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Reviving Cultural Ableness through Narratives: Analysing Select Aboriginal Novels in English

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Abstract

This paper probes two critically acclaimed aboriginal novels that reject qualities of cultural disabilities enforced upon natives in two prominent settler colonies. The protagonists of the novels find themselves marked by a lack of ableness or disability in multiple forms triggering identity crises and trauma. In societies where multiple communities coexist, ethnic diversities and historical vindications encountered in literary narratives illuminate the plight of marginalised communities, especially the culturally disabled. This paper argues that disability in a cultural context is not a medical or physical condition, but one that originates from differences identified in skin colour, gestures, voice, body shapes, linguistic backgrounds, racial and social standing, and so on. The contestations of power in these novels are read as a struggle between able-bodied and disabled-bodied individuals. Enforcing such differences formulate power that leads to the suppression and marginalisation of the culturally different at every turn. Groups, tribes, or individuals who are unable to transcend their ascribed cultural identities are deemed incapable of autonomy or authoritarian positions. This curtails the social movements and inputs of culturally differentiated persons and can be compared to challenges faced by physically and medically disabled individuals.

Keywords: Ableness; Aboriginal Narratives; Culture; Disability; Identity.

The attempt of Aboriginal writers to find a niche for themselves in the global literary canon has aided the Aboriginal communities and their ways of life to find more acceptance and validation. This paper proposes to analyse two well-acclaimed aboriginal novels - Alexis Wright's *Carpentaria* (2007) and Linda Hogan's *People of the Whale* (2008); to examine

the reassignment of abilities from a native point of view. To quote Alexis Wright's concerns:

> I felt literature; the work of fiction; was the best way of presenting a truth– not the real truth; but more of a truth than non-fiction; which is not really the truth either. Non-fiction is often about the writer telling what is safe to tell …. I use literature to try and create a truer replica of reality. ("Politics" 13-14)

This truer replica of her nation is her attempt to counter strategies of cultural discrimination that have disabled and portrayed able-bodied natives as non-performing. The select writers are acclaimed literary representatives of their tribes and have appropriated the Eurocentric form of the novel to voice the gaps of silence enforced on their communities for centuries. Viewed through a postcolonial lens; the side-tracked aboriginal population is seen to celebrate their cultural difference and question their proposed lack of ableness through such counter-narratives. As its theoretical framework; this paper identifies and probes the premise opened up by race studies and disability studies to enable scholars to identify deeper academic scholarship from perspectives other than the ones set by European standards.

Linda Hogan; a popular representative of the Chickasaw tribe; has received prestigious awards and entered into the Chickasaw Nation Hall of Fame in 2007. She has also authored more than seven novels. On the other hand; *Carpentaria* is the magnum opus by Alexis Wright from Australia who belongs to the Waanyi tribe. Though from continents on either side of the globe; these writers focus on a similar cause; they are trying to counter identity politics - a politics through which false identities are created and propagated. Through their writings; they aim to decentralise dominant hegemonic centres of power. These novels reverberate with pride in aboriginal ways of life accompanied by regret and anger at being portrayed as unfit to share powerful places in society. The novels recall untold myths and histories to reassert their cultural ableness. The arguments here sustain the fact that oppressed societies counter neglect by producing counter-narratives that project native identities; and perspectives; and recall historical experiences absent in the documents circulated by the ruling class. This sheds new light on powerful ideologies that encompass social relationships. In both these nations; Australia and Native America; the oppressors have settled in native spaces and today rule the Nation and ostracise the First Nation citizens.

Disability Studies theorist Christopher Bell challenged disability studies to engage with race; calling it "white disability studies" in his essay "Introducing White Disability Studies: A Modest Proposal;" in 2006. His posthumous work *Blackness and Disability* (2011) further developed this field of research. Thoughts and writings of Fiona Kumari Campbell; Tobin Siebers; A. J. Withers; Sami S. Chalk; and others also helped to ponder further on the suggestions put forth by Christopher Bell. A quick review of all the above works together highlights the urgency of understanding how neoliberal economic oppression and the suppression or the presumed civilising of the natives are to be read side by side. Such arguments foreground ableness in sexed; raced; and appropriated bodies. As Nirmala Erevelles contends; "Race and disability; two significant categories of difference that shape the social; have often been conceptualised as analogous to each other" (145). This led to the use of dis/ability being used as a metaphor. Collectively; these works reflect an effort to deal with complex histories of marking racially 'othered' bodies as physically; psychologically; or morally deficient. The chief protagonists of these novels have gone through traumatic incidents similar to the ones felt by physically disabled people. Here; "disability is not a physical or mental defect; but a cultural and minority identity" that deters the characters from their maximum performance (Siebers 4). Hence; the protagonists are viewed as 'disabled' because of the cultural milieu in which they find themselves.

