



Contemporary Disability Poetry Discourse: A Study of Selected Poems of Vassar Miller

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Abstract

In contemporary American poetry, disability poetry, which emerged in the late decades of the 20th century, has gained substantial popularity and societal influence on par with protest poetry, which decries injustice based on race, ethnicity and class. This study, thus debunks Meg Day, American scholar who thinks that, "Disability poetics isn't for us," meaning that it falls short in preventing disability by non-disabled poets (such as objectifying disability metaphors and tragic or reductively inspirational representations of disability that are not written by disabled people. Handicapped poets recognized that poetry was a potent medium for articulating their agonizing experiences and their grief of their crippled bodies. This paper seeks to highlight the pervasiveness of disability representation in contemporary American poetry and the poetical richness of the marginalized poets. Vassar Miller (1924-1998) had written disability poetry combined with feminist attitude to claim back their stolen disabled body from non-disabled ones. She tries to fight the sense of ableism in communities where they only see that beauty is embodied in their normalcy and beautiful bodies. This paper conducted a qualitative descriptive content analysis of Vassar Miller's poetry written in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Eight poems are chosen from Miller's collection (1991). *If I Had Wheels or Love: Collected Poems of Vassar Miller*, which compose and shape Miller's viewpoint of disability as a literary, social and cultural tradition. The purpose of this study is to explore Vassar Miller's poetry of disability selected from her collection *If I had Wheels or Love: Collected Poems* (1991). She argues that disability is a social and cultural enforcement rather than physical impairment. The study revealed that disability is presented not only as a goal, but also as a means to subvert the conventional notions of beauty, sexuality, and normalcy spread among American community.

Keywords: Ableism, Crip poetry, Disability, Normalcy, and Vassar Miller.

خطاب شعر الإعاقة المعاصر: دراسة لقصائد مختارة من شعر فاسر ميلر

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الملخص

في الشعر الأمريكي المعاصر، اكتسب شعر الإعاقة، الذي ظهر في العقود الأخيرة من القرن العشرين، شهرة كبيرة وتأثيراً اجتماعياً يعادل شعر الاحتجاج الذي يدين الظلم بناءً على العرق والإثنية والطبقة



الاجتماعية. لذا، تفند هذه الدراسة رأي ميغ داي، الباحثة الأمريكية التي تقول: "شعر الإعاقة ليس لنا"، مما يعني أنه لا يساهم في الوقاية من الإعاقة من قبل شعراء غير معاقين (مثل تجسيد الإعاقة من خلال الاستعارات أو التمثيلات التراجيدية أو الإلهامية التبسيطية للإعاقة التي لا يكتبها المعاقون). وقد أدرك شعراء المعاقين أن الشعر كان وسيلة قوية للتعبير عن معاناتهم وألم أجسامهم. تسعى هذه الورقة البحثية تسليط الضوء على انتشار تمثيل الإعاقة في الشعر الأمريكي المعاصر وغنى الشعر الذي يقدمه الشعراء المهمشون. كتبت فاسر ميلر (1924-1998) شعراً عن الإعاقة جمع بين الموقف النسوي لاستعادة أجسامهم المعاقة المسروقة من الآخرين غير المعاقين. تحاول الشاعرة محاربة التمييز ضد المعاقين في المجتمعات التي ترى أن الجمال يتجسد في الطبيعية والجمال الجسدي. أجرت هذه الورقة تحليلاً وصفيًا نوعيًا لمحتوى شعر فاسر ميلر المكتوب في أواخر الثمانينيات وأوائل التسعينيات. تم اختيار ثمانية قصائد من مجموعة ميلر (لو كان لدي عجالات أو حب: القصائد المختارة لفاسر ميلر) (1991) التي تشكل وتعبّر عن وجهة نظر ميلر حول الإعاقة كتراث أدبي واجتماعي وثقافي وهي تجادل بأن الإعاقة هي فرض اجتماعي وثقافي أكثر من كونها إعاقة جسدية. كشفت الدراسة أن الإعاقة لا تُعرض فقط كهدف، بل أيضًا كوسيلة لقلب المفاهيم التقليدية للجمال والجنس والطبيعية المنتشرة في المجتمع الأمريكي.

الكلمات المفتاحية: التمييز ضد المعاقين: شعر المعاقين، الإعاقة، الاعتدال، وفاسر ميلر.

Introduction

By studying various literary works throughout history, it can be noticed that stereotypical representations of disability are prominently portrayed. When people with disability limbs are shown as deformed, blind, paralyzed, mentally sick, or experiencing any other sort of bodily function impairment, it is typically associated with villainous or wicked characters, or it is depicted literally as a handicap resulting from combat injuries.

A. J. Baird, a literary scholar condemns poetry of disability before the 1983 due to certain reasons that show poetry of disability as super-sentimental and self-pitying. In sense, reading such a poetry would give us superficial empathy rather than in depth attachment. Baird sees this sort of poetry was not successful or up to the artistic standards of the mainstream (qtn. Bartlett, et al. 2011, p. 28).

