

## The Disabled Gender: Gendering Disability in J.M. Coetzee's *In the Heart of the Country* and Zaynab Alkali's *The Still Born*

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### Abstract

JM Coetzee and Zaