

From Impairment to Disability: Exploring Social Constructs in Cristina Henriquez's *The Book of Unknown Americans*

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ABSTRACT: *The research study investigates the concepts of impairment and disability, and identifies techniques employed by capitalism to produce disability in the society by analyzing Cristina Henriquez's *The Book of Unknown Americans* through the lens of Marxist Disability Studies. In the light of the framework presented by Michael Oliver, the research paper inspects as to how impairment is a biological deficiency and disability is a social construct, in order to explore the ways by which the society renders an able individual as disable. The research challenges the established belief about disability being a problem of the body and delves into the social model. It aims to highlight how the capitalist power structure builds its capital through human exploitation and various other means, which ultimately creates disability in society. The paper inquiries about the impacts of capitalism through the analysis of characters in the novel. This research is delimited to a character study in the light of the themes of Marxism and Disability Studies; the characters and situations pertaining to this sphere are intricately analyzed through Michael Oliver's theoretical framework, paving way for institutions to understand the exploitative measures exercised by the capitalist power structure to produce disability in the society. This research arises at the conclusion that the capitalist structure indeed paves a path for suppressing the people with disabilities.*

Keywords: impairment, disability, Marxist Disability, power, exploitation, social constructs, historic materialism

Introduction

Cristina Henriquez is an American author who has published two novels, a collection of short stories, and has also contributed to a few anthologies. *The Book of Unknown Americans* narrates the story of Alma and Arturo Rivera who leave their comfortable surroundings in Patzcuaro, Mexico when their daughter Maribel suffers a severe head injury. Their journey into the United States leads them to Newark, Delaware where they have located a school, Evers, for the learning disabled. Maribel's head injury has left her brain severely damaged, and they plan to enroll her in Evers in hopes of helping her with the recovery. Maribel's inability to communicate is due to her head injury, a physical impairment. However, the sexual assaults she faces traumatize her to an extent that she turns quiet. This is how the society takes away the abilities of the individual, rendering one disable.

The aim of this research is to explore the social manifestations of disability in a capitalist society and the techniques employed by the capitalist power structure to produce disability. Physical impairment is a biological deficiency and is often termed as disability. However, disability is a social construct, a political and an economic phenomenon. In contemporary capitalist society, disability is defined in relation to one's exploitability as a worker for the sake of capital accumulation. One who ceases to contribute to society is no longer an able person. In the light of this, the study intends to explain how it is the agency of society that disables and devalues those whose labor power is perceived to be less exploitable within capitalism. It aims to fulfill the gap in existing literature between the biological understanding of disability and its social underpinnings. To fill the gap, both Marxism and Disability Studies are carefully analyzed in the light of the characters in the novel and the behavior they are subjected to. The objective of the study, thus, is to investigate the phenomenon of disability in Cristina Henriquez's *The Book of Unknown Americans* through the lens of Marxist Disability Studies, particularly focusing on the theoretical framework provided by Michael Oliver in his article titled "Capitalism, Disability and Ideology: A Materialist Critique of the Normalization Principle" in order to reveal how the social sphere due to oppressive class system and financial crisis renders an able individual as disable. The objectives are achieved by investigating the techniques employed by capitalism to produce disability through the lens of Marxist Disability Studies which include social

dislocation, racism, and exploitation of human body, via an in-depth character study.

Upper- and lower-class system exists not only with respect to the amount of money one holds but also with regards to the power of ability that able individuals exercise over the physically impaired e.g. through sexual molestation. The significance of this research lies in the fact that in contemporary society, how a modern man like Arturo in the novel, who is not physically impaired is forcefully led to disability by the capitalist power structure through various means that it employs.

Research in the field of literary studies has produced remarkable work in the disciplines of Marxism and Disability Studies. Marxism, a theory propounded by Karl Marx, dwells on the importance of capital in a society. It draws on the capitalist mode of production, where means of production are owned by the workers and the product is used and capitalized by the owners. The proletariat i.e. the workers exhaust their abilities to form the desired product yet remain alienated from it. They are not able to afford the product that they make themselves. The aristocracy builds its capital on the obtained product and also controls the proletariat since they are in a submissive position who have to receive the wages at the hands of the upper class. The abilities of the workers are capitalized and monetized and this power play between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat, the owner and the owned continues until the latter is drained of its abilities to produce any fruitful result and is discarded like an object. Moreover, it states that the economic structure is the base of the society and the superstructures i.e. the political, legal and social structures are formed in relation to the base.

Disability Studies has been a discipline under study since the 1980's. Research in this field have given rise to debates about the medical and social model of disability. The medical model refers to a biological deficiency i.e. a person having a missed body part. The social model alludes to disability being caused by social factors. This moot point has arrived at a conclusion to call the former as physical impairment and the latter as disability. Hence, in the field of

Disability Studies, a person not having a body part or being unable to behave normally due to some disease etc. is physically impaired. Society and its factors such as oppression, subjugation, power play, capitalism, economic crisis, racism, gender inequality, class system, and others

render a non-physically impaired person as disable. This would be termed as disability.

