively shown how disability is often used within creative productions as a storytelling “crutch,” termed “narrative prosthesis” by Mitchell and Snyder (2000), which represents *other* conditions of disempowerment, lack or deviance. According to the “double bind” of disability representation, disability becomes “a master metaphor for social ills” (Mitchell, 2002, p. 24) but “firmly entrench[es]” disabled people “on the outer margins of social power and cultural value” (Mitchell & Snyder, 1997a, p. 6). Despite the existence of “disability counternarratives,” which concentrate on forms of “social awareness” generated by disability rather than aiming to “resolve” it (Mitchell & Snyder, 2000, pp. 164-165), for some literary analysts the predominance of metaphorical disability representations dooms people with disabilities to states of disenfranchisement likened to those experienced by marginalized postcolonial subjects. As Mitchell and Snyder (2005) put it, “Disabled people are left, as is often the case with other post-colonial subjects, to mull over the degree to which their social relations are mediated by constructed beliefs about variant bodies and minds.”

In theorizing disability representation in this way, Mitchell and Snyder clearly draw on postcolonial theories such as Gayatri Spivak’s (1999) seminal work on subalternism. This relationship between disabled and postcolonial subjectivity is articulated more explicitly by Mark Sherry (2007), who notes “the rhetorical connections that are commonly made between elements of postcolonialism (exile, diaspora, apartheid, slavery, and so on) and experiences of disability (deafness, psychiatric illness, blindness, etc.)” (p. 10). Similarly, Michael Davidson (2008) notes that the rhetoric of globalization “is suffused with references to physical impairment – countries suffer from *crippling* debt; national leaders who are *deaf* to the needs of their people; poverty as a *cancer* spreading throughout a region” (p. 168). In one of the most

persistent postcolonial narrative tropes, employed by creative writers and critics alike, disability becomes an embodied marker of the “damage” experienced by postcolonial nations and communities. Analogies are drawn between “broken” bodies and “broken” nations; histories are described in cycles of wounding and healing; societies are characterized as fragmented and dislocated. The subaltern subject’s inability to “speak” is a major figurative theme within postcolonial theory (Spivak, 1999), as is Fanon’s pathologization of colonial subjectivity (1963; 1986). Connections can also be easily made between the supposed physical and emotional dependency of people with disabilities and the economic or political “dependency” on international support of emerging postcolonial nations (McRuer, 2007).

Given the pervasive nature of disability as a trope, its lack of critical interrogation within postcolonial literary studies represents a considerable theoretical deficit. The *body’s* figurative potential is widely recognized; Elleke Boehmer (2005), for example, identifies how, “in colonial representation, exclusion, suppression and relegation can often be seen as literally *embodied*” by “the silent and wounded body of the colonized” (p. 129; p. 131). The bodies under critical consideration here are clearly disabled bodies, and yet disability remains an unspoken and under-theorized term in postcolonial textual analysis. This is perhaps due to the instability of disability as an identity category (Davis, 2002a), which impacts upon its collective politics and, by extension, affects the theoretical constructs we use to examine literary representations of disabled identities. Because disability lacks recognition within postcolonial theory as a coherent and politicized subject position or a material component of identity, disabled figures tend to be objectified and decontextualized. Even socially engaged, culturally sensitive postcolonial reading practices, committed to establishing the agency of racial, gendered or indigenous minorities, can reproduce assumptions that disability functions in the exclusively figurative terms of narrative prosthesis. This does not always reflect inadequate modes of *representation*; however, in many cases, it indicates an underdeveloped *critical* vocabulary regarding disability. A critical perspective informed by disability studies can therefore help to fill out elisions within postcolonial theory and literary criticism. The reclamation of “wounded” postcolonial bodies as overtly *disabled* bodies helps to foreground the multifaceted material, as well as metaphorical, meanings they embody in fictional texts, and to encourage the reading of disabled characters in terms of agency and politics rather than exclusively as aesthetic devices.

Conversely, disability studies can benefit from postcolonialist reading practices, since a textual preoccupation with the materiality of postcolonial experience necessarily impacts upon disability representations. Following Robert McRuer (2006), who “would qualify the transhistorical applicability Mitchell and Snyder give to their theory” (p. 225), I contend that the *transcultural* applicability of narrative prosthesis must also be qualified. While it may be a productive point of access to disability narratives which lend themselves to allegorical interpretations, writers and texts that emerge from different cultural contexts and deal with very specific historical moments may be more or less sensitive to disability as a *social* entity, and more or less inclined to utilize disability as a sustained metaphorical device. As McRuer cogently warns, “There is no guarantee that even the most foundational disability studies theses will function in the same way when we talk about global bodies” (p. 201).

