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Research Article

Bodies That Cannot Be Cured: Disability, Care, and Resistance in Jesmyn Ward's Sing, Unburied, Sing

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Abstract

Jesmyn Ward's *Sing, Unburied, Sing* shows us that illness and frailty, as well as caregiving, are an important part of family life. If we look at the story of Mam's cancer, Pop's old and sick body, Kayla's persistent vomit, and Jojo's caring activity, we will see how the world of existence becomes full of expressions of vulnerability and dependence on each other. We will argue in this paper that this novel does not allow its characters with disabilities to become symbols of something else and to experience race trauma. The author focuses on the material side of illness. Based on Rosemarie Garland-Thomson's feminist disability studies, David Mitchell and Sharon Snyder's narrative prosthesis, and Sami Schalk's body-mind writing theories, we will analyse *Sing, Unburied, Sing* as a work that tells about embodied life, care labour, and hardships that black rural families face in their survival.

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1. INTRODUCTION

In the novel *Sing, Unburied, Sing* written by Jesmyn Ward, there are many bodies under stress. Mam is fighting against cancer while Pop feels the force of ageing and working hard his whole lifetime. While Kayla has her vomiting attacks, Jojo does not escape from demanding duties in taking care of others. There is more than just sad details in this novel. These details play an important role in the author's view of family, history, and survival.

Many critics of Jesmyn Ward's works pay attention to the key issues of race and trauma but they do not explain everything about the illness as it was presented in the novel. If one considers only illness as the symbol of some suffering in history, he/she is going to miss the most important idea of the book which deals with the suffering of different bodies. This paper states that *Sing, Unburied, Sing* is worth of reading from the perspective of disability studies as the book does not consider disability just as a metaphor.

The relevance of the approach lies in the shift of focus brought about by the origins of disability studies from the idea of the illness as an individual medical condition to the connection between illness and the environment in which it occurs. Garland-Thomson supports the claim that the concept of disability is influenced by norms, power, and cultural meanings. Mitchell and Snyder present the argument that literature often employs disability as a means of constructing a plot or a symbol. The bodymind theory developed by Schalk provides an insight into the interconnection between the physical and the mental experience, especially in the case of the Black experience conditioned by racial violence and structural inequality. Thus, the mentioned ideas make it possible to interpret Ward's novel as a narrative about caregiving, dependency, and survival in a physical sense.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Scholarship on Jesmyn Ward often focuses on the emotional power of her work, her treatment of the legacy of slavery, and her discussion of poverty and incarceration in the rural South. Critics note that *Sing, Unburied, Sing* is significantly shaped by history, especially the implications of racism and the prison system. However, sickness and physical frailty are often subsumed within these broader issues rather than being examined in their own right.

This is where disability studies play a valuable role. The notion of narrative prosthesis offered by Mitchell and Snyder shows how disability is used as a narrative device in literature rather than for reflecting life experiences. In various works, disabled bodies are given a symbolic meaning, while their real social context is neglected. The theory is valuable in this instance as it helps point out the habit of understanding illness as metaphor at once.

The importance of Garland-Thomson's feminist disability studies is that it presents disability not as an individual deficiency but as a category of social and cultural significance. Disability is not just deformity of the body; it is a relationship between bodies and environments, modified by discrimination

and asymmetric power. Such an approach is highly applicable to the novel, as the implications of illnesses in the family are affected by poverty, isolation in the countryside, racial discrimination, and inability to get medical attention.

Another significant dimension is presented in Schalk's research of bodymind. She claims that in the African American feminist tradition, mind and body cannot be treated separately, given the intricate connections between experience, emotions, memory, and physical activity. This perspective proves to be quite appropriate for Ward's novel as well because it presents bodily suffering as a part of a larger cultural construct of pain, bereavement, and labour.

3. METHODOLOGY

The primary method used in this paper is close reading. The paper emphasizes on the passages in the book *Sing, Unburied, Sing* which show clear evidence of physical disability, aging, caregiving and dependency. Mam, Pop, Kayla and Jojo are pivotal characters in the story as their actions clearly communicate how caregiving and illness impact the emotional and social framework of the novel. Rather than focusing on the analysis of the characters themselves, this paper raises the questions of how bodily vulnerability is narrated by Ward as well as what information on the issues of race, gender and family that such narration might provide.

