



LITERARY QUEST

An International, Peer-Reviewed, Open Access, Monthly, Online Journal of English Language and Literature

Visiting the Invisible: Sea in Memoirs Written by Differently Abled

Mr. J S Jahangir

Assistant Professor, Department of English, Iqbal College, Peringammala,
Thiruvananthapuram, Kerala, India

Abstract

The article explores how the representation of sea in select memoirs written by differently abled people elucidates memory. The memoirs by differently abled treat sea as an operational identity to address their disability. Sea helps the memory to develop their ideas, thoughts, and actions. Memory tries to enable the disability in through these memoirs. Memoirs are the potential agent that tries to present sea as a driving force of memory to expand their canvass. Sea is beyond boundaries and its presence is inevitable. Similar is memory. This equation is tied to find the varied possibilities in this research article. The article can present disability studies as a productive theoretical lens that could outline scholarly discussion about sea and sea literature to encourage more culturally gifted discourses in our academia.

Keywords

Sea; Memory; Body; Narratives of Illness; and Disability.

◆

This article grows out of my experience with the memoirs written by disabled people. The disability memoirs illustrate the oceanic imaginary as an agency, variety and, are suggestive of memory. Memory related to sea in these texts highlights some specific function in recovering forgotten histories, contextualizing and counter contextualizing phenomenon, play a significant role in cultural production and shifting narratives of the past, present and future.

Sea is considered as a vast body of water that envelops a great deal of geographical environment of the earth. The wide symmetry and the immense geometry composes it as an essential constituent, form and commodity not only in ecology but also in varied multidisciplinary academic topics. This multi-discipline nature interest pursues me to see the unseen sea images employed to narrate the registered memories of the disabled people.

Disability is a worldwide phenomenon with global consequences. It is an enigma that we experience. The experience is both public and private. The disability experience is a matter for social inquiry. For some, it represents a personal catastrophe to be avoided, a shameful condition to be denied or hidden from one's family and personal space. For others, disability is a source of pride and empowerment, an enriched self-identity and self-worth. Disability for many reasons is a redefining experience that adds value to individual lives and clarifies the meaning of human. Disability creates a new set of powerful bonds, responsibilities, opportunities and recognition for the individual, family and the society. This significant experience of the disability as a social phenomenon can reveal and illuminate a redefined culture to understand the disabled body.

An alternate redefined disability culture celebrates a positive disabled identity, disabled body and disabled consciousness. For persons with disabilities, the body is the center of political and emotional struggle. Social movements and creative and literary writings that stressed positive self-image and self-help have made people with disabilities increasingly visible and active in public life. Through these resourceful activities, they gained the power to define and challenge society's definition of bodies as flawed, dangerous and dependent.

The expulsion of the predefined *normal* body is prudently addressed through the sea images that voyage into the innate memories of the disabled people in the select memoirs for the study. *Planet of the Blind* (1998) and *Eavesdropping: A Memoir of Blindness and Listening* (2006) by Stephen Kuusisto and *The Cry of the Gull* by Emmanuelle Laborit are the memoirs selected for excavating the unseen sea reflections that accommodates their identity.

Personal narratives of illness and disability are often an autobiographical answer: on some level it is an inquiry about one's own health and his history. People seemed to find it odd that a healthy-looking individual who is not disabled would be interested in illness and disability. In part, it reflects the influence of identity politics. Arthur W. Frank writes "What happens to my body happens to my life" (13) in his seminal text *At the Will of the Body*. The statement actually resonate the human condition and conditioning of the human body within the context of society and a text of enquiry in the academia, as well.

The concerns with health and illness are not contradictory: rather, both are expressions of a powerful cultural mandate that individuals control their body. Bodily dysfunction is perhaps the most common threat to the appealing belief that one controls one's destiny. Generally, illness narratives reflect mixed motives: an urge for self-exploration and a desire to serve those with the same

condition. As Frank observes, ill “people tell stories not just to work out their own changing identities, but also to guide others who will follow them. They seek not to provide a map that can guide others- each must create his own- but rather to witness the experience of reconstructing one’s own map...” (17). Hence, narratives of illness and disability are a medium in which the writers probe and give expression to the complex dialectic of mind, body, and culture.