Postcolonial Endings: Sentimentality and Narrative Closure

One way in which postcolonial literary representations often differ from the canonical English and American texts discussed in current disability theory regards the function of sentimentality. Mitchell and Snyder (2000) have commented that “[s]entimental plotlines [...] offer impossible solutions by situating disability as an either/or condition forever hovering somewhere between tragic death or sudden cure” (p. 169). The “cure” trajectory, marketed as a tale of triumph over adversity, explains the continued public interest in Ali Abbas’s rehabilitation; as a form of *strategic* sentimentality, it was manipulated to galvanize an active response from the public. In contrast, according to Mitchell and Snyder’s literary model, fiction that relegates disabled characters to the status of plot resolution devices, excluding them from participation in the projected social and political futures it depicts, produces affective responses from readers that aid narrative closure rather than intellectual engagement.

Contrary to this effect, and to the normalizing telos of conservative novels (Davis, 2002a), many postcolonial texts resist reductive or sentimental conclusions, even when they do end with the cure or death of a disabled character. This lack of sentimentality is often tied up with the materialist postcolonial preoccupations of the texts, since the cultural struggles fictionalized may remain ongoing and unresolved. Postcolonial endings often negotiate ways of *caring* for permanently marginalized communities (Barker, 2008). Further, in many disabling postcolonial spaces (landmine-ridden Angola, for example), sheer numbers of disabled citizens make it illogical to understand disability sentimentally. Some postcolonial writers necessarily deal with disability as a material presence, negotiating a complex matrix of factors operating between the individual, history, society, and its often violent machinations. As Davidson (2008) cautions, referencing Mitchell and Snyder, “There are cases in which a prosthesis is *still* a prosthesis. [...] Regarded in a more globalized environment, the social meaning of both disability and narrative may have to be expanded” (p. 176). Writers of postcolonial fiction may find it imperative to engage with disabled characters’ status as embodied subjects and *citizens* in their particular culture and nation; disability often participates in politicized discourses of community and belonging rather than sentimental narratives of pity.

Snyder and Mitchell (2006) have recently conceptualized a “cultural model of disability,” according to which “disability functions not as an identification of abnormality but rather as a tool of cultural diagnosis” (p. 12). In its current form, this model is diffuse and generic; although it usefully reinscribes the materiality of the body, addressing a weakness of the social model of disability, the “culture” it evokes is a catch-all network of experiences, ideas and practices surrounding disability, and is not articulated in any rigorous way. However, if diversified and particularized, the cultural model has a great deal of potential as a blueprint for *situated* disability theory as it emphasizes the specificity of different cultures’ approaches to the construction, politics and administration of disability. As an important part of this process of theorization, postcolonial literary texts can alert us to the multiplicity of “cultural models” that may be available, in fictional and discursive form, to enable disability studies to fill out its current absences and to address its western bias. Interdisciplinary reading practices should therefore be integral to the process of decolonizing disability studies.

Midnight’s Children and Prosthetic National Allegory

To illustrate the benefits of interdisciplinary textual analysis I turn now to *Midnight's Children*, a text that is ideologically complex, generically ambiguous, and politically contradictory in its representations of disability. The protagonist and narrator of the novel, Saleem Sinai, is "handcuffed to history" due to his birth on the stroke of midnight, August 15, 1947, "the precise instant of India's arrival at independence" (Rushdie, 1995, p. 9), making this a classic example of postcolonial national allegory. According to the novel's magical realist logic, this historic moment of birth endows Saleem and a thousand others – the eponymous midnight's children – with fantastic forms of embodied or cognitive difference, which are identified explicitly with the Indian nation's exceptionality and potential development. Saleem is born with telepathic ability and with various impairments of function and appearance (no sense of smell, facial birthmarks and an unusually shaped face and nose). He is disabled further as the text progresses, often in tandem with "disabling" national events: he develops bandy legs; loses the hearing of one ear; loses a finger; and becomes bald as a child. An operation to drain his inflamed sinuses leaves him with an exceptionally keen sense of smell but deprives him of his telepathic powers; he loses his memory for a number of years; and, as an adult, is castrated by State representatives during the family planning drive of the National Emergency of 1975 to 1977.⁴

Throughout the text, Saleem the adult narrator is convinced that his body is fragmenting, reflecting the breakdown of the nascent ideals of independent India and exemplifying what seems to be a straightforwardly prosthetic disability narrative. Indeed, Rushdie sets up very clear relationships between Saleem's body and the new nation: his face resembles a map of India, for example, with birthmarks in the place of Pakistan, so that the newly partitioned Islamic state is described as a stain on the face of India. The body is therefore central to Saleem's story of postcolonial national development. He writes, "[u]ncork the body, and God knows what you permit to come tumbling out" (p. 237). This "uncorking" is associated with "revolutionary" effects (p. 237), indicating the transformative potential of the unruly body in the novel. Despite the overtly prosthetic nature of the analogy between disabled body and damaged nation, the continuing bodily metamorphoses of Saleem and the children prove to be "revolutionary" textual devices, as they enable Rushdie to critique the nation-state's treatment of difference within its borders and citizenry.