Thomas Witka Just; the central figure in *People of Whale*; leaves his wife Ruth Small to serve in the Vietnam War. Troubled by the brutalities of war and disillusioned by the actions of his fellow soldiers; he flees into the Vietnamese forests after an altercation that results in fatalities among American soldiers. Thomas integrates into a local tribe; eventually marrying Ma; a tribal woman. Meanwhile; Ruth remains in A'atsika with their son; Marco; waiting anxiously. Seven years later; Thomas is forcibly repatriated by the American military. Overwhelmed by shame and unable to confront his past; he disappears into the anonymity of the city. However; news of renewed whaling by his community prompts Thomas to return to A'atsika. He seeks redemption through participation in traditional whaling rites; hoping to cleanse his spirit. Back in A'atsika; Ruth now leads protests against the resumption of whaling. Tragically; during one of these hunts; a whale is killed; and Marco loses his life in a devastating accident. Subsequently; the land suffers from a severe drought; intensifying the community's challenges. The narrative pivots around Thomas; Ruth; and their tribe as they navigate their collective trauma and seek healing amidst profound loss and environmental hardship.

Carpentaria serves as both a tribute to Aboriginal Australian heritage and a poignant exploration of the country's oppressive colonial history. The novel portrays Aboriginals confined to the impoverished slum of Picklebush; highlighting their struggles against systemic marginalisation. At its core is Normal Phantom; leader of the Westside community within Picklebush; depicted as an atypical hero who refuses direct confrontation with his adversaries. His inaction symbolises the deep-seated shame inflicted on his people over generations of colonisation. Juxtaposing alongside Normal are three pivotal characters: Angel Day; Mozzie Fishman; and Elias Smith. Infused with elements of dreamtime and magical realism they navigate the clash of cultures from an Aboriginal Australian perspective. Central to the narrative is the Rainbow Serpent; a mythical being revered as the creator of the land and custodian of the land's history. Alexis Wright's works consistently challenge conventional interpretations of history; aiming for a holistic understanding of the past through unconventional narrative techniques.

Top of FormBottom of FormThe cultural model of disability proposes multiple rather than a single dominant model of dis-ableness. The examination explores how disability influences the creative aspects of identity; culture; and the viewpoints of the protagonists. The contestations of power in these novels are analysed as a struggle between able-bodied individuals and disabled bodies. The figure given below (Figure 1) explores the nuances of the three models proposed. The cultural model is here analysed from three levels – the individual level; the community level; and from a larger canvas - the worldview. When the changes in culture; ethnic identities; and social progress are not balanced it leads to a disability similar to medical and social disability. In this condition; bodies are not able to perform to their full potential. So; the journeys of Thomas and Normal; the chief protagonist of the selected novels; are taken together to show how social and political circumstances undermine the ability of the characters in both novels.

The sedimented history of these people; captured in their cultural memory which forms the truth of a group; is the focus at a second level. This finds its manifestations in narratives in the form of myths; mnemonic devices; structures; historical references; etc. which are valuable pieces of information in the analysis regarding the nature of cultural disability. Elements of cultural disability identified in these narratives aim at establishing the importance of celebrating and moving forward together rather than focussing on the differences. The significant absence of characters that represent colonial dominance in the plot of these novels makes them

a unique area of study. All characters belong to an aboriginal backdrop once again highlighting the texts at a critical level.

In the imaginary land of Desperance; Alexis Wright's chief protagonist Normal Phantom is portrayed as an aged aboriginal mystic and local leader. His dysfunctional community is cleverly camouflaged by the dreamtime narrative technique used in the novel. Likewise; the crisis in *People of the Whale* is foregrounded by juxtapositioning the modernised tribal space of Aa'tsika with the traditional space occupied by the people of white houses; as the community is referred to. When the tension in *Carpentaria* escalates around the establishment of a mining site; the novel *People of the* Whale escalates around the Vietnamese war. Thomas Witka suffers from post-traumatic war syndrome and is traumatised by his war memories. He builds a wall around his house isolating himself from the sea and his people. Normal; on the other hand; disappears into the sea for months to surpass his spells of cultural rootlessness. The social as well as private spaces of the protagonists are severely trampled upon; accentuating their cultural inability to lead a normal life. The protagonists are representatives of a section of people in multicultural societies; upon whom disability is thrust.