Historically speaking, The Disability Rights Movement had its start in the 1970s when activists began to call for demonstrations, destroy social barriers, organize rallies, and push for legislative changes so that wheelchair users or people of disability could make their voices heard among the mainstream. This political stereotypical view of disability challenges the medical model, which views disability as a personal, biological issue that has to be resolved. Furthermore, it upholds the idea that those with disabilities are flawed, deserving of little respect, and not worthy of equal rights. Therefore, on similar basis to how the Civil Rights Act of 1964-banned discrimination based on race, the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 and the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 made it unlawful to discriminate against anyone based on their impairment or their limitations (Yu, 2021: 126). One of the leading figures of Disability poetry, Jim Ferris explains that disability or crip poetry is:



Poetry that seeks to explore and validate the lived experience of moving through the world with a disability. Sometimes referred to as crip poetry, disability poetry embodies a disability consciousness; it is informed by and contributes to disability culture." That is a serviceable definition. But here's what I left out: the possibility, the edgy potential, the openness and even likelihood of transformation (Ferris, 2007: 12).

Crip poetry, like the rest of the disability arts movement, opposes the idea that disability is a personal, tragic, pitiful, and humiliating occurrence. Disability poetry also has a keen understanding of how society interprets and reacts to human differences, frequently leading to prejudice, marginalization, and discrimination. This leads to a significant portion of the impact that impairments have on people's life. Ferris believes that there are certain features of "crip poetry," which involve "a challenge to stereotypes and an insistence on self-definition; a foregrounding of perspectives of people with disabilities; an emphasis on embodiment, especially atypical embodiment (qtn. Bartlett, et al, 2011,p. 226).

In the 1980s and 1990s, American poets started to include disability more overtly into their poems (Toward Solomon's Mountain, 1986). Many of these poets, including Laura Hershey, Jim Ferris, Kenny Fries, and Stephen Kuusisto, put disability at the center of their poetry by writing primarily for disabled readers rather than nondisabled ones, and their work additionally reflects their involvement in the Disability Rights Movement and disability culture as well as to their embodied experiences living with disability (Baird and Workman, 1986).

A clear line of distinction was made between disability poetics and crip poetics by Meg Day, American scholar. She said that "Disability poetics isn't for us," meaning that it falls short in preventing disability by non-disabled poets (such as objectifying disability metaphors and tragic or reductively inspirational representations of disability that are not written by disabled people). Day has thus made an approximate to identify more with crip poetry than with disability poetry since, in her opinion, only crip poets like Gaia Thomas, Raymond Luczak, Daniel Simpson, and Ona Gritz heavily and objectively formulated people with disability as a major topic in their poetic writings (Yu, 2021:128).

This research focuses on studying crip poetry of Vassar Miller showing the impact of disability as a social factor, which subverts the crip people rather than as a malfunction of the body. Miller is a staunch defender of disability rights. Vassar Miller (1924-1998) is an American poet who wrote a great deal of poetry, which was highly acclaimed for its exacting formality, emotional intensity, and strong religious convictions. The majority of her poems explored her life as a disabled person. Miller was born with cerebral palsy, and her father, a real estate developer, encouraged her from an early age to write by



typewriter. Miller explored religious faith, social isolation, and physical disability. Miller's life with cerebral palsy was portrayed in several of her works. Furthermore, she advocated individuals with disabilities and gave voice to what she described as "one of the world's most invisible minorities" through her work as a poet.

In her famous work entitled *Despite this Flesh: The Disabled in Stories and Poems* (1985), an anthology she produced in 1985, Miller and other handicapped writers explored what it meant to live with a disability for the reader. Miller is known for her collection entitled *If I had Wheels or Love: Collected Poems* (1991) in which a perceptive reader can detect her mature poetic style and direct style. Miller reviewed her own situation and discussed the hardships she and her family faced in the beginning. Miller sought to collect poetry of disability in an anthology to show abled-bodied people to the lives of the disabled by using their own words and stories to fight and challenge the term of 'Ableism'

Vassar Miller, who was 74 years old when she passed away in 1998, lived her whole life in a wheelchair. Her body was weak due to cerebral palsy, and her speech was sporadic and hard to comprehend. She was a devout Christian who wrote with both the skepticism of a skeptic and the spirit of a mystical saint. Similar to the audacity with which she penned her spiritual poetry, Vassar Miller was never afraid to discuss her disabilities (Bartlett, et al. 2011: 77).