Stephen Kuusisto is one such American poet who has written two memoirs that adumbrates all that is best in illness narratives. *Planet of the Blind* (1998) is the first which won the *New York Times*’ “Notable Book of the Year.” *Planet of the Blind* sketches the life and original events that occurred in Kuusisto’s life. All through his narration we find the presence of Corky, his dog. The blind author welcomes all his readers to *Planet of the Blind* right from the prologue of the text. Stephen Kuusisto’s second memoir was published in 2006 titled *Eavesdropping: A Memoir of Blindness and Listening*. It is written in the form of linked essays. The inner title page refers to *A Life by Ear* in its titular description. It suggests Kuusisto’s visual deficiency and tells the readers that Kuusisto contemplates the whole world with his ear. Kuusisto offers his story of living, developing an aural landscape so that he hears “layers of space” (12) rather than see them. *Eavesdropping* becomes an art for Kuusisto, the attentive, active listener and keen observer that he is, and the memoir is composed of countless anecdotes recounting his experiences doing just that.

Stephen Kusisto has “a photographic memory” (20) and for him “reading is a whole body experience” (21). This peculiar human condition helps him to investigate and navigate through the sea to idealize and image his destiny. He registers his sea-thoughts through stating that “Sometimes I write about submarines, sinking ships, people lost at sea” (29). His memories regarding submarines, ships and people lost at sea signify his knowledge and interest vis-à-vis to marine world. The marine world is boundless and infinite. Here, sea serves disability similar to Kafka’s observation, “A book should serve as the ax

for the frozen sea within us.” Sea drives the disabled body to motivate and encourage its future life. Lord Byron, born with a condition known as club foot writes in his famous lengthy poem *Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage* that entice the disabled body towards the sea and Nature in general.

There is a pleasure in the pathless woods,
There is a rapture on the lonely shore,
There is society where none intrudes,
By the deep Sea, and music in its roar:
I love not Man the less, but Nature more (10).

Sea in human culture has been important for centuries, as people experience the sea in contradictory ways: as powerful but serene, beautiful but dangerous. But sea to a blind is different experience and may be a disgusting meditation too. The sea has appeared in literature since Homer's *Odyssey* (8 BCE). Homer, a blind poet creates the gigantic sea to play a momentous task by describing the ten-year voyage of the Greek hero Odysseus who struggles to return home across the sea, encountering sea monsters along the way. Odysseus’ voyage is similar to the voyage undertaken by Kuusisto. The voyage in the sea is a perfect incarnation of life that might be calm but at times tumultuous due to the trials and tribulations in the same.

One can argue that Kuusisto participated in the postcolonial experience in certain ways while echoing his memory. First, born as blind, he had always the feeling of disabled body. His language, education and literary models depict the sense of postcoloniality inherent in him when he says “I discover silence in all the abundance. I listen” (82). Kuusisto strives to trounce the intricacies that he experiences as a disabled person and assimilates the voice and tradition of imperial culture. One of the key issues for postcolonial reading is how the subaltern constructs a subject position from which to write.

The memoirs by Kuusisto draw parallels to Jorge Luis Borges, who too later in his life became a blind man. The Argentinean poet, in *The Sea*, points

out that the sea itself exists before all mythologies, that is, that the sea is prior to colonial discourse. Thus by articulating the voice of the sea, Borges and Kuusisto step outside the unequal power relations of the colonial experience and enter into a universal archetype. While questioning sea, it implies that Kuusisto rejects the subaltern position, suggesting that his identity is tied to the sea, something that embraces all continents equally, and that he can no more be constrained by cultural oppression than can the sea itself.

Sea is used to present a general model of the structuring of space within the narrative text. The term space is used here to mean specifically the spatial aspects of the reconstructed world. The space for a blind man naturally is constructed and imaginative. The imagination is unarranged and is cosmic. Here, the imaginative registration of memories takes an extra-literary field to combine the two complementary aspects together- space and time. These complementary elements are of equal status that cuts the entire outer space that encompasses an innovative signification and similar simulacra.