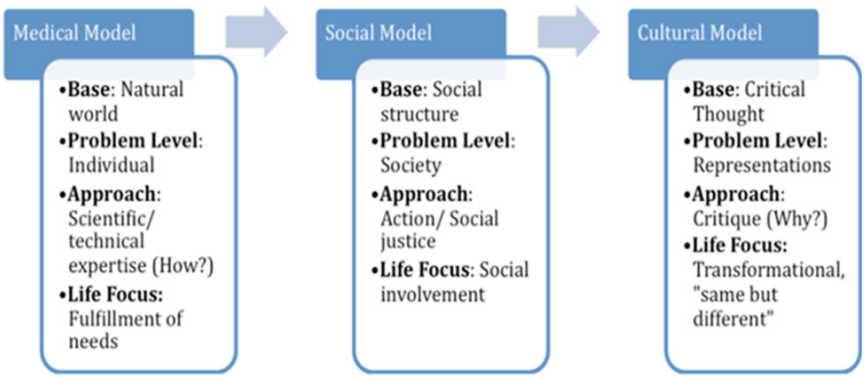

Figure1: Models of disability adapted from Lamb (2000) & Devlieger et al. (Brett 2)

At the centre of both novels; an aboriginal protagonist is found disorganised; failing miserably to acclimatise to the present scenario. Their native

knowledge systems passed on from their ancestors; stand juxtaposed against strategies of discrimination and assimilation adopted by the ruling class. This strange milieu forces Normal and Thomas to become recluses and to be viewed as misfits by their communities. Both the select protagonists are bearers of a heritage; a family name that has kept their respective communities united till now. Normal's family owned the river in which the Rainbow Serpent (mythological creature) lives: "His ancestors were the river people; who were living with the river from before time began" (Wright; *Carpentaria* 6) and Thomas's grandfather was a man of many unique skills. He is described thus in the novel. "By the age of five he had dreamed the map of underwater mountains and valleys; the landscape of the rock and the forests and the language of currents" (Hogan 19). Normal Phantom is a storyteller and taxidermist and Thomas is a whale hunter; skills acquired through informal knowledge systems of their communities. Forced by new circumstances; they are compelled to do new-generation jobs. One is a trash collector and the other is a soldier respectively. They fail miserably to assimilate. Ostracised as abnormal or diseased; they return traumatised by their experiences to live secluded lives.

Yet; these novels are not only about trauma and loss – they also celebrate aboriginal history and culture before the colonial invasion. It projects the aboriginal's refusal to be defined by Western notions of time and religion. Angel; Normal's wife who tries to assimilate into the white society declares immediately after finding a broken clock: "Luck was going to change for sure … because she Mrs. Angel Day; now owned the luck of the white people" (Wright; *Carpentaria* 23). In another instance; she also finds a statue of Mother Mary through which she believes she will be able to appreciate the religion of the Uptown people. Through Angel's failed journey of self-discovery; Wright vetoes notions of time and religion popularised by the colonisers. The Aboriginal's way of life; time; and beliefs have a different connotation incomprehensible to the dominant white society. For example; the Aboriginals describe the day Thomas Witka was born in the following manner. "But on this day; the day after Thomas was born; the octopus walked out of the sea … the eye of it looking at them; each one seen; as if each one was known in all their past; all their future" (Hogan 15). By introducing such a description Hogan undermines the importance of "July 2; 1947" the birthday of Thomas marked by the Gregorian calendar (15). Instead; the novel begins by foregrounding the Octopus; the spiritual guardian of the tribe as the holder of all memories. The stories can be considered as resistance narratives which motivate the reader to conclude with Wright that the crux of the crisis in the novels is

that "precarious modernity is squashed by hostilities dormant for four hundred years…" and not the cultural disability of ethnic minorities as proposed by dominant narratives (Wright; *Carpentaria* 25). With the tools of power confiscated through centuries of colonisation; the dominant society rejects native capabilities and disregards aboriginal beliefs and practices as deviant; a disability.