These two diverse disciplines, when combined, formulate a new dimension. Marxism and Disability Studies together propagate how the class system prevalent in the society renders an individual as disable. Marxism, which solely builds on an individual i.e. the worker or the proletariat, to contribute productively to the society, stands in contrast to the disabled (physically impaired) who cannot contribute that effectively to the socio-economic strata. The other perspective to this phenomenon is the oppressive class system that renders an able individual as disable due to financial crisis and social pressure. The primary theorists of this field notably include: Michael Oliver, Karl Marx, Paul Abberley, and Tom Shakespeare.

Michael Oliver, the primary theorist for this research, was himself a disabled individual. He is considered the Father of the Social Model of Disability because he was the first one to draw a distinct line between impairment and disability in order to highlight that social barriers were the main factors in producing disability in the society. His major publications include *The Politics of Disablement and Understanding Disability: From Theory to Practice*. This research aims to establish and validate its ground in the light of his article titled “Capitalism, Disability and Ideology: A Materialist Critique of the Normalization Principle.”

This research intends to highlight that economic instability, and unemployment is caused by society. It is the social structure that exercises its power by making the individual disable through economic seizure.

The research aims at answering the following research questions:

How does the social structure render an able individual as disable?

What techniques does the capitalist power structure employ to afflict people with disability?

According to the WHO World Report on Disability 2011, 15 per cent of the world’s population, or more than one billion people, are living with disability. It is a matter of concern that in a capitalist society people with disability have to face a lot of challenges: they lack access to employment opportunities, and even if they are able to get employment, they face problems such as reasonable accommodation at work, accessible public

transportation to get them to work and back home; discrimination and ignorance about their potential at work. The condition is deplorable as persons with disabilities, mostly, have to depend on welfare or charitable organizations for their livelihood. These reasons highlight the significant of this research as it is important to recognize the disabled people as individuals and devise ways and means to make them socially and economically able.

Literature Review

“All animals are equal, but some animals are more equal than others,” remarks George Orwell in his book *Animal Farm*. This multi-layered sentence captures the thought of Marxist Disability Studies as it seeks to explore the causes and effects of a capitalist power structure and the way it maneuvers the abilities of an individual. This literature review examines various debates that have occurred in the field of Marxist Disability Studies.

In the field of literature and education, both Marxism and Disability Studies have been vastly debated, the former being more researched upon than the latter due to its relatively earlier emergence. However, the two disciplines when combined to form Marxist Disability Studies gives rise to a new theoretical framework which has not been well explored before. As Marxism propounds a capitalist mode of production where the owner (bourgeoisie) of the means of production builds its capital at the expense of the abilities of those who produce goods (proletariats), Marxist Disability Studies argues that a capitalist society disables individuals due to class system, power struggle, social inhibitions, and economic seizure. In this way, not only are the physically impaired people misfit for society since they are unable to produce goods effectively, but also some social factors inhibit the abilities of an able-bodied individual to function properly.

One of the key theorists crucial to the framework of Marxist Disability Studies is Karl Marx (1818-1883), a philosopher, revolutionary, and an activist who became quite popular among the communist regimes due to his works. However, his theories have also propagated debates in the modern world till date. These include his deep study of history, economic analysis, and capitalist mode of production. The following quote

highlights one of the major aspects of his theoretical framework. According to the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy:

he put forth the theory of “historical materialism” which states that the social structure rises and falls and eventually decreases the growth of human productive power. His study of capitalism, on similar grounds, analyses how societal power structures build their capital by extracting maximum profit from the labor power of the proletariats (45).

Thus, historical materialism states that social and economic structure never remains at a state of equilibrium. It rises and falls, builds its capital on the human body and its labor, and transforms itself according to the amount of productivity.

The shift of disability to a relatively social sphere was due to the Disability Rights Movement which strongly criticized the medical model of disability because it limited the notion of disability to a biological end and turned a blind eye towards its other components. Physically impaired individuals were straightaway marginalized and not considered a part of the social circle, hence disassociated from discussions. The movement brought to light the social model of disability in order to observe the relationship between man and society, and the derivatives that are formulated as a result.

Research in the field of Disability Studies has further argued that “there is no other social form far more disabling than capitalism” (Jaffee 3). In fact, the perimeters to define a person’s “ability” rely on “one’s exploitability as a worker” (Jaffee 3). The more a person can be abused with regards to one’s ‘ability’ to produce the “desired product,” the higher a person’s “value.” Human value became attached to a “person’s productivity” and “efficiency” (Jaffee 3).

Abberley rightly argues that “labour power” is important and “socially valuable” because it plays a significant role in the formation of one’s identity (Jaffee 4). Marxism does not offer any alternative to the established hegemonic structure of capitalism which markets ability. However, Marxist disability scholars have demanded an alternative form of labour which enables the disabled and the physically impaired to enter the social circle and make their “nonproductive” labour productive.