Material and Methods of Research

This paper conducted a qualitative descriptive content analysis of Vassar Miller's poetry written in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Eight poems are chosen from Miller's collection (1991). *If I Had Wheels or Love: Collected Poems of Vassar Miller*, which compose and shape Miller's viewpoint of disability as a literary, social and cultural tradition. In addition to the textual analysis, this study examined the corpus scholarship about Miller's works, the historical, cultural, and literary works of great value to assess and interpret the intended message in her poetry. To shed light on the importance of disability and poetry, the study dedicates a section to explain and discuss theories set by Garland-Thomson and Lennard J. Davis. These theories are assets to understand disability in Miller's poetry. They are used as tools to analyze Miller's poems. Miller's use of disability, in her poems, touches other intersectional areas of studies like gender, race and identity. Her writing of disability is set against the backdrop of these theories; *Extraordinary Bodies: Figuring Physical Disability in American Culture* by Garland-Thomson, *'Feminist Disability Studies: Signs'* by Garland-Thomson *'Constructing Normalcy'* by Lennard J. Davis.

Theorizing Disability

The foundation of disability studies is formulated to combating the social exclusion of those with impairments. Disability, according to a large number of



humanity academics involved in this topic, is not a peripheral concern in literary and cultural studies but rather a crucial and revolutionary critical category for understanding literature and literary theory. The frequent use of literary characters with impairments as simple emblems of evil, exoticism, frailty, or ugliness has drawn criticism from academics (Garland-Thomson Extraordinary Bodies: Figuring Physical Disability in American Culture and Literature 9).

These critics examine the recurrent preconceptions that are supported by literary works and contend that traditional narratives about disabilities are frequently inaccurate and fall short of fully capturing the complexity of disability as an identity, a mode of existence, or an embodied, lived experience. According to these scholars, clichéd narrative scripts have the capacity to uphold ableist ideas that disability is an absence; handicapped characters are frequently employed only as a means of illuminating aspects of the non-disabled protagonist (Murray, 2012,p. 245).

Disability studies gained more and more attention as a legitimate academic discipline starting in the 1980s. Scholars probe the relationship between disability as a subject position and as a location of human knowledge. Academics differentiate between two models concerning disability: the **medical** and **social** models. Numerous academics drew clear line that they disagreed with the medical paradigm, which saw disability as only personal shortcoming in a form of illness that needed to be remedied or hidden. They refused to see disability as a disease or as a condition that required treatment.

Rather, advocates and academics presented a social model of disability that is frequently referred to as the "social-constructionist" approach. This approach emphasized the structural and public dimensions of disability as well as the historical oppression of the disabled population. They propound a crucial distinction between "impairment" and "disability". Under this modal of disability, a person's disability is a product of their relationship with the society in which they live. People become "disabled" when they are excluded from or subjected to discrimination by society, and this can take the form of affective, sensory, cognitive, or architectural barriers. On the other hand, an impairment is a physical, functional limitation (Hall, 2016: 21).

For Tom Shakespeare, the social model's articulation had a complicated and wide-ranging impact since it was both an academic theory and an activist instrument. He maintains that it was a force for change on three avenues: politically, by helping to mobilize the disabled community; instrumentally, by emphasizing the need for society to change and remove barriers; and psychologically, by fostering the growth of a shared identity among individuals with disparate physical and mental disabilities (2006).



In his book, entitled "The Disability Studies Reader" Lennard J. Davis writes about disability from historical point of view, and how this field of study emerged as interdisciplinary field with other discourses:

It is not as if disability studies has simply appeared out of someone's head at this historical moment. It would be more appropriate to say that disability studies has been in the making for many years, but, like people with disabilities, has only recently recognized itself as a political, discursive entity. Indeed, like the appearance of African- American studies following rapidly on the heels of the civil rights movement, there is a reciprocal connection between political praxis by people with disabilities and the formation of a discursive category of disability studies ("Introduction" 2006: xvi).

As stated by disability historian Paul Longmore, the history of disability studies may be broken down into "waves." The first wave was made up of activism and advocacy for civil rights, which resulted in the U.S, Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990. The rise of disability studies as an academic subject that remained intimately related to collective identity and disability culture movements marked the second wave. In more recent times, academics have proposed that disability theory is about to enter a third phase, or wave, in which the discipline is starting to "fissure" around several important arguments. One of these splits revolves around the social model's central binary, which is the difference between "disability" and "impairment" (Adams 496). The concept of disability studies by Tobin Siebers states that literary and cultural discourses offer a wealth of material for research:

Disability studies does not treat disease or disability, hoping to cure or avoid them; it studies the social meanings, symbols, and stigmas attached to disability identity and asks how they relate to enforced systems of exclusion an expression (Siebers, 2008: 4).

The early writing of first wave in literary and cultural disability studies concentrated on discovering and recovering this richness of works by intellectuals and writers with disabilities through investigating fictional characters and formerly published literary or cultural theory that addresses disability. In his biographical approach to the recuperative enterprise, Davis, for instance, asks his readers whether they have ever seen any of the following writers as disabled: George Gordon Byron, Virginia Woolf, John Milton, Alexander Pope, John Keats, James Joyce, or Virginia Woolf (Hall, 2016, 32).