Signs of a cultural model of disability at an individual level can be detected in the following actions of the protagonists - their rootlessness; their disinterestedness in daily activities; their psychological instability; lack of social bonding; alcoholism; violence; etc. All these together with their inability to maintain a steady means of livelihood indirectly result in social disability. Skilled primarily in their traditional means of livelihood; Normal and Thomas find themselves at odds with their respective clan's new means of livelihood. The people of Desperance are today trash collectors and the people of Aa'tsika have commodified whale hunting and do not follow rules and rituals previously followed by the clan. The two men are severely affected by the present plight of their respective communities which intensifies their emotionally and morally disabled status prompting them further to make wrong decisions. They fail miserably to earn respect among their tribesmen. Due to misplaced patriotic notions; Thomas joins the American army weeks after his marriage to his childhood sweetheart Ruth. The reality of the war unsettles him and in his disabled condition; he kills fellow soldiers and escapes into the jungle. After the war; Thomas feels: "He was a lie. His cells were all lies; and his being was made up of lies…" (Hogan 45). Oddly; the narrative space provided by the novels helps them to vindicate their position and reassert their natural position in their land and communities.

The select authors celebrate the 'differences' used by the dominant class to discriminate against Aboriginals. In the process; they reclaim lost identities and repair the tarnished images of their communities. Thomas Witka has whales for company whereas gropers "the descendants of the giant dinosaur" are tamed by Normal (Wright; *Carpentaria* 248). Both Wright and Hogan have chosen these figures from their respective mythologies. The sea and the ancient river respectively calm and sustain Thomas and Normal in their journey of self-discovery. Many characters in the novels possess unusual skills. Thomas's father had webbed feet and his mother was a "whale singer" (Hogan 5). Singing ancient rhymes is a capability associated with many characters: "Yet old man Midnight remembered a ceremony he had never performed in his life…He went on and on; believing he was singing in the right sequence …" (Wright; Carpentaria 375).

Secondary characters like Rain Priest; Fires Extinguisher; Mozzie Fishman; Elias; Ruth; Micky; who is referred to as "a walking encyclopaedia" etc. play significant roles in redefining designated "eccentric" qualities as abilities sharpened by their community and culture (11). Cultural disability when viewed through the native lens presents able bodies that live by age-old principles followed from prehistoric times. The civilised does not necessarily abide by European standards in all cases. There are other noble and enabling systems of living.

Mozzie Fishman begins "a religious pilgrimage" to win over "the cold and heartless ambitions of politicians and bureaucrats who came flying … to destroy the lives of the aboriginals" (Wright; *Carpentaria* 125; 128). Their strange habits and actions surprise non-native readers but their presence anchors people associated with native knowledge systems. When stories project the unique skills of tribal men and women and celebrate their lives and contributions; the confused new generation of tribal communities acclimatise and appreciate their unique identities and historical presence in the nation. The novels refute many existing stories; enlarge native worldviews; and demand space for decentralised communities. Hogan summarises Thomas's awakening thus:

> But lies are the first recognition of truth. He wouldn't think this; he wouldn't know it for many years. He would think; instead; My ancestors had purity and purpose. They had songs for everything. They were honest; even in their treaties; which in truth they called entreaties. (Hogan 45)

Ruth; Thomas' wife is a traditionalist and reminds her community that whaling is a collective effort. She reminds her fellow members that whaling is a traditional process that is tuned to the natural geographical and environmental milieu of the area. She warns the tribe of misguiding information from the dominant society which always treated whales as commodities to be killed and sold. "What about our ancestors calling them spirit fish when the white men called them devils;" she asks (Hogan 81). This one dialogue from the novel exposes the wide gap in the worldviews among societies living on the margins and that of their rulers. Lack of acceptance of their so-called 'deviant' worldview leads to disability acquisitions in many natives. Thoams and Normal are two typical examples of such deviant behaviours.

Normal Phantom and Thomas Witka are set apart because of their intimate knowledge of regions unfamiliar to the modern world and their intimate

contact with the spirit world: "Norm knew they were fossilised bones of gropers and other animals being found by … palaeontologists ... (Wright; *Carpentaria* 248). Thomas's father's "knowledge of the ocean was so great that scientists came to question him. Scientists and anthropologists then wrote papers about what he told them. Doctors from as far away as Russia came to find out how he held his breath and stayed beneath water for as long as he did with no ill effects; how he could remain in a hibernating state without breathing." (Hogan 19). But such capabilities are modulated and Bio-power; the technologies of power that societies use to police and subjugate select populations; is systemically used for control. At many junctures in these novels; the reader along with the characters experiences the fear and distrust of the authorities. Unsuitable and biased systems of law enforcement force characters to retreat further into the margins. Most aboriginal narratives highlight the active roles of both those who construct and experience it; yet often diminish the profound impact of individual participants in this process. Individuals are traumatised and their worldview is reduced to a state similar to that of the medically disabled. The chief protagonists of both novels are treated as 'strange' by both dominant and aboriginal communities and are isolated by their families.