In implementing Marxist analysis on the social model of disability, it is revealed that the

“society is built on a competitive market foundation” and it is “this social system” which

“disables us” (qtd. in “In Search of a Social Model of Disability: Marxism, Normality, and Culture”). For instance, a person with a facial disfigurement or a dark complexion will not be hired for a cosmetics advertisement. Hence, he will automatically be excluded from the commercial market and made disable as opposed to a person with fair complexion. These people are excluded to bring “economic advantage to the capitalist society” by lessening “employment costs” or “increasing worker efficiency” (Armer 8). They continue to be discriminated from the socio-economic circle for the benefit of the power structure so that money is not unduly spent on them.

According to the lens of Marxist Disability Studies, the power structure is that of capitalism which builds its capital upon human body, and produces disability. In Marx’s words, “human body” is an “active” and “creative organism” which is ‘capable of durable production’ but the capitalist system turns it into a machine (Bengtsson 151). An underpinning idea of capitalism is that a “true human” is one who employs his abilities to his best “in order to create” (Bengtsson 154). Rigorous work ultimately exhausts the human body of its abilities. Marx agrees that the capitalist power structure “mutilates the labourer into the fragment of a man” and turns him into “an appendage of a machine” (Bengtsson 154). Thus, the labourer is reduced to a

“Crippled monstrosity” because he is rendered devoid of his human nature and made disable (Bengtsson 154). For instance, Marx writes in his book *Das Kapital* about a report which mentions that “fingers must be quicker to pick up the thread and perform the action because if dealt with laziness, they are destroyed” (Bengtsson 155). This reveals how the human body has materialized and is valuable according to how well it adapts to the socio-economic system.

For this research, the theoretical framework provided by Michael Oliver will be used to strengthen and validate the argument of the thesis. Michael Oliver’s framework is the most appropriate for this research due to a few reasons: the theorist himself was a disabled individual and his deductions are based primarily on his personal experience, he is one of the pioneer in the field of Disability Studies and was the first one to emerge as a professor in this field, he coined the term “the social model of disability” to differentiate it from impairment (medical model) and the main

contention of this research is to explore the social manifestations of disability, hence his framework becomes the most useful in locating the answers to the research questions.

Oliver continues to delineate a materialist framework in order to elucidate as to what happened to the disabled “with the rise of capitalism” (145) His module implies that “the production of disability is no different from the production of motor cars or hamburgers” (145). This vividly suggests that disability is “culturally produced” and “socially structured” (145). In this respect, Oliver views the status of disabled people in the society as “unproductive” and

“dependent” (145).

Michael Oliver states that disability has “nothing to do with the body.” He emphasized its constructed nature and social model. The manifesto of the Union of Physically Impaired Against Segregation titled *Fundamental Principles of Disability* (1976) asserts that disability is the manifestation of social discrimination against the impaired. Arturo and Maribel are subjected to different forms of social and economic discrimination due to their hybrid identity that their abilities are taken away, making them unable to contribute to the society.

Michael J. Oliver in his article titled “Capitalism, Disability and Ideology: A Materialist

Critique of the Normalization Principle” extends the discussion of the relationship between Marxism and disability. He upholds Abberley’s point of view: “oppression is complimentary to exploitation” (Armer 4) and provides the root cause behind it. “The oppression faced by people with disability is rooted in the economic and social structures of capitalism” (Oliver 6). This oppression is carried out via “racism, sexism, homophobia, ageism, and disablism” which is inherent in all capitalist societies (Oliver 6). It implies evidently how disability is produced socially and economically at the hands of the power structures, inevitably.

There exists a directly proportional relationship between disability and poverty as well. People with disabilities are relatively poor, uneducated, and unemployed as opposed to able-bodied people. Oliver quotes Coleridge in his article “Capitalism, Disability and Ideology: A Materialist Critique of the Normalization Principle” as: “disability creates poverty and there is hardly any doubt about the fact that the disabled

people are the most poor in poorer countries” (Oliver 15). Not only does this highlight the aspect of unavoidable discrimination but also reveals an attitude of internalized oppression in the minds of people with disability, be it physical, social, or economic.

Having established the context in the light of discussions within the field of Marxist Disability Studies, this research intends to explicate the notions propounded by Michael Oliver in his article “Capitalism, Disability and Ideology: A Materialist Critique of the Normalization Principle.” This article, as elaborated above, provides a strong ground for the analysis of the novel and aims to answer the research questions.

Discussion and Analysis

Cristina Henriquez, in her novel *The Book of Unknown Americans*, presents the readers with characters who undergo a physical, social, economic, and a psychological journey in their lives to reveal the social manifestations of disability in a capitalist power structure.