These scholars scrutinize the repeated stereotypes that are underpinned by literary works and contend that typical narratives about disabilities are frequently inaccurate and fall short of fully capturing the nuanced nature of disability as an identity, a mode of existence, or lived experience. According to these researchers, stereotyped narrative scripts have the power to sustain ableist



ideas that disability is an absence; handicapped characters are usually used only as an avenue of illuminating aspects of the non-disabled protagonists (Davis, 2006,p. 3).

According to Davis, the novel is one of several "public venues" where the "abnormal" is shown to support hegemonic notions of the normal in terms of gender, ethnicity, class, and ability or disability. Davis calls this theory "enforcing normalcy" Lennard Davis believes that the idea of disability used as merely as a tool of illuminating or supporting the norm works supersede the level of character and involving the level of genre (Davis, 2006: 4).

Davis' viewpoint is articulated and underpinned by Leonard Kriegel, in his treatise entitled, "Disability as Metaphor in Literature" (1988). Kriegel states that disability, as literary representation, is usually viewed as source of pity or threat. The other metaphorical sense of disability is that it serves to reinforce and stabilize concepts of normalcy or to provide readers with more context for the story and a deeper comprehension of the main, non-disabled characters. In a sense, disability is not shown for the sake of disability but for other purposes like notions normalcy and hegemony. Disability as a field of study is an interdisciplinary one, the study will adopt an eclectic approach where disability and feminism are combined to study and analyze poems.

Studies on disabilities and feminism have a lot in common and share the similar ground. These movements concentrate on rights and have a commitment to uncovering the cultural conventions, social traditions and power structures that support ableism and sexism. Both of them sprang from activism for rights. For a woman with disability is probably to be humiliated, suffered, exploited and to experience sexual harassment than non-disabled woman. Disabled woman is twice oppressed; first being a woman and second being a disabled woman.

Dualistic identity theories have been utilized by feminists and disability scholars to draw attention to the ways in which oppressive roles are created by society. First-wave disability researchers frequently made a difference between physical "impairment" and the socially created category of "disability," just as early feminists demanded a separation between biological "sex" and cultural presumptions about "gender." However, in more recent times, scholars like Tom Shakespeare and Judith Butler have started to wonder whether it is really possible to draw such a clear division between the social and the physical in both domains. The meeting points between feminism and disability are available and can be used as framework to study literary, cultural text.

According to Susan Wendell (1997: 273), a feminist disability studies approach must recognize the need of reciprocal interdependency among individuals due to the prevailing cultural belief that depending on the help of others is humiliating in a society, which celebrates independence Here, a disability studies viewpoint



highlights the ways in which conventional justifications for autonomy and independence frequently rest on an assumed, required able-bodiedness.

Iris Marion Young, a philosopher, shows how nature of femaleness, disease, and disability are often associated in western thought; women's bodies, like those of people with disabilities, are often perceived as deficient, heavy, and frail. They are always carry within themselves the sense of lacking whether as a woman or a disabled woman. There is an obvious connection between disability studies and feminism because the sense of rejection of the medicalized idea that certain bodies are really inherently malformed, helpless, damaged, or dependent (2005: 45). Thus, the study puts feminism and disability in some sort of dialogue with each other discussing the politics of appearance, standards of beauty, normality and abnormality. In such critical area, Rosemarie Garland-Thomson has been a key figure in explaining the complex and reciprocal connection that exists between disability studies and feminism. Feminist disability studies was recognized as an area of study by Garland-Thomson in a 2005 paper that was published in the journal *Signs*. She divides the history of feminist disability studies into three waves: "retrievals", "reimaginings" and "rethinkings" (Hall, 2016: 42).

This structure calls to the mind Showalter's 1982 account of feminist literary history. "Retrievals" entails looking for literature that, although they may not directly address disability, still somehow convey the feeling of being impaired. The works of the second wave, under the umbrella "reimaginings," frequently feature works by women with disabilities and actively challenge and rewrite repressive scripts. "Rethinkings" has to do with intersectionality of disability with other areas of study as in poststructuralism, race, and materiality. Rosemarie Garland-Thomson says:

Language about "figuring" and "representing" or "narratives" can dislodge the pervasive notions we all learn about disability and shake up our assumptions about what constitutes happiness, attractiveness, suffering, dignity, or a livable experience. Feminist disability studies thus reveals both the cultural work and the limits of language. ("Feminist Disability Studies" 1559)

Garland-Thomson claims that literary descriptions of disability directly influence how the public views disabilities. She is well aware of the significant of social and political works that literary criticism can accomplish by exposing how disability is a socially constructed design implied through various representations, stories, and figures. Garland-Thomson's *Extraordinary Bodies*, and her later book, *Staring: How We Look* (2009), tries to search for a common ground between feminism and disability and doubting the standards of beauty set by hegemonic powerful structure by employing politics of appearance and its relationship with beauty. She uses her close reading approach to argue for a "disability aesthetics" that fundamentally attacks the mainstream



conceptualization of beauty in terms of “harmony, bodily integrity and health as standards of beauty” (cited in Hall, 2016: 42).