These novels also throw light on how native people can escape these false identities and recover their lost ones. The extensive use of mythology is an effective strategy. This connects them to their cultural pasts and gives them a sense of continuity. The use of non-linear storytelling techniques mixed with innate memories is another strategy that many a time ruptures the normal flow of events as the Western world envisages it. Aboriginal novels written in English are found incomprehensible by mainstream readers because of this nonlinear narrative technique. If booksellers found *Carpentaria* difficult it was because Wright intended it that way. Using non-grammatical sentences (the English spoken by natives) and native vocabulary are other strategies adopted to undermine Western supremacy. The sites of memory in the aboriginal landscape do not have faulty significations. Ecological concerns and retreat to one's own culture enable natives to regain their ableness.

> Thomas thinks of the graves of old people at home; marked by whalebone; the shrines that belonged to the whalers and the women; the sky that isn't European. Its constellations are a great whale; a sea lion; a tree of life; and he remembers this; this is who he is; the man who stands beneath those stars; those planets. He's A'atsika. He comprehends the immensity; the pathos of the tragedy that shaped him and all his actions– and theirs– forever after.

(Hogan 256)

Identity is not a burden or a limitation; nor is it an inherent attribute or fixed condition. For Thomas trapped between Europe and A'astika identity is evolving. Will understands Normal; his father; better when he enters a cave marked by his ancestors. Identity is best understood as an epistemological construct encompassing various theories on how individuals navigate social contexts. These books in a way highlight identity formations as a theoretical way to understand the relationship between power; experience; culture; identity; and politics. Man is presented with immense opportunities to evolve and identify himself as a useful citizen in any cultural milieu presented to him. All cultures enable in one way or the other and hence should not be treated as a mark of dis-ableness.

> Will had climbed higher into the hills; until eventually; he came to a large rock cave. Inside; the walls were covered by ancestral paintings telling stories of human history; made and remade by ochre paints; as the forefathers whispered the charter of their land. Will acknowledged their presence; touched the walls in places to embrace the timelessness of his own being. He felt humbled; honoured to be in the home of birds; animals and clans people of time passed. (Wright; *Carpentaria* 182)

The cave and the site of memory described by Thomas above are projected as places where memory crystallises. The rock paintings are equated to ancestors and "the charter of their land" to Aboriginal people. The boundaries that define past; present and future collapse into "timelessness" (182). When Phantom touches the cave wall; he senses the presence of his ancestors. The paintings depicting the spiritual realm and aboriginal cosmology forge an interactive environment that surpasses the historical archives of dominant discourses. Hence this analysis based on a cultural disability paradigm reveals an understanding of the personal experience and political stance of aboriginal protagonists in a new light. Native literature in the beginning concentrated on traditions as a cultural retreat. But today cultural memory; history; and myth are used as agents to rediscover lost heritage and culture and present them as tools to overcome the challenges posed by the present environment.

Identity is usually perceived based on visible differences connected to the medical or physical conditions of the body. This paper takes the argument forward and concentrates on the sufferings and marginalisation of the culturally differentiated which affects physical ableness. The dilemma orig-

inates from differences identified in skin colour; gender traits; gestures; voice; body shapes; linguistic backgrounds; racial and social standing; etc. Stereotypical descriptions and appropriated historical narratives lend power to the oppressors and lead to further suppression and marginalisation of the disabled; especially the culturally different ones this paper has pondered over. "Identities; narratives and experiences based on disability have a status of theory because they represent locations and forms of embodiment from which the dominant ideologies of society become visible and open to criticism" (Siebers 14).

The novels under examination portray protagonists who start disoriented and traumatised within their aboriginal settings but are rejuvenated through slow tactics of cultural assimilation. Through such counter-narratives; native authors urge people who are forced to identify themselves as non-abled to think differently than accept being marked as different. These novels help readers to look beyond popular descriptions; identify themselves as non-disabled; and read what one is not. At the end of both the novels taken up for study characters reform and achieve social inclusion; after reshaping their identities and capacities. Their journeys of self-affirmation and exploration lead them to emerge stronger; more mature and rejuvenated. Hence both the novels reclaim the lost glory of aboriginal protagonists and inspire others to follow similar paths with more vigour. Recognising and respecting cultural dimensions is crucial for promoting inclusivity; understanding; and support within multicultural nations.

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