3.1 Deconstruction of the binary: Impairment/Disability

As clarified by the debates in the field of Disability Studies, impairment refers to a biological deficiency in a person whereas disability is a social construct. The impairment/disability binary does not classify the physically impaired as the marginalized, rather, the social streak of disability identifies how able individuals are equally suppressed in the socio-economic system of the society. Michael Oliver, a disability activist, was the first person to coin the term “the social model of disability” and differentiated impairment from disability (Oliver 2). This model is reflected in the novel through different characters; Maribel who is physically impaired, and other characters who are made disabled socially.

In *The Book of Unknown Americans*, Maribel, a teenager, is suffering from a head injury due to which she does not behave normally. Called a “retard” by a boy, she falls in the category of the deviant (Henriquez 70). She is the only abnormal, physically impaired character in the novel. However, her parents, who struggle for her well-being and face different reactions from the society fall in the category of the disabled. They are subjected to disability by their environment, of which their daughter is a part, as well the atmosphere of America and its people. From food to security of life, both her parents, Alma and Arturo spend their lives in

search for a better future for their daughter, trying to counter the disability they are inflicted with.

Their arrival to the U.S. brings about certain constraints; crisis which involves food, clothing, shelter, but also psychological trauma and oppression of various forms by citizens of the foreign country. "I'll make breakfast," the first thing Alma says upon arriving at their new place. "We don't have any food," replies Arturo, to which Alma retorts "We can get some" but both had "no idea where to go" (Henriquez 7). The feeling of being alien in a foreign land act as a catalyst that takes away some of their basic needs which they relished back in Mexico.

Alma and Arturo feel disabled when they go for grocery to a nearby market but remain unable to converse with anyone due to the discrepancy in language. Spanish as they were, they could not comprehend English. Hence, when Arturo paid "twenty dollars" at the counter and waited for the things to be handed over to him, the cashier "said something and outstretched his hand" (Henriquez 9). "I already paid twenty dollars. We are only getting a few things," says

Arturo but no one could understand and people standing in the line began to create a

"commotion" impatiently (Henriquez 9). This brings about a xenophobic feeling between the two as they struggle to rescue themselves and their daughter from the trouble.

Unknown language also becomes an obstacle in the path of protecting their daughter from "the boy from the gas station" (Henriquez 34). Alma catches this boy named Garrett "staring" at them, the first time they go out of their apartment (Henriquez 34). After some days, when she gets late to pick Maribel from the bus stop, she assumes the boy to have caught her daughter. Her suspicion proves correct as she finds the boy with Maribel in the "garage" having "her shirt up" (Henriquez 36). Traumatized and fearful as she is, she runs to a police station to file a complaint but remains unable to convey her concern for a very long time due to her language being Spanish. In this way, language plays a significant role in abling or disabling an individual from the opportunities of life. Especially, belonging to a different place with alien culture and land, it becomes difficult to comprehend many things or at least requires time.

The landlord of her apartment, Fito, is swift to listen to and capture her feelings because he spoke her language, Spanish. She felt that “there was a certain comfort that came with hearing someone speak Spanish, to understand and to be understood, to not have to wonder what I was missing” (Henriquez 36). The sense of familiarity makes her feel at home and gives her a sense of completion, rather than feeling left out. Foreign language, thus, becomes a barrier to communication as well as a hindrance to other resources which would have otherwise been available to them had they been prone to English language.

Sexual molestation faced by Maribel is another form of disability which her parents’ encounter. As much as they try to protect her, the “fear” of being harassed always circulates in the mind of her mother (Henriquez 37). She feels insecure all the time, even when she is in her apartment, anticipating the “boy’s” presence somewhere around (Henriquez 36). It is Maribel who is physically impaired but sexual harassment of her results in her parents’ disability, in them being unable to perform the required actions for the safety of their daughter.

In another apartment live the Toro’s with their son Mayor. Mayor’s elder brother Enrique has gone abroad for higher studies as he was exceptionally well in his studies. Mayor is constantly compared to his brother by his parents, inculcating within him a sense of lack.

Enrique was so good at soccer that he got published in the paper. “Mayor plays soccer too, but we’ve never seen his name in the paper yet,” remarks his father (Henriquez 78). The boy is constantly admonished and sent down the drain due to frequent comparisons. Mayor is also mistreated at school because of his family background. He is “taunted” by his fellows and asked if “he belongs to Noriega” and is told “to back through the canal” (Henriquez 68). Insults are hurled upon him as he is abused badly: “fucking chicken legs,” “Major Pollo,” “Major fuckup,” and “Don’t tell him to kick my shoe” (Henriquez 15). These abusive insults torment him psychologically and emotionally and he never considers himself able enough to come up to the mark of his peers.

One day when Mayor was changing into his “gym shorts,” Julius Olsen “tucked his hands into his armpits and started flapping them like wings” (Henriquez 14). He “flung a shoe at his chest” and cried “Bwaak!” (Henriquez 14). These insults were a part of the daily routine of Mayor which had made him disable to an extent that he could not focus on his studies or play well. He rather faked playing soccer and lied to his father.

