

The Intersectional Exploitation And The Situational Irony Of Disabled Lumpenproletariat In The Novel *Motherless Brooklyn*

^[1] Sakthi Prasath, ^[2] Mohammed Nazar

^[1] Assistant Professor of English, School of Management, SRM Institute of Science Technology, Kattankulathur, Chennai

^[2] Assistant Professor, Department of English, Khadir Mohideen College, Adirampattinam.

Abstract: This paper explores marginalization effected by the intersectionality of psychological disability and class-based subalternity in the novel ‘Motherless Brooklyn’. Through analyzing characters afflicted by psychological disabilities and how their class situations lead them to involve themselves in exploitative endeavors, this paper focuses on the structure of exploitation made possible by the intersectionality of both disability and class-based marginalization.

1. Introduction

Disability studies emerged as an important discipline in the late twentieth century. According to the World Health Organization (WHO), “Disability is an umbrella term, covering impairments, activity limitations and participation restrictions. An impairment is a problem in body function or structure. An activity limitation is a difficulty encountered by an individual in executing a task or action while a participation restriction is a problem experienced by an individual in involvement in life situations. Disability is thus not just a health problem. It is a complex phenomenon reflecting the interaction between features of a person’s body and features of the society in which he or she lives.”

Since physical disability differs from mental disorder, many Novelists portray the character with mental disorder in different dimensions in their fictions over the period of time. Novelists like Mark Haddon and Rick Riordan explored disabilities in a different perspective. For instance, the central character Christopher in the novel *Curious Incident of a Dog at Night Time*, in which he claims himself as “a mathematician with some behaviour disabilities”, suffers from Autism who tries to resolve the murder of the dog named Wellington.

Similarly, *Motherless Brooklyn* is a detective novel in which most of the prominent characters are hailing from the margins of the society. They are typical lumpen proletariat who are devoid of any filiation of the civilization as they are orphans who have got no one to take care of. This uprooted nature of urban poor makes them exposed to various kinds of exploitations. Apart from the socio-economic aspect, this novel could also be studied from the vantage point of disability as the central character of the novel suffers from a neurological disorder.

2. Overview of the Novel

The novel *Motherless Brooklyn* revolves around Minna Frank, Lionel Esrog, Tony, Danny and Gilbert. Minna Frank runs a private detective which works for the mobsters where the above- mentioned characters do all the odd jobs for him. At a crucial point, Minna was murdered by anonymous people whose identities will be revealed at the end of the novel. Lionel Esrog is the central character of this novel who suffers from **Tourette syndrome** and he is the one who solves the mystery of the murder of his father figure Minna whom he always sees as an Idol.

(On Tourette Syndrome) Tourette Syndrome is neurological disorder characterized by repetitive stereotype, involuntary movements and vocalization called Tics such as repeatedly blinking the eyes, shrugging shoulders or blurting out offensive words. It is compulsive behaviour with meaningless repetition of words. Like Christopher in the novel *Curious Incident of a Dog at Night Time*, Lionel claims

“I’ve got Tourette’s. My mouth won’t quit, though mostly I whisper or subvocalize like I’m reading aloud, my Adam’s apple bobbing, jaw muscle beating like a miniature heart under my cheek”.

Lionel’s Tourette Syndrome plays a pivotal role in the development of the novel and the trajectory of the plot. Due to his disorder, Lionel can’t stop picking things apart, twisting them around re-assembling them, specially words and sound which is the most important trait to possess for a detective but here Lionel’s disability helps him naturally to solve many puzzles in the novel. Since Lionel is the narrator, the author Letham structured the novel with tics of the narrator through which the character resolves the murder. Here, the significant role of Tourette syndrome travels way beyond the plot as it also has strong influences in the form of the novel itself.

In the beginning chapter where Lionel and Gilbert sits in the car to assist Minna, Lionel is uncontrollable with his syndrome where he starts saying “eat me” repetitively which made him call him a freak. Everyone acquainted with Lionel see him as a freak and his syndrome as a freakshow where Minna considers him as normative, not deviant as others do. When Tony, the next important person in the detective agency, sends Lionel to inform death of Minna to his wife Julia he encounters a cop Seminole. When the cop inquires to Lionel on the death of Minna he led his tics so free that he doesn’t want to control it but he uses his syndrome to irritate the cop deliberately. At an important juncture, Lionel is able to see the murderer in the Buddhist zen where Minna was plotted to death. He is unable to control his syndrome and he was caught without proceeding forward to the murderer. In all the important moments of the novel till last chapter, Lionel faces the problems just because of the syndrome.

Minna owns an illegal moving company where he uses all the four orphans from their schooldays. He only gives them instructions to do petty jobs without telling them any details of the work. He uses the Tourette syndrome of Lionel to subdue the other orphans where it was a huge recognition for Lionel who was sidelined from mainstream society. When Minna returned from Maine after a long time, he again used the four grownup orphans who were still at the margin of the society. For Lionel and others, Minna is a father figure whom they want to be like. But the death of Minna becomes an irreparable loss for Lionel than the other orphans since Minna is the only person who does not consider him as a freak and he decides to avenge the murderer.

3. Intersectionality of Disability And Class-Based Marginalization

This novel offers a unique opportunity where the primary character is marginalized both in the external and internal domains of the life system. Lionel is placed in the margins of the society both in the socio-economic and psychological realms. In this way, his marginality has been profoundly constructed by the author in order to render a fresh look at disability and social marginalization. The interstices between one’s internal and external world and how the marginalization in both these spheres affect the person is chiseled with great care by the author. While others exist in the margins only in the social sphere, Lionel’s Tourette Syndrome denies him an opportunity to own even his internal self by enjoying autonomy over his own thoughts, body and behavior. In this way, psychological disorder affects his social behavior and makes him an outcast even within the marginalized spaces. Thus, he often finds himself at the most underprivileged of the margins.

By making Lionel the narrator of the novel, the author succeeds in narrating it through a mind which suffers from Tourette Syndrome. Far beyond using TS merely for the sake of literary novelty, the author’s way of employing such a character forces the reader to dwell some time in the world of the people with this syndrome. Readers are made to patiently listen to Lionel, take efforts to comprehend his tics and gibberish and grow familiar to him. In this way, the novel sensitizes the people of the mainstream to understand the TS people beyond their simplistic, reductionist and condescending perceptions of ‘craziness’ and ‘freakishness’. Through this, the novel not only informs the reader about Tourette Syndrome but also has a transformative effect upon himself/herself regarding TS and the people who suffer from this disorder.

The social positioning of Lionel and his friends make them submit themselves to the idol, Minna. This could be understood well if it is studied with what Marxism has to say about the specific class nature of these characters. In the Marxist tradition, unlike the proletariat, the organized workers who are deeply rooted in their own work and personal spaces and are highly organized as unions and associations with a higher level of political consciousness,

Lumpen proletariat are perceived as uprooted individuals who dwell at the margins of the urban spaces, doing odd jobs for the gangster leaders and criminals. They also serve as henchmen, doing criminal jobs for the financially and politically powerful people who enjoys reputation in the high societies. That is why a major trend in the Marxist tradition treated the whole class of Lumpen proletariat as excrement of the civilization and wary of this particular class' potential to be the foot-soldiers of any counter-revolutionary, anti-social and anti-civilizational mobilizations. All they need is a father figure who can cater to their emotions and passions and they detest any call for reason as elitist. On the other hand, organized worker class, service class, peasants and a part of the intellectual class were identified as revolutionary forces who will lead history on its road of progress. History also shows us that a huge section of the Lumpen class mobilized themselves behind some of the most disastrous counter-revolutionary movements such as Fascism and Nazism which were led by charismatic leaders who successfully catered to the emotions of the uprooted, dispossessed and the alienated masses. In order to rise over this miserable state, these Lumpen proletariat would willfully submit their freedom at the feet of their father figure and by doing it they gain identity, meaning and purpose. But ultimately this formation of identity and meaning making process would eventually lead to much bloodshed is the lesson which the human kind has to learn more quickly than ever. So, it is this historical pattern which gets unfolded at a microcosmic level in the world of Minna and his henchmen.

In this already interesting external socio-economic setting of the novel, the author introduces a rarely explored internal setting which is Lionel's TS affected psychological sphere. A detective fiction in which a henchman vows to unpack the mystery behind the murder of his father figure in whose case Tourette Syndrome has a significant influence, offers the novel complex layers of subtexts without which it would have been reduced into a mere addition to the already existing corpus of detective fictions. The telling and realistic portrayal of the life situations in the margins of the society and the flesh and blood understanding and sketching of a character is at the crux of the novel. This makes the character of Lionel obviously central because his persona is the epicenter in which all the domains, dimensions and complexities of the novel colludes with one another. Thus, any deeper understanding of the novel is not at all possible by overlooking the character of Lionel. The curious case of his Tourette Syndrome is the significant factor which not only shapes his persona but also leads to the direction of the plot. His obsession with words and its associated sound patterns and meanings make him the right person to uncover the mystery. As Minna knows him very well, he gives clues in his final hours in a way that it will psychologically force Lionel to discover and expose the perpetrators who are behind his killing. In this way, Lionel looks like a natural choice for an enterprise of such a manner. In this way, the author doesn't warp the role of the person with TS as someone who lacks something than other people who are 'normal'. Rather, he tries to explore how these people are creatively grappling with their lives, trying to overcome their limitations by adopting innovative methods and the possibilities which are often not accessible to the so-called normal could be effectively made use of by the very peculiarity of these people's psychological condition.

Looking after Minna as the father figure, Lionel eventually finds out who is the murderer but ironically, he also finds out the fact that Minna is actually exploiting all the four especially Leonel since he is marginalized and it is very easy for Minna to make him his most reliable henchman. The ability of remembering all the things he hears makes Leonel the most important being when it comes to the investigation work. The situational irony is that when incongruity appears between expectations of something to happen, and what actually happens instead. It generally includes sharp contrasts and contradictions. Starting the quest to avenge the murderer leads Leonel to understand the exploitation caused by the father figure Minna. Leonel explores how bourgeois like Minna exploits lumpen proletariat Leonel. Intersectionality argues that the protagonist Leonel is exploited both ways as lumpen proletariat and as disabled.

4. Conclusion

'Motherless Brooklyn' is a novel that ingeniously weaves a fictional narrative that involves crime and investigation layered by neurological disability and class based-marginalization. It is this layered sub-text of the novel that offers fruitful avenues to study the entanglements between marginalization based on disability and class, and how people who find themselves in their interstices get exploited. This paper explores this intersectionality in the novel

drawing both from disability studies and Marxist literary theory, which demonstrates how it shapes the development of characters and the narrative in the novel.

References

- [1] Lethem, Jonathan, *Motherless Brooklyn* (Penguin New Delhi 1989) all the subsequent references to this edition will be referred to as MB.
- [2] Goodley, Dan, *Disability Studies : An Interdisciplinary Introduction* (Sage Publications LTD)
- [3] Barry, Peter, *Beginning Theory : An Introduction to Literary and Cultural Theory*. 3rd ed. Newyork: Manchester UP, 2009. Print
- [4] Eagleton, Terry. 1976. *Marxism and Literary Criticism*. California: University of California Press.
- [5] Althusser, Louis. 1984. *Essays on Ideology*.