The analysis is guided by three theoretical frameworks. The first one is the concept of narrative prosthesis introduced by Mitchell and Snyder and it is used to build the question of where the novel seems to use the disability for literary purposes. The second framework is feminist disability theory by Garland-Thomson and it is employed to assess how the norms of capability regulate caregiving and other expectations in the society. The third one is the bodymind concept by Schalk and it allows to examine the issue of embodiment without making the separation between pain and social.

Unlike an empirical study, this research falls under qualitative interpretive research. The present research uses textual analysis technique and critical theories for examining the representation of illness and care in Ward's novel. It does not aim to make wide scale claims about disability representation.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Mam's cancer and the reality of care

Mam's illness is one of the best examples of Ward's unwillingness to simplify sickness to a symbol. It is not only a sign of suffering or a representation of the family's vulnerability. Rather, it is a declining body in need of care; such body whose condition is able to change the whole order of the house.

In the book, it is impossible to overlook the physical and emotional labor of caring for the dying.

What is remarkable is that the caring is never complete or enough. The family does all they can, but the novel does not say that love is everything. Caring is necessary, but it is also exhausting and incomplete. Jojo's role becomes very significant here since it shows how early children can be

involved in the process of caring. Thus, Mam's illness turns into a serious tragedy.

Pop's aging body and historical burden

While Pop embodies the heritage of history, he is also the definition of a historical figure that is irrefutably impacted by age and returning deteriorating human body condition. It would be incorrect to read him merely as a representation of racial nostalgia or prison experience. More execution of writing gives this character bodily vulnerability that matters very much. The character's body that has been shaped by work, pain, and time is still a body with its own limitations and requirements.

Disability studies give a very conceptual subjectivity. His character challenges the understanding of strength as nothing but a synonym to independence. Pop cannot be a hero who manages to overcome suffering; rather, he remains someone whose body is marked by suffering with which he must continue to live.

Kayla's vomiting and bodily uncertainty

Kayla's vomiting symbolizes one of the novel's strangest physical features since it fails to obtain a clear conclusion. This ambiguity matters. It prevents the reader from interpreting Kayla's ailment simply as a metaphor and draws attention back to the body itself. Her symptoms cause anxiety, discomfort, and difficulty and reveal their ties to real life and illness rather than to the conventional literary trope.

This passage shows that care happens before diagnosis. The family does not wait for the medical professionals to elaborate on Kayla's problems and must perform care under uncertain conditions. This situation is well-known in the lives of disabled and sick people, as they have to deal with symptoms long before obtaining their explanation. Ward depicts this truth vividly and contests the idea that one's body must be easy to interpret.

Jojo and care labour

Jojo, the main character in the story, represents care work in one of its strongest forms. He is a child, yet he often is the adult in the situation. Jojo looks after Kayla, helps with the chores, and is responsible for emotions too advanced for someone his age. Care is understood as work that has to be done rather than love that flows naturally.

The way Jojo takes care of others exposes the complexities of race and class. Living in a poor rural Black household where little help is available from outside, care becomes a matter of improvisation and family ties. However, Ward does not, in any way, idealize this life stressing that care can be both rewarding and burdensome.

Resistance to metaphor

As the text suggests, these texts oppose the tendency we find in literature to make disability stand for something else. Ward's novels are certainly rich in symbolism and history. However, she does not permit illness to fade away into a metaphorical meaning. Thus, Mam's cancer is still cancer, Kayla's vomiting

remains a symptom, and Pop's body is still old and sick. Jojo's caregiving is still work for him. Tellingly, the novel illustrates that all these things are real and not just significant.

This is why the application of a disability lens is vital. What it enables us to see is that the novel is not only about trauma and memory but about the reality of taking care of bodies in pain and decline. Also, it reveals that survival is something achieved collectively rather than individually in the novel.

5. CONCLUSION

Analysing the novel *Sing, Unburied*, sing through a disability studies lens helps us understand the book more deeply in relation to bodily matter, nature of care, and survival. Mam has cancer, Pop has an aging and weakened body, Kayla vomits without any reasons, and Jojo is a caregiver, all of which indicates that bodily vulnerability is not a minor theme. This is one of the most important ways in which the novel addresses family and history issues.

Drawing upon Garland-Thomson, Mitchell and Snyder and Schalk, this paper has demonstrated that Ward tries to avoid using disability only in a figurative way. Instead, she puts physical suffering in the center of the Black rural experience, where care is rare and dependency is normal. This perspective helps to understand Ward's works better, demonstrating that the novel is not only about racial trauma and ghosts.

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