His encounter with Maribel reveals a certain association that he feels toward her. His proclivity toward a physically impaired girl accentuates his own disability socially which enables both to fall in one category and form a community: “maybe because she was brain-damaged... she didn’t seem intimidating because of that” (Henriquez 109). Mayor’s association with Maribel is observed on a psychological and emotional level where both understand each other’s feelings and try to offer each other hope and comfort.

Oliver propounds the concept of “internalized oppression” as an agency that afflicts a person with another form of disability (Oliver 16). It is a disabling barrier created by capitalist society. Internalized oppression and blame disables an individual emotionally and psychologically, eventually affecting one’s performance in society. The incident that led to Maribel’s head injury plays an important part in Alma’s life. She was the one “holding the ladder” when Maribel was climbing it (Henriquez 102). Arturo blames her for the damage: “You were supposed to be holding it/ Why did you even let her go up there? It wasn’t safe” (Henriquez

102). As a result, Alma internalizes this blame: “My fault. My fault. Repeating it in my head again and again” (Henriquez 102). This psychological pressure takes a toll on her for the rest of her life as she is reminded of her “fault” whenever she looks at her daughter. Consequently, she fails to be a confident and an able part of society. She is always fearful of the future, replete with an inferiority complex, though she tries her best to please her daughter as well as her husband.

Fate has planned something more traumatic ahead of her when she is led to encounter Arturo’s death. There are many factors that produce disability for her, the foremost of it being money. Not only can she afford the funeral and its procedure, but also unable to take Arturo’s body back to her homeland as it would require “five thousand dollars” (Henriquez 209). It becomes evident in a country like U.S. which holds the banner of offering “possibilities” becomes the very land to take away hope and prospects from its immigrants (Henriquez 76).

From relationships to political affairs, home to state, micro level to macro level, power persists everywhere. The struggle for power, and then to exercise it over the others is the way of life. Michael Foucault puts forth power/knowledge dyad to explain that both power and knowledge are directly proportional to each other. The knowledge one has about the

other person, gives him power over the other as one can manipulate the other accordingly.

In *The Book of Unknown Americans* exist relationships of power. Rafa and Celia, husband and wife, demonstrate a patriarchal mindset within their home. When Rafa loses his job and Celia suggests that she should also look for a job, she is snubbed by her husband: "I am the provider" (Henriquez 213). Similarly, when she is on the phone talking to her friend a little longer, Rafa asks him to shut it: "those phone calls cost a lot of money" and she replies: "we could afford them if you could let me have a job" (Henriquez 214). Celia's complaints and shouts are not catered to and it is the man of the house whose voice prevails, hence a clear demonstration of power.

Power can also be analyzed from a different angle. For instance, Maribel holds a powerful position in the lives of Arturo and Alma. It is because of Maribel that they come to the U.S. Maribel is the driving force of their actions. From Arturo's job to getting proper food and providing security, each step of her parents revolves around their daughter. This relationship is not based on the dynamics of the superior and the inferior, rather highlights how certain people become a catalyst for one's life, forever.

A woman who would have reacted differently had she been in Patzcuaro is left disheveled and in a low morale to ever stand up against cruelty. This intensifies when she goes to the police station to file a report for her daughter being sexually extorted by Garrett but is met with disappointment: "I came home one day, and a boy was with my daughter... So a teenage boy was with your teenage daughter... Did he assault her? / Did you see him punch her?" (Henriquez 148). Alma is shocked: "But he came for my daughter... you don't seem to understand" (Henriquez 148). She is told that "staring is not criminal/ The boy probably has a crush on her and that's your job to deal with" (Henriquez 149).

Power dynamics shift when the police refuse to offer her any help; Garrett becomes the powerful and Alma the powerless. As much as the police is known to be corrupt, she does not have enough money to offer them to rescue her. Money, thus, becomes the agency which would have made her powerful had she been rich.

It is significant to decode the binaries of the powerful and the powerless, the superior and the inferior, the dynamics of capitalist society and

patriarchal mindset, in order to reveal the social problem of disability created for the able individuals.

4.2 Capitalism produces Disability

Michael Oliver presented his “historical materialist account of disability” in which he clarified “disability to be a creation of capitalism” (Oliver 2). While applying a Marxist perspective to his social model of disability, he acknowledged that the “economic, social, political, and cultural factors” are involved in creating “disablement” in the society (Oliver 2). The novel explicates this very notion through multi-faceted characters and such a portrayal indicates how disability truly is a creation of capitalism brought into action via various techniques of power.

Arturo’s new job at Delaware had led them to a two-storey apartment “made of cinderblocks and cement” (Henriquez 4). “The linoleum floors were dingy and worn. Every wall was painted a dark mustard yellow” (Henriquez 5). The windows were “covered by plastic sheets” and “held in place with tape;” the “toilet was ringed with rust” and “an upright shower stall with neither a door nor a curtain” (Henriquez 5). Having packed and left everything in Patzcuaro with

“only a few of our things, each other, and hope,” Alma told herself she was “lucky” to have this (Henriquez 4). The insufficient resources, insecurity, and helplessness made her think again and again: “would that be enough?” whether they had made the right decision in leaving their homeland, their everything (Henriquez 6). Capitalism cashes on the helplessness of the individuals as it continues to play its card of cruelty and oppression by not providing basic needs to the people. A home provided in dilapidated condition reflects further hindrances that they might come across on their goal to getting their daughter admitted to Evers.