The Cry of the Gull, published in 1998 is a memoir by Emmanuelle Laborit, a girl born deaf who later became an actress. She recounts her childhood memories and the learning of sign language helped by her sister. Her parents did not want to believe it but in due course they were forced to face the facts. Emmanuelle's parents helped her to discover her hearing difference. The memoir traces the history of the deaf community that is as vast as the sea. The memoir tries to bring out the sea images through the sign language. She comments in the chapter Mr. Implanter from the memoir that the "Deaf history is one of a long struggle" (126). And continues her comment

In 1620, a Spanish monk invented the rudiments of sign language. Later, in France, the Abbe de l'Epee expanded on them and founded an institute specializing in educating the deaf... In the eighteenth century, the reputation of the institute in Paris was so great that King Louis XVI visited it to observe the teaching

methods used there... However, sign language was officially banned in the nineteenth century. Mimicry, as it was called, could no longer be used in schools...It was labeled a “monkey language” and was spurned (126).

According to H-Dirksen L. Bauman, a Full Professor of Deaf studies, “Deaf history may be characterized as a struggle for Deaf individuals to “speak” for themselves rather than to be spoken about in medical and educational discourses” (47).

The memoir has a separate narrative that tries to voice through sea image especially in the chapter entitled as “Cry of the Seagull.” It deals with the past, present and the future of Emmanuelle. Her childhood memories are narrated in a floating model that resembles the floating of water in the sea. For instance she speaks philosophically on the time-line of her childhood,

My life up to age seven is full of gaps. I only have visual memories, like flashbacks, images whose timeframe I can't place.... Past, future, everything was on the same time-space line. ...*Tomorrow* had no meaning either. And I couldn't ask what they meant. I was helpless, completely unaware of time passing (7).

The relationship between disability and deafness has recently become contested and challenging. This is mainly because; Deaf (“culturally deaf”) people do not accept the label of disabled for themselves, preferring to think of themselves as a ‘linguistic and cultural minority’ (Davis 3). It is to be preferentially noted that deaf people have developed their own language and culture which is quite commendable imaging them as doubly abled. The narratives concerning a variety of kinds of hearing loss denote that Deaf people take pride in their distinctive culture. Emmanuelle too was satisfied with her human condition. The deaf actress won Moliere Award for her thumping performance in *Children of a Lesser God*. She voices all that she has to express- ‘My voice is different, that's all’ (142). She even celebrates her deafness and

also shows concern to the deaf community by proclaiming that, “I’m proud and happy that, because of me, the media have taken an interest in the world of silence” (143).

Personal narratives of illness and disability are no longer neglected. The best of these narratives acknowledge that our bodies are not ultimately in our control. At the same time, they remind us that we do have considerable influence over the way our bodies, healthy or not, are viewed. When the body takes a turn for the worse, the mind often turns toward words. Thus, these words are catalogued through memories when illness and disability are reminders of mortality and frailty. Those human conditions narrate in helping to recover and restore our lives.

Works Cited

- Bauman, H-Dirksen L. “Voicing Deaf Identity: Through the ‘I’s’ and Ears of an Other.” *Getting a Life: Everyday Uses of Autobiography*. Eds. Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1995. Print.
- Byron, Lord. “Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage.” poets.org. Academy of American Poets. n.d.Web.02/11/2017.
- Davis, Lennard J. *Enforcing Normalcy: Disability, Deafness, and the Body*. London: Verso, 1995.Print.
- Frank, Arthur W. *At the Will of the Body*. New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt Publishing House, 2002. Print.
- Kafka, Franz. *Letters to Friends, Family and Editors*. New York: Penguin Random House LLC, 1977.Print.
- Kuusisto, Steve. *Planet of the Blind*. New York: Delta, 1998. Print.
- . *Eavesdropping: A Memoir of Blindness and Listening*. New York: Norton, 2006. Print.
- Laborit, Emmanuelle. *The Cry of the Gull*. Washington, DC : Gallaudet U Press, 1998. Print.

MLA (7th Edition) Citation:

Jahangir, J S. "Visiting the Invisible: Sea in Memoirs Written by Differently Abled." *Literary Quest* 3.3 (November 2017): 52-60. Web. DoA.

DoA – Date of Access

Eg. 23 Aug. 2015. ; 05 April 2017.