The Purpose of the Study

The paper aims to provide a new interpretation of disability in the light of theories set by Garland-Thomson and Lennard J. Davis. It shows how disability is not only a medical issue, but it is a social and cultural factor shaping and reshaping individuals who suffer from disability. It affirms the second and hidden layer of suffering of disability by being disabled woman. Because of being disabled woman, she does not have enough social space to interact and prove her identity. This paper also sheds light on how disabled woman, like Vassar Miller, was physically disabled but mentally and poetically capable of fighting back ableism by resorting to her spiritual reservoir. The other goal of the paper is to uncover violence whether social, or physical or even literal violence committed against people with disability. This paper shows that this violence is not haphazardly done, but it is committed with an ideology that people of disability are of lower status and they are sexually abused especially if an individual is a female.

Analysis, Discussion and Findings

Poetics of Disability in Practice: Vassar Miller's Poetry

In 1998, at the age of 74, Vassar Miller passed away, having lived her whole life in a wheelchair. Her body was weak due to cerebral palsy, and her speech was sporadic and hard to comprehend. Vassar Miller, a devout Christian, wrote right away with the spirit of a mystic saint. Miller wrote poetry that addressed social isolation, religious faith, and physical handicap; her poems' directness, clarity, and strict formal control brought to mind religious writers like Emily Dickinson, George Herbert, and John Donne. Miller once said that the purpose of her life was “To write. And to serve God.” (Bartlett, 2011: 77).

Vassar Miller published many books throughout her career as a poet of disability. Among them *Adam's Footprint* (1956); *Wage War on Silence* (1960), which was nominated for a Pulitzer Prize; *If I Could Sleep Deeply Enough* (1974); *Struggling to Swim on Concrete* (1984); and *If I Had Wheels or Love* (1991). Starting from her personal belief that writing is about figuring and representing body, Vassar Miller never hesitated to discuss her disabilities. Her writing has an unwavering declaration style and an emphatic, even urgent, and often furious tone. In her famous poem, "Dramatic Monologue in the Speaker's Own Voice," Miller sheds light on and connect between two spheres that stand for points of oppression and suffering: femininity and disability:

My lost virginity
would hurt me the way ghosts of their limbs
make amputees shriek, my womanhood
too seldom used. Have you ever viewed me this way?



No, none of you ever have. I'm either a monster
in search of a horror movie to be in,
or else I'm a brain floating within a body
whose sides I must gingerly touch while you glance
discreetly away. (Miller 82).

Miller contemplates how society looks upon her like. She is suffered and oppressed twice. Firstly, being a woman under the patriarchal structure and as a disabled woman. The stereotypical image is a monster that is suitable for horror movies, terrorizing non-disabled ones. She doesn't live a normal life, even when it comes to sexuality. People would turn away from her. She is freak and her body doesn't carry aesthetics of beauty yet it holds geography of abnormality. They turn their eyes away as they turn their eyes from garbage or killing scene. Her appearance is similar to ghost's appearance where people would not be accustomed.

Miller does not sentimentalize or romanticize the scene; she wants no sympathy as much as she seeks for equality. People have lost their spiritual values, which are supposedly the center where people might rely on. Writing in a religious tone about social isolation, she tries very hard to remind people of their mortality:

It gives you a nasty shock after which you insist I am glued
to my flesh like a fly in a paste pot. Maybe you think everyone is,
that, or a delicate lady in a dirty sty mincing on tiptoe.

I wish you'd learn better before we all totter
into our coffins where there's no straight way to lie crooked (Miller 82).

Non-disabled would look upon her as an insect attached to a certain frying pan or pot without any significance as a human being as others. She imagines a scene where people might encounter her in some random street. They shriek away because they hit something nasty. She writes with a prophetic tone that the day would come where all people would demise and cannot be circuitous before God.

Throughout the poem, the poet uses animal and freak imageries to dehumanize and animalize people with disability. From the beginning, we see the resisting tone towards the stereotypical image of disability saying that she is not a bomb that explode in people's hands. She is human with a soul, name and family as everyone is. In another poem entitled "If I Had Wheels or Love" the speaker imagines if she would have lover in her life as other women, she would be happy and thrilled and ready to move across the city roads:

I could make prayers or poems on and on,
Relax or labor all the summer day,
If I had wheels or love, I would be gone.
Spinning along the roadsides into dawn,
Feeling the flesh of lovers whom I'd lay
I could make prayers or poems on and on.



Whistling the hours by me as they drone,
Kissed on my breast and belly where I'd play

If I had wheels or love, I would be gone (Miller 80).