The new place with its capitalist structure takes further toll on them when they feel hungry: “we don’t have any food” and they “had no idea where to go” (Henriquez 7). The feeling of being displaced overwhelms them as they decide to look for food. Maslow in his Pyramid of

Needs identify food and security as the necessity of one’s life. Whoever fails to attain these two things lives with a sense of lack and remains unable to contribute fruitfully to society with regards to one’s abilities. Similarly, Alma, Arturo, and Maribel cannot even think of any other thing

until they fish out ways and means to get proper food. They search for markets and try to comprehend the food labels through pictures. At the counter, they realize the less amount of “money” that they have as compared to the products that they have bought (Henriquez 45). The irony is the discrepancy in the status they held in Mexico, and the class system that they get seeped in once they arrive in Delaware.

Arturo “owned a construction business” in Mexico (Henriquez 25). The job he gets in Delaware is to “pick mushrooms out of dirt” in the dark the whole day (Henriquez 24). The fall of class, from high to low, affects his temperament. He no longer remains the same able person, the way he delivered in his own homeland. From being a manager to now being “required to work all day without being allowed to eat or drink” made Arturo lose his sense of composure, authenticity, responsibility, and abilities (Henriquez 27). He “wanted more” (Henriquez 27). The canopy of job was restrictive as it exhausted him of his abilities throughout the day, leaving him with no energy to think of a better performative future. Such is the technique of a capitalist power structure, to gauge the abilities of an individual in a task such as that of his source of income, so that he may not think beyond its horizon. In Arturo’s case, he gets so involved in his job, working day and night to meet the credentials, that he cannot think beyond his earning potential.

Delaware is a place heavily swept in class system because the apartments on the streets belong to a certain group of people and are thus given the label accordingly. The Main Street has “all the university students” (Henriquez 35). In Hockessin reside “the gringos” (Henriquez

36). “Downtown Wilmington is where most of the blacks live, and Greenville is where the rich white people stay. Elsmere and Newport are for the lower class” (Henriquez 36). The class system reflects prejudice in the minds of capitalist society which divides people on the basis of caste and color. This gives rise to a certain form of disability where the upper class automatically considers itself able and the lower class internalizes itself as the disable. The able people, in this respect, categorize themselves as the normal and automatically assume power over the disable, the non-normal. The binary of the powerful and the powerless, the superior and the inferior, gives rise to class system, and consequently to the social problem of disability.

Money is the basic requirement for a person to live. As propounded by Marxism, money forms the basis of every social strata. It also becomes a

disease, the absence of which can disable an individual from the various opportunities that life offers. Michael Oliver coined the term

“Political economy” to explicate the “significance of economy in a society” (Oliver 5). According to him, it is a crucial “determining factor” in “structuring the lives of people in a society” (Oliver 5). In *The Book of Unknown Americans*, Mayor’s father loses his job “at the diner where he worked as a line cook” (Henriquez 39). The situation worsens, so his mother decides “that she should get a job” but is subdued by his husband’s command “I am the provider” (Henriquez 39). He does not allow her to get a job, keeping intact his patriarchal instinct, and also hurls insults at her if she talks on phone a little longer: “Those phone calls cost a lot of money/ We could afford them if you could let me get a job” (Henriquez 39). The lack of money becomes an apple of discord between the husband and wife. It renders both disable in a way that two people who once were madly in love with each other are now disheveled. No money means minimal food, clothing, and other accessories. It, thus, becomes a limitation for one to access resources fruitfully.

Even before the couple was married, Rafael Toro left no stone unturned in searching for jobs, to earn independently, before getting married to Celia: “Eventually I got a job at a restaurant, just so that I could have enough money to buy her gifts and take her out occasionally to a movie. That’s what a man is supposed to do” (Henriquez 21). Money also becomes an agency of power. The one who possesses money becomes the powerful, the one who controls, and eventually the one who is able. These binaries take form due to the agency of money; whoever owns it, becomes superior and can control the other’s feelings.

The American capitalist society builds its capital through the minor jobs offered to the immigrants who have come with the sole “dream” to be “Americans” (Henriquez 76). Jobs like “bus boy,” “dish washer,” and “line cook” are offered to the immigrants who were otherwise managers and trainers in their own country (Henriquez 79). The class difference has been internalized within them to such an extent that they are happy to have “become Americans”

(Henriquez 79). The mentality of the people of Panama becomes evident when Celia decides to leave for her homeland with her husband and son. The people plan to “roll out red carpet” upon their arrival because they were “Americans” (Henriquez 79). This makes the Toro’s realize that “they don’t belong there anymore” (Henriquez 79). This is a technique of

the capitalist power structure, to keep people involved in petty matters such as that of social differences, class struggle, so that they may stay away from political and economic agendas, hence producing disability. The immigrants are made disable to think, act, react, and respond to the injustices that they are inflicted with. Their minds are too small to realize the petty positions they are being offered by the capitalist circle for their own benefit. Oliver intends to divert the attention of the people through his social model from the defects of impairment to the “disabling social barriers and cultural and economic inhibitions” (Oliver 3). The kind of jobs the immigrants are offered in America is one such example.