The Politics of Postcolonial Freakery

The midnight's children are described variously as "miraculous" (p. 195), "fabulous beings" (p. 197), "freak kids" (p. 221) and "monsters" (p. 434). Their (dis)abilities range from supernormative skills of time travel, flight and lycanthropy to those who are "little more than circus freaks: bearded girls, a boy with the fully-operative gills of a freshwater mahaseer trout, Siamese twins with two bodies dangling off a single head and neck" (p. 198). Rushdie taps into freak discourses that have been widely theorized within disability studies. Rosemarie Garland-Thomson (1997) explains how, in the "liminal space" of the freak show, "The domesticated freak simultaneously embodied exceptionality as marvel and exceptionality as anomaly, thus posing to the spectator the implicit political question of how to interpret differences within an egalitarian social order" (p. 17). In *Midnight's Children*, the presence of the children generates the question of how to interpret difference within the newly postcolonial nation-space, and thus engages

directly with Rushdie's primary concern – the exploration of postcolonial Indian identities and politics.

Garland-Thomson (1997) suggests that people with non-normative physicalities are granted a symbolic role within their cultures: “Such beings” become “magnets for the anxieties and ambitions of their times” (p. 70). In line with this, the children function as receptacles for India's unease regarding its self-definition:

“Midnight's children can be made to represent many things, according to your point of view: they can be seen as the last throw of everything antiquated and retrogressive in our myth-ridden nation, whose defeat was entirely desirable in the context of a modernizing, twentieth-century economy; or as the true hope of freedom, which is now forever extinguished” (Rushdie, 1995, p. 200).

The children are placed at the centre of debates surrounding national identity in the transitional period between colonialism and postcolonialism. In his independence day speech, quoted in the novel, India's first Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru promoted a vision of national inclusivity: “We have to build the noble mansion of free India, where all her children may dwell” (Rushdie, 1995, p. 118). Postcolonial criticism has been alert to *Midnight's Children's* engagement with the Nehruvian ideal of “unity in diversity,” and has identified in the children an allegorical movement towards a celebratory demographic mapping of India's diversity. In Saleem's Midnight Children's Conference, the nation is defined *in terms of* its exceptional inhabitants and not in opposition to them. The children therefore embody the optimism of independence by challenging reductive or monolithic views of difference, validating the exceptional, and accessing the *potential* of “unity in diversity” as a national ideology. Their liminal ontologies, however, also gesture towards the practical constraints placed on difference precisely by Nehru's idea of secular Indian modernity. As they remain unique but are subjected to surveillance, classification and hierarchization, the children simultaneously embody “possibilities and also restrictions of possibility” (Rushdie, 1995, p. 108).

A commentary on national citizenship is therefore played out through the children. Anita Ghai (2002) explains that in India (as elsewhere), “Historically, disabled people have been invisible, both physically and metaphorically” and that “disability represents horror and tragedy” (pp. 89-90). Saleem upholds this evaluation, describing India as “a country where any physical or mental peculiarity in a child is a source of deep family shame” (Rushdie, 1995, p. 169). As a disabled child, Saleem negotiates discrimination and “restrictions of possibility” in the social sphere. This means that despite its fetishization as a quintessential text of magical realism, *Midnight's Children* also provides a social realist counterpoint to celebratory national discourses of freakery. Rushdie utilizes disability metaphorically to critique the nation's incapacity to deal with difference, but also engages in material analysis of disability in its familial, social, and national contexts.

Davis (2002b) discusses how, “For the formation of the modern nation-state[,] [...] bodies and bodily practices had to be standardized, homogenized, and normalized” (p. 101). This is certainly true in the India of *Midnight's Children* where, by virtue of their exceptionality, the children's citizenship is continually placed under threat. By the end of the text, which depicts the Emergency's suspension of civil liberties and imposition of strict disciplinary regimes, a

vocabulary of eugenics is mobilized to describe the children's vulnerability as disabled citizens of a conformist state. They become "[m]idnight's children: who may have been the embodiment of the hope of freedom, who may also have been freaks-who-ought-to-be-finished-off" (Rushdie, 1995, p. 304).