She interfuses sexual images and disability to highlight and intensify the sense of forbiddingness and being banned from simple life activities like sexual activity. She imagines herself being kissed and cuddled where two lovers are set in intimate relationship yet this is part of a dream or illusion that would not come true. She ends the poem: "Cool as the evening is and soft as fawn, /Warm as my fiddling fingers when they say." The speaker yearns for flattery speech or romance loving words in which each woman is in need of such words, nevertheless, none of that would take place because she is disabled, valueless and vampire-like creature. Miller shows how disabled women are always in a state of dependency. She is always a lacking creature who would never be complete because the entire community see them in that perspective. This proves Susan Wendell's viewpoint when she shows interdependency between individuals, men and woman. In a sense, a woman is a lacking subject and in need of men to be in complete unity. Wendell celebrates independence over dependence to have strong women.

The bodies in Miller's poetry are not shown as strange or menacing "others," here understood to be identities distinct from one's own that one uses to make sense of who they are. Rather, they provide an invitation to both readers with disabilities and those without to discuss their experiences of being marginalized. This includes the simultaneous and mutually reinforcing experiences of desexualization and dehumanization. Miller presents disability as a usual pain and people are used to watching people with disability as neglect and source of pitying. In her poem, "The Common Core," the poem starts with direct, simple words that deliver a strong message:

Each man's sorrow is an absolute
Each man's pain is a norm
No one can prove and no one refute.

Which is the blacker, coal or soot? (Miller 84).

The speaker casts doubt whether life offers any help to people with disability. People might be born with disability while others might be healthy, but they are prone to be disabled. In this regard, the inevitable sense of pain and sorrow is one. In other sense, the pain and suffering is indisputable:

No man's sickness has a synonym,
No man's disease has a double.
You weep for your love, I for my limbs—

Who mourns with reason? who over whims? (Miller 84).

Miller emphasizes the living experience of having sickness that might look harder and difficult to be accepted by others. People who have certain diseases might last for a while and be cured and treated. What about those who suffer



mostly from physical congenital issue or physical mutilations. Miller is a representative of people living with disability who believe in their rights of living as other non-disabled people. Miller who suffers from cerebral palsy presents a persona in "The Common Core, " having Gangrene which is a deadly disease that affects the human body. An individual affected by Gangrene is highly prone to die because certain limbs within his or her body will be cut off:

Gangrene is fire and cancer is burning.

Which one's deadlier? Toss

A coin to decide; past your discerning

Touch the heart's center, still and unturning,

That common core of the Cross;

You die of fire and I of burning. (Miller 84).

By comparing the two deadly diseases: Gangrene and cancer, Miller reaches a conclusion that, there is no difference between them because the common core between those diseases is death. There is no way out to avoid death. She utilizes death as a unifying feature of lives whether you are disabled or non-disabled. Through this technique of identification and sameness with otherness, she manages to secure some liminal space of humanity. By identifying with people suffering from certain disease, she shares their suffering and forwards her humanity first foremost.

Due to her physical limitations, Miller sheds light on the impact of disability on familial relationship, and this is typified in her poem, "Subterfuge" where images of familial love and disability are evoked. The opening lines of the poem describes the father coming in holding an underwood typewriter "like an awkward bouquet." This analogy highlights the importance of the typewriter in the situation by evoking both tenderness and awkwardness in his motion. The typewriter turns becomes the center of attention signifying creativity and the bond between the father and his child, who has spasms and is probably physically crippled:

for his spastic child who sits down

on the floor, one knee on the frame

of the typewriter, and holding her wrist

with her right hand, in that precision known

to the crippled, peck at the keys

with a sparrow's preoccupation. (Miller 87).

What is important is not the gift, but how the daughter reacts to the bouquet of typewriter. The child's approach of using the typewriter is explained in great details, emphasizing the difficulties with her body. She sits on the floor, bracing herself with one leg on the typewriter's frame and her right hand grabbing her wrist "with that exactness known to the crippled." This picture shows the child's focused effort and determination, and it also shows her as tough and resourceful



in spite of her physical limitations. The young child is described as "peck[ing] at the keys with a sparrow's preoccupation," finding typing to be a precise and engrossing hobby. The child's great focus and commitment to doing something significant are suggested by this visual element. Her study of language and imagination are facilitated by the typewriter, as seen by her discovery of rhyme "Falling by chance on rhyme." Miller seems to suggest that people of disability are creative, and they incur the potentiality of imagination. This typewriter is turned into a tool in which she practices her imagination and hobbies. This poem shows the parental love of a father who strives for safety to his disability daughter. The delicate but nuanced relationship between a father and his crippled daughter is captured in Vassar Miller's poem. The poem highlights the human spirit's fortitude and the transformational potential of creativity in the face of hardship via rich imagery and subtle language. It asks readers to reflect on the deep bonds that bind families together and the enduring power of love and support, even in the face of disability.

Miller dedicates a whole set of poems discussing the impact of disability in children. Children are used to walking and running in the meadows, however this image is turned upside down in Miller's poem, "The Crippled Child" which explicates the hardship and challenges in every action they take. Miller presents remorseful image of a child trying to tie her shoes. The very act of tying is a representation of the child's perseverance and effort in overcoming her physical constraints:

The crippled child

is teaching her doll.