Both Maribel and Mayor’s father are fired from their job suddenly. The reason why Rafa, Mayor’s father had “been axed wasn’t even his fault/It was the rotten economy that had landed him in the water and that had capsized the whole ship along with him” (Henriquez 205). Similarly, Arturo explains that he was given a job because “the government was pressuring them to hire workers with papers/ Probably it saves them money that way” (Henriquez 181). The psychological and economic disability faced by the two families is equally painful and heart wrenching. The oppressive power structure would never understand even on humanitarian grounds “how badly a person could want a thing-money, or peace of mind, or a better education for their injured daughter, or just a chance, a chance! At this thing called life” (Henriquez 181).

Capitalism prevails on macro and micro levels distinctly. The employers act as devils who can recruit and fire people as per their convenience. It appears as if they have objects working at their disposal, for the building of their capital, and not human beings made of flesh and blood. Disability activists pay tribute to Michael Oliver for introducing the social model and they call it “liberating” because it “shifted the focus from seeing the problem in an impaired

individual towards societal barriers as the main cause of disablement” (Oliver 11).

A significant notion to keep in mind is that it is the economy that forms the base of any nation. It means that the whole superstructure of a nation is built upon the economy. It is defined in accordance with the economic system that is prevalent at the time. The superstructure includes religion, laws, institutions of education etc. Since, the prevalent economic model guides them, they in turn stabilize and promulgate the prevalent economic order and weave a suitable political and social order that is conducive for

the progression and existence of the established economic order. As Oliver states, any individual who fails to cater to the needs of the society or is no longer “usefully trained” and “productively employed” will be eliminated socially and economically by capitalist power structure (Terzi 144).

When personal and political motives combine in the capitalist power structure, the public and the workers have to pay the price. It is at the cost of their body, their abilities, and their hard work that the circle of socio-economic strata is working. Arturo and Rafa fall in the category of the proletariats. They have exhausted their time, money, and abilities, not only for their families but also for the system for which they have been striving. The irony is that no matter how much one invests, one can be discarded and alienated from it as if one was never a part of it. This shock is enough to render an individual psychologically and emotionally disable.

Racial attitude and behavior is another technique employed by capitalism to produce disability in a society. When Rafa is driving fast in his new car and Celia objects, he explains: “If you’re white or maybe Oriental, they let you drive however you want. But if you’re not, they stop you” (Henriquez 165). That is why Rafa drove fast to escape the eyes of the police. The racial mentality is reflective of the mindset of the American capitalist society. Michael Oliver describes “racism, sexism, and ageism” as “disabling techniques” forcefully employed by power structures to build their own capital and exclude certain people from the society (Oliver 16).

Racism finds its way on a micro level also, as it persists in Mayor’s school. It is enough to disable him to perform well in school. As his father wants him to play soccer like his brother Enrique, his logic of playing the game went like: “I was Latino and male and not a cripple, therefore I should play soccer. Soccer was for Latinos, basketball for Blacks, and the whites could keep their tennis and golf...” (Henriquez 16). Class system on this level reveals the biased divisions in the minds of the capitalists as well who exercise similar treatment with their workers with regards to the profession.

Bruce K. Alexander, in his book *The Globalization of Addiction* writes:

“Social dislocation is the state of umpteen number of people who are alienated from their culture, customs, and their personal identity by the

globalization of 'free-market society' in which people's basic needs are considered less valuable as compared to the status of market and economy" (Alexander 10).

Maribel's head injury draws Alma and Arturo to the U.S. for better prospects and better future for their daughter to admit her to Evers. They become both socially and economically dislocated as they leave their own homeland in Patzcuaro, Mexico. Not only do they leave their belongings behind, but are also driven away from their culture, traditions, and above all language. Language becomes a barrier to their communication as they do not know how to converse in English language. As Alma decides to learn English, she realizes that "English was such a dense, tight language. So many hard letters like miniature walls. Not open with vowels the way Spanish was" (Henríquez 60). Visiting markets or even Maribel's school becomes a problem for both Alma and Arturo as they do not understand how to put their message across. When Arturo lost his job, Alma taught him one sentence from the dictionary to ask employers around: "Are you hiring?" (Henríquez 55). Arturo came home disappointed only to reveal that they said something in English as a reply to which he could not comprehend and answer, hence the result was zero. Dislocation renders their personality and their abilities to nothingness due to an unknown language and an alien land.