The novel ends ambiguously with an image of Saleem's unruly, protesting body fragmenting and being absorbed into the heterogeneous crowd of India. Rushdie therefore stakes a claim for a national identity that incorporates impairment – Saleem's disabled presence is projected past the novel's conclusion – and yet this is fragile and circumscribed as *Midnight's Children* resists closure, hovering somewhere between death and survival. The celebratory prosthetic narrative in which disability symbolizes "the true hope of freedom" is pitted against a hegemonic nationalist rhetoric of "cure"; normalcy is posited as the unrealized but frightening and rapidly crystallizing vision of a paranoid, power-hungry state.

Postcolonial Fiction: Testing the Limits of Interdisciplinary Analysis

As this strategic analysis highlights, reading *Midnight's Children* with attention to disability theory and postcolonial critical methodologies reveals how Rushdie uses disability as a productive point of access to social and cultural critique.⁵ He does not simply reduce disability to the "opportunistic metaphoric device" (Mitchell, 2002, p. 15) of narrative prosthesis, but neither does his text comfortably fit the social model's locus of discrimination and misrepresentation. Various strands of meaning are present in Rushdie's engagements with disability – celebratory and oppressive, progressive and recidivist alike – and the metaphorical capacity of disability, when it is explored in material terms as well, only adds to the richness of its resonances. Disability *is* an aesthetic mechanism in this text, represented using conventions of freakery and the grotesque, and is instrumentalized to elucidate Rushdie's more carefully articulated *postcolonial* concerns. This does not mean, however, that it is definitively damaging. Indeed, texts like *Midnight's Children* grant disability the opportunity to be as multiple, as complicated, and as contradictory as any other aspect of identity. Rushdie's novel represents a test case for contemporary literary disability studies because, although offering a prosthetic narrative, its culturally and historically specific engagements with disability ultimately exceed the scope of current models and theories.

Dominant theories of literary disability tend to focus on the political shortcomings of representations at the expense of their enabling features, on their appropriation of disability's figurative capital rather than their materialist explorations of disability as an embodied social identity. Accordingly, our reading strategies need to be updated in order to reflect the variety and complexity of fictional representations, and interdisciplinary engagements can facilitate this process. In the case of *Midnight's Children*, postcolonial discourses of belonging and citizenship demonstrate the nuanced social contextualization of Rushdie's disability representations. Likewise, literary disability studies perspectives expose the omissions within postcolonial analysis, according to which Saleem and the children are rarely identified as disabled. Writing about disability politics in India, Ghai (2002) suggests that "[p]ost-colonialism can destabilize the totalizing tendencies of imported Western discourse. It brings the possibility of problematizing the norms of given cultural practices and a commitment to take responsibility for modifications that result from the situatedness of knowledge" (p. 96).

The presence of disability in postcolonial fictional texts destabilizes totalizing tendencies in two useful ways. Firstly, disabled characters challenge *western* cultural hegemony by showcasing alternative methods of constructing, understanding and managing global difference quite distinct from ubiquitous “poster child” narratives of dependency and pity. Secondly, they act as a check on the universalizing tendencies of *disability discourses* – both indigenous constructions of disability *and* imported western ones. By continually drawing attention to the “situatedness of knowledge” about disabled difference, fictional representations expose the insufficiencies of current theoretical models of disability, encourage the decolonization of reading practices, and offer alternative “cultural models” as the *basis* of politicized disability theory. In turn, critical analysis of such texts serves to illuminate the theoretical elisions within disability studies *and* postcolonial literary studies (within which “prosthetic” readings are the default position), and begins to establish a more collaborative approach towards the study of disability in postcolonial contexts.

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Endnotes

¹ For the commoditization and consumption of postcolonial literary narratives, with reference to *Midnight's Children*, see Huggan (2001).

² Mitchell and Snyder's forthcoming special issue of the *Journal of Literary and Cultural Disability Studies* on The

Geopolitics of Disability will be important in establishing more globalized approaches to disability.

³ Social science-based disability studies has a longer history of research in global contexts. See, for example, Priestley (2001) and Stone (1999). Essays in these collections testify to the need to decolonize western research assumptions, which are often founded on western civil rights paradigms. Within literary disability studies, Quayson (2007) notably engages with postcolonial theory in his analysis of literary texts.

⁴ For a detailed account of the events and politics of the Emergency, see Tarlo (2003).

⁵ For an extended version of this textual analysis, see Barker (2008).