Each thing she knows

is small, is small. (Miller 89).

The child's restricted range of contact and communication is brought to light, but her aptitude for empathy and caring is also highlighted when the child shares her emotions with a doll showing her innocence amid the struggles of disability. She finds happiness and meaning in sharing her life with her doll, in spite of her personal physical limitations:

The crippled child

is singing a song.

Each note she sings

is long, is long. (Miller 89).

The child is shown singing a song in the final verse; it is a song of woe and note of sadness. The repetition of "is long, is long" implies that every note she sings has emotional importance or heaviness. Despite her difficulties and disability, the child uses music as an avenue for healing and a way to express herself, overcoming her physical constraints and finding comfort in song. The sense of physical constraints or body limitation is turned into a recurrent image that defies the societal norms. In her famous poem, "Unseen Beauty," Miller ponders



what beauty is in the eyes of beholders? What is beauty's relationship to physical body? In this poem, she presents internal sense of beauty as something inherent and basic:

Most see a wretch
as birth's mistake
Who, if God had a face,
they'd spit in it. (Miller 90).

In his opening lines, the poet draws attention to the widespread belief that people who are perceived as ugly or deformed in such a way are damned people. It implies that even if God showed up in such a manner, people would still treat them with contempt and show them tremendous disgust or rejection:

Some, undeluded,
find beauty in us,
clean love of self
they never trade,
needing no mirror,
asking no exemption
Of the world's design
but justice only (Miller 90).

The poet draws a distinction between the views of the majority and those of a few who are able to see inner beauty and see past conventional aesthetics. This demonstrates the self-love and acceptance of people who value their intrinsic worth without need for approval from others and who see past outward looks. Miller gives a primacy for inner love and beauty over the outer love or physical beauty, which never last and it is temporary. These lines highlight one's independence from society's ideals of beauty, implying that genuine beauty is independent of comparisons or outside approval. The emphasis moves from outward appearance to a desire for equality and justice in the way people are viewed and treated especially those who are disabled:

Beauty as we've known it
is but a frail mask,
Cleaving to life,
where real beauty
feeds on the essence
of the soul's fulfillment (Miller 90).

Miller ends her poem showing her true belief in inner beauty, the essence of humanity. This argument questions the belief that beauty is fleeting and surface-level, like a mask that hides more profound realities. The poet makes the argument that genuine beauty transcends outward manifestations and material worries and instead comes from inner contentment and honesty. So, Miller tries overcome her physical limitation by emphasizing the overlooked aspects of humanity; like self-acceptance. "Unseen Beauty" promotes a more profound



comprehension of beauty that goes beyond superficial evaluations. It questions the notion that physical appeal is the only indicator of value and attacks cultural prejudices. Rather, the poem honors the beauty that may be discovered in honesty, self-acceptance, and spiritual satisfaction. It challenges readers to reevaluate how they define beauty and to see the intrinsic worth of every person, regardless of how they may appear. The poem highlights the idea that genuine beauty cannot be found in superficial physical characteristics or social norms, but rather in the sincerity and satisfaction of the spirit.

Miller stresses the importance of disabled people who are having psychological and physical issues in the middle of American community. This is clearly exemplified in her famous poem, "The Cripple." The poet adopts a tone of a marginalized disabled woman who suffers because of stereotypical image of disability, which is ugly, retarded individual:

I am the cripple, the one you pass by
with averted eyes and a whispered sigh
I am the burden, the weight you bear
The reminder of life's unfair share (Miller 92).

The speaker of the poem opens by talking about how other people see them—as a disabled person who is frequently pitied or neglected. Whispered sighs and turned away gaze convey social distaste and avoidance. The speaker feels like an inconvenience to other people, an ongoing reminder of the injustices and difficulties in life:

I am the outcast, the one you shun
The broken body under the sun
I am the reminder of your own mortality
The mirror reflecting your fragility (Miller 92).

In addition, the speaker shares how they feel rejected, humiliated and alone because of their physical attributes, making them feel like someone who belongs nowhere. It might be unsettling for many people to face their fragility and death, but the handicapped person's presence acts as a reminder of these things to others. However, Miller changes her tone in the third stanza showing people of disability as powerful and resilient ones who wouldn't succumb to death and listen to abhorrent voices:

But I am also more than what you see
I am a spirit strong and free
I am a fighter, a survivor of pain
A warrior who will rise again (Miller 92).

The speaker of the poem now contends that their inner power and tenacity surpass their outward appearance in this passage. The speaker presents himself



or herself as a victorious hero/ heroine who will not be defeated by their circumstances and highlights their resolve to overcome hardship and obstacles:

So do not pity me or look away
For I am here to stay
I may be broken, but I am whole
And in my heart lies a fire that will never grow cold (Miller 92).