Social dislocation brings about with it the element of security as well. Alma is full of fear from the very first day because she notices a boy "from the gas station" who was "staring" at them continuously (Henríquez 89). This fear remains within her whenever she leaves her apartment, silently feeling the presence of the boy keeping watch over them. Henríquez creates such a situation that although this boy never harms or takes any physical step toward them, he is caught with Maribel one day "in the garage" after school having "her shirt up" (Henríquez 56). This leaves her mother in tears as she collapses emotionally as if she will never be able to protect her daughter. This is how social dislocation renders them psychologically and emotionally disable.

Poverty disables one as it not only takes away the luxuries of life but also becomes an obstacle in fulfilling one's dire needs. From food to welfare, it is the monetary factor which holds power. It is reinforced by the capitalist power structure as it continues to feed those who are rich and the poor continue to remain so, hence holding oligarchy. When Arturo and Rafa lose their job, the families face a crisis which prevents them to

buy food and other necessary items for themselves. Alma made “rice and beans and rice and beans and more rice and beans, but since we couldn’t afford chiles or ham or anything to spice it up, we soon grew tired of rice and beans” (Henriquez 183). They had “oatmeal” left from the previous day but it was so hard to eat that “neither Arturo nor Maribel” wanted it (Henriquez 183). The author highlights how the immigrants are trying to survive at a place which they thought would offer a better future for them and their daughter. According to Maslow’s Pyramid of Needs, food forms the basis of the pyramid i.e. it is the most significant need, such that if it is not fulfilled, one cannot think of climbing up the pyramid and seek greater goals. This, again, is one of the techniques of the capitalist hegemonic structure, to keep the people and their minds occupied by this one overpowering need so that they do not meddle in their affairs or even think about the fact that they are being exploited, lest assured that they would think of entrepreneurship or participating in a business. This reveals how “disability exacerbates poverty in the society” and there is no doubt about the fact that “disabled people are the most poor and unemployed as compared to able-bodied people” (Oliver 14).

Analyzing these situations brings to light the factors that are involved in rendering an able individual as disable. Alma is an able-bodied woman. Her husband is shot which is an external force out of one’s control. The incident drains her economically, psychologically, and emotionally; in other words, disables her. Similarly, the endeavor to fly back to Patzcuaro requires monetary benefit which she does not have. Hence, lack of money disables an able individual, bars one’s actions and opportunities in life. It also affects one’s emotional and psychological health which constitutes the productive part of one’s body. One, thus, becomes relatively less able and fruitful to society.

The research has proven that capitalist power structure employs various means to create disability in the society which include social dislocation, racism, deviation from the norms, stigmatization, and exploitation of human body. It is in turn the social structure that renders an able individual as disable. According to Oliver, “individual transformation of a person takes place at the expense of the social changes in the society” (Oliver 16). Hence, if the society is disabling, the growth of an individual would be retarded.

Conclusion

The research portrays a critical insight into the novel *The Book of Unknown Americans* through the optic of Marxist Disability Studies. The situation of the unknown Americans in a foreign land reveals how able individuals are forcefully rendered disabled by the society. Moreover, capitalism plays a significant role in creating disability in society. They are purposefully excluded from the mainstream socio-economic strata.

The aim of this research was to explore the social manifestations of disability and highlight the techniques employed by the capitalist power structure to produce disability in society. It has been proved through evidence that notions like poverty, social dislocation, class struggle, relationships of power, stigmatization, human body as an object of consumption, and racism contribute to person's disability. Due to such variable entities an individual becomes socially, economically, psychologically, and emotionally, a less able part of society.

The novel demonstrates how characters like Arturo and Rafa are deeply seeped into the prejudiced system of capitalism, and they have no choice but to cater to the needs of the system. The aim of disabling able individuals is to exclude them socially and economically from the capitalist power structure so that the hegemony of all prevailing social institutions is maintained. As the proletariat remain engrossed in their efforts to work and produce labor, the one in positions continue to build their capital by cashing the abilities of their workers, and never provide them fully. Through such a portrayal of the characters, it has been proven through the lens of Marxist Disability Studies, the extent to which capitalism builds its capital by exploiting the individuals and their abilities.

The research offers a solution for the disabled and paves way for them to make space in the society. The theorists belonging to a different school of thought argue about the inclusion of the disabled people in mainstream society. Ford suggests that it is for the advantage of the capitalist society that it includes the "impaired" into the mainstream's "workforce" through "open labor market" (Armer 8). Like Marx expressed that the proletariat will be able to achieve freedom from "oppression" only if it rises from its "false consciousness," the disabled people also need to awaken from their slumber and realize the ways they are being exploited through pressure. Hence, in order to achieve emancipation from disablement, "disabled people must find ways of engaging in the class struggle" (Finkelstein 5).

Thus, it has been proven that capitalist society employs techniques of power to produce and create disability. A non-impaired physically able person is forcefully made disable by the society through means of exploitation.

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