



Research Paper

## Body, Gaze and Disability Reality: A Study on MaliniChib's One Little Finger and The Girl Who Can by AmaAta Aidoo

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**Abstract:**

Disability studies have occupied a vibrant place in the interdisciplinary fields. The social perceptive attitude towards a person with physical and mental disorders is negative and that perception causes those disabled demotivated and demoralized in society. The issue arising out of human perception towards disabled person is not a current phenomenon; it dates back to the dawn of human history. The bodily differences derive the idea of disability on certain physical and mental characteristics. Like the gender difference as a product of social culture, persons with impaired physical characteristics are categorized as 'strange', 'disabled' and are supposed to be unable to do any work or unfit for usual life. This is society's visual and traditional attitude which causes deterioration of the disabled class. The disabled are misunderstood and negatively treated and stripped off their mere rights of living along with the abled. Sometimes, they are thought to be product of divine curse or as product of their previous sins and are treated as burden to the society. This paper aims to explore physical body of the disabled, social attitude to the body and the reality of disability in MaliniChib's One Little Finger and Ama Ata Aidoo's The Girl who Can.

**Keywords:** Disability, interdisciplinary, gender, impairments, gaze, sins.

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### I. Introduction:

The concept of ability and disability is misunderstood and remains as a controversial issue in society. Ability and disabilities are differentiated on certain physical characteristics which are thought as less able than normalcy and this is purely one's own perception how one observes a disabled person and analyzes. It is one's individual attitude which is one's own perceptive reflection upon what he sees and how is seen and analyzed. The social attitude towards the disabled people are much influenced by the culture which shapes one's mental behavior and reflection and from this perceptual attitude, one finds differences and develops a nuance towards the disabled people. It is closely linked with values, ethics, moral reasoning and choice when one comes in contact with other. Wyer and Lambart define 'person perception' as the process by which people form impressions and make judgements about the traits and characteristics of others. These perceptions involve evaluating a physical appearance and relation why an individual looks, dresses, and appears as he/she does.

The individual's perception of body towards the disability is explained in terms of Mikhail Bakhtin. Bakhtin's the 'gaze' refers to the act of seeing another person from a specific, situated perspective, highlighting the idea that our perception of someone is always influenced by our own position in relation to them, meaning we can never fully grasp another person's complete self as they see themselves due to this 'outside' viewpoint; this concept is closely tied to his broader ideas of 'dialogism' and 'heteroglossia' where meaning is created through the interaction between different voices and perspectives.

Body image is gazed at the people with physical disability is examined from a psychosocial perspective that is informed by the social model of disability. Psychosocial theory provides a useful framework for understanding the body image concerns of people with physical disability. It includes concepts such as 'stigma' and 'otherness' as well as integrating the problem of exclusionary social ideals and social norms.

Goffman (1963, p. 12) provided one of the earliest and most notable psychosocial perspectives on physical disability. Goffman built his theoretical discussion around the concept of stigma that he defined as “an attribute that is deeply discrediting”. He distinguished between three different types of stigma. The first type he described as abominations of the body, and within this category were the physical disabilities or disfigurements. The second type was blemishes of individual character, such as mental disorder.

Thus, according to stigma theory, when a person with a physical disability meets a stranger, the stranger immediately becomes aware of the person's ‘discrediting attribute’, that is the physical impairment. The impairment results in ‘stigma’, and the stranger makes many other attributions about the person based on this one attribute. These attributions may include that the person with the physical disability is unattractive, impotent, asexual, receiving welfare payments or of lower intelligence. The person may be immediately discounted as a possible lover or friend. Hence, the disability becomes an all-permeating, overwhelming classification that obscures all other personal characteristics, skills and abilities (Dovey&Graffam, 1994; Lawrence, 1991; Stone, 1995).

The overt and the covert attitude towards the persons with disabilities is not the current phenomenon but is stereotypical social malice. The disabled confront various types of oppression and prejudices that cause to discourage and disregard their lives.