The speaker invites people of disability to recognize their existence and worth as individuals, challenging the idea of sympathy. The speaker affirms their sense of completeness and the ongoing strength of their soul in spite of their bodily limitations. The poem beautifully conveys a message of perseverance and determination while simultaneously capturing the sentiments of marginalization and prejudice felt by people with disabilities. It dispels myths about society and promotes compassion and tolerance for people of disability. In the end, the poem honors the human spirit's tenacity in the face of hardship, highlighting the significance of looking past outward manifestations to acknowledge each person's innate power and dignity.

The sense of physical limitation or disability is reflected in a person's dreams in which Miller presents a character who suffers from sleeplessness and wishes to have dreams as others. This sense of disability is integrated with other hardships like insomnia. In her famous poem entitled, "Insomniac's Prayer" Miller vividly portrays the experience of insomnia and the longing for restful sleep to stay away from blameful and hateful words of disability through powerful imagery and metaphor:

I lie with my body knotted into a fist
clenching against itself,
arms doubled against my ribs,
knees crooking into a gnarl,
legs, side by side, martialled. (Miller 97).

The first few lines use a metaphor of the body being firmly clenched and twisted to represent the physical tension and discomfort felt during insomnia. The speaker's distorted body position is depicted in this visual, highlighting the difficulty and restlessness associated with insomnia. The entire experience of insomnia is a reflection of his disability issue showing that a disabled individual is suffered at physical level and emotional level:

My sleep is a war against waking up,
my waking up is a slow ravelling again into dark
when dreams jump out of my skull
like pictures in a child's pop-up book
onto paper if my luck can catch them



before they dribble away into dingy dawns (Miller 97).

The speaker imagines himself in a battleground against the unavoidable return to consciousness as he or she sleeps. It is said that waking up is a repetitive and draining process by comparing it to unwinding back into darkness. Dreams are ephemeral and enigmatic; they appear for a short while before vanishing into reality:

Oh, who will unsnarl my body
into gestures of love?
Who will give my heart room
to fly free in its rickety cage?
Whose subtlety whisper apart my legs,
Thrusting quick like a snake's tongue?
Who will nudge the dreams back into my head,
back into my bones, where rhyming with one another like wind chimes,
they will make music whenever I move? (Miller 97).

The speaker longs for companionship and warmth as well as an end to the physical strain. Within the bounds of the speaker's tortured heart, it expresses a wish for emotional emancipation and tranquility. In order to reduce the tension and restlessness, kindness and care are suggested by the images in this passage. The speaker imagines dreams as harmonic components within themselves that stimulate movement and creativity, and they want for someone or anything to bring back the dreams and creativity that insomnia has taken. The speaker yearns for dreams of having himself free from fetters of disability. Losing dreams, and having the experience of sleeplessness are denoting features of disability at emotional level; especially Miller links dreams with the idea of movement as if dreams are source of inspiration and power that a disability individual resorts to. "Insomniac's Prayer" expresses a profound need for relief, closeness, and the return of dreams and creativity while evoking the mental and physical misery of insomnia. The poem expresses the irritation of insomnia while also hinting at a positive want for comfort and renewal alongside disability of the fragile body.

Conclusions

In short, Miller advocates the rights of disabled who are suffering from marginalization, dehumanization and exploitation. What makes Miller unique is that she adds double layer of suffering by being a woman. She presents female disabled individuals who are suffered first because of being disabled and second because of being a woman. Miller presents the issue of disability and sticks to the spiritual reservoir to stand for disabled people and fight back ableism. The



poet combines sexuality and disability showing female disabled women who are banned from the basic pleasures of life where these disabled women haven't got lovers as other women. That is why Miller introduces the woman who is always in need of relationship, love and marriage.

Miller tries to raise the consciousness of people towards people of disability and change the preconceived thoughts into some sort of solidarity. She emphasizes the social aspect of disability, treats disability not as a disease but as a social format. They believe that people of disability wouldn't have felt their disability without some social dehumanizing factor that keeps stressing people of disability. Those people are banned from basic element of life as in marriage or sexual life. Miller relies heavily on the spiritual reservoir to stand for people of disability and fight against marginalization and dehumanization. She endeavors to develop disability poetics that values non-normative expertise, style, language, and intellect as well as alterity. Instead of trying to hide behind words, the poet attempts to utilize them to highlight diversity and uplift a voice that is marginalized in the face of ableist views that are prevalent today.

Poetry of disability undoubtedly exhibits a range of emotions, including balance and imbalance, health and illness, evident infirmity and concealed power. Nevertheless, poetry on disabilities challenge conventional wisdom and the accepted notion of normalcy through these oppositions. Having an asymmetrical life or physique implies a distinct perspective. Trying to believe in other talents is part of living with a handicap. The mind and body are interdependent; having a disability, being blind or deaf, or not having intelligence does not imply that one lacks the other's strength. After all, the crippled are unable to avoid discomfort; it is not their decision. To us, he or she may be a sibling, sister, parent, or friend. By combining our voices to the voices of people with disability, we can reach a middle ground where a community of equality can be grounded and our look upon health and sickness can be altered.

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