### **Body, Disability and Reality in One Little Finger:**

MaliniChib, born in 1966 in Calcutta chronicles her life in *One Little Finger*. She recounts all her experiences of her hardships and struggle after being disabled. Her indomitable spirit and determination propels her to champion against all the odds and hazards that she had to face as a disabled. During her birth, the umbilical cord got stuck around her neck that resulted in a lack of oxygen to her brain and within few seconds it eventuated in giving her a lifetime of a severe disability called Cerebral Palsy. Her birth was hugely traumatic and the pediatrician in charge kept repeating to himself,

It was mistake I should have carried out a caesarean .... Let's see if she survives... I am not sure if she will survive... at the most 72 hours. (Chib 3)

She anyway survived and doctors affirmed that the damage to her brain was irreversible and she had to live a vegetable life forever. With her growing up of age, she gradually turned into a permanent disabled with cerebral palsy. Her family did not give up hope, wandered from doctors to doctors not only in India but also in abroad.

The social psychology of body perception and attitude strikes her and makes her think about the differences. The world ‘handicapped’ starts haunting her day and night. She had the fine body with well sensual perception yet the society started treating her as ‘disable’. She argued with her parents over the issue, ‘why her beautiful baby was considered not normal’ (Chib 4). The body is assumed on paradoxical ground that the disabled are incapable of all sensory feelings. She could not speak but could feel everything as an able do yet the surroundings treat her body with negative outlook, no one ever probes in her inner psyche’,

Some people could not understand that although I did not speak. I could comprehend. These people had nothing to say to me. (Chib 6)

People did not believe that Malini could feel and think but she is stigmatized and isolated. The irony is that her inner psyche remains unnoticed but her body with cerebral palsy becomes her social identity and for the first time she realized that she is different from others, by body only.

Malini's physical body has been identified as different, ‘disabled’ but IQ level was above the average. Her appearance with her body was thought as disabled but inner content was enough to surpass the average ‘able’,

I did have irreversible brain damage but I was not mentally handicapped. In fact, I was normal and above average in intelligence. A graphic description commonly used to describe children like me in England was apparently ‘an intelligent mind with a disobedient body’. (Chib 9)

Her body appears to be grotesque and ignominious to the society. The doctors boldly declared that she would be a ‘vegetable’ and ‘non-thinking person’ and ‘poked and examined me as if I did not feel any pain. Well, I was just a patient and not a human being’ (Chib 16).

She could think, feel and sense what happened around her. The social visual perception to a person with physical deformities and abnormalities once again come into critical discussion. She is judged by her physicality, no one feels and senses her as human being despite all sensual capabilities.

The vegetability of life refers to the life of non-sensual, non-responsive, nonsexual and unattractive to heterosexuality but Malini had all her feelings and sensation despite being spastic and cerebral patient. The conflict of physical body and inner mind start struggling and her mind triumphs over her body. Her body remains to be judged by the society and criticized but she determines to concentrate on her inner potentiality.

The question of her bodily disability is the main focal point of society. People gaze at her with negative perception and her identity as a human being is negated. Appearance of body is given the priority of a person whereas one's inner potentiality remains unnoticed and ignored. The body gaze is the theorization of one's own visual and perceptual impression upon a man on his appearance and immediately judged from the viewers' angle of observation. Therefore, disabled people are viewed and judged by their apparent body exposure and are differentiated as 'unfit', 'impaired', and 'disabled'. The perceptual observation and its outcome not only devalue and degrade those disabled but more derogatively discourage and isolate and exclude them. They get traumatized and their bodies appear to be ignominious to the society.

Beyond her body, she has clear sensory feelings. She longs for romance, 'I wondered if there would ever be a man in my life. Would a man see beyond my body?' (Chib 65). She has the usual longing for love and desire. The agony of being excluded and isolated haunts her day and night. She started challenging the social norms of differences, 'the embarrassment of being excluded' (Chib 75).

The visible body becomes her identity to the society forming social opinion as disabled. Whereas her invisible mind with passionate craving for love and romance remains uncared and unnoticed by her surroundings. She applied for jobs in various organizations. Some responded, some did not bother,

I felt that my speech was the biggest barrier. The actual fact is that employers could see only my disability, not my ability. (Chib 175)

Being disabled, Malini faces not only social exclusion but also becomes the victim of working right.

Disability of her body and ability of her mind are at strife but she does not yield to her body. She determines to fight against all these odds and for disability inclusion.

Malini endeavours to change societal attitude towards disability into public focus with her numerous articles in the local papers. She raises her voice against this disparity and fights for inclusivity. The social reality of disability is more harsh specially in India as she says,

People (especially in India) see us as children and children should not be heard. They look at our imperfect bodies, and believe some of the religious beliefs which explain that we are the way we are, due to a retribution for past sins committed. I seriously wonder sometimes- what is the sin I committed? (Chib 195)

### **Body and Reality in The Girl Who Can**

Ama Ata Aidoo (1942-2023) was born in Ghana. She is a distinguished feminist activist, social reformer and first woman who published her writings in English. She presents the paradoxical position of women in African society before and after the colonization. She explores the position of women as sub human and their unending oppression caused by the male. Her story, *The Girl Who Can* rotates on the conflict between tradition and modernity, ability and disability and men women relation in African society. The story is narrated by a small girl of seven who confronts the jeering of her grandmother, Nani. Adoja's grandmother is worried about her skinny legs. Her grandmother thought that those skinny legs small calf and flesh would not be able to bear child. Adoja is conscious of her legs but less worried, she encourages her grandmother not to worry about it,

Like all this business to do with my legs. I have always wanted to tell them not to worry (Aidoo 28).

Discussion between her mother and grandmother takes regularly on the same issue. Grandmother's perception to Adoja is her physical appearance. The weightage and value of women, to grandmother, depends on well-built female's body but Adoja had her thin legs. Maami is less worried about her health and got her admitted to the

local school. Nana represents old values and tradition whereas her Maami for emerging modernism. Nana's sole concern is revealed on perception to Adoja's physical feature,

Nana: Ah, ah you know, Kaya, I think my God that your very first child is female. But Kaya, I am not sure about her legs. Hm... hm...hm.

Maami: Mother, why are you always complaining about Adoja's legs? If you ask me...

Nana: they are too thin. And I am not asking you! (Aidoo 28, 29)

Adoja's grandmother is too worried with the thin legs of Adoja. To her traditional outlook, women are judged with the physical feature having charms of body and well-built legs with 'meat and calves'. Grandmother thinks,

Nana: As I keep saying, if any woman decides to come into this world with all of her two legs, then she should select legs that have meat on them; with good calves. Because you are sure such legs would support solid hips. And a woman must have solid hips to be able to have children. (Aidoo 29)

Nana looks at Adoja's body from a traditional point and her estimation of the female worth is judged by bearing children. Adoja defies all these traditional outlooks and gets admitted to the secondary school. Walking five miles from her residence, she goes on foot that distance and attends school regularly facing no problem with her legs. In her school athletic competition, she secures the first position. Her name was nominated by the school authority for participation in the inter school district athletic meet. In each running race, she stands first and receives the champion's trophy. Adoja breaks her Nana's traditional outlook of the worth of female figure. The legs become metaphor of transformation from tradition to modernity. Her Nana changes her mindset towards Adoja and tries her best to do to help Adoja in her sports career. Skinny legs, once was her questionable identity, have now established her as an iconic athlete.

## **II. Conclusion:**

The reality of disability is rooted in society. Disability either by birth by any accidental phenomenon shows the social, political, educational and psychological differences. Society is indifferent to bridge up or alignment for the disability. They are taken as the mercy of the society and occasionally ostracized from society. Traditional perception to the disabled need to be changed with injection of humanity for their inclusion in main stream of the society and by focusing more on their inner potentiality. They should not be judged by their bodily features rather be given more concentration on their inner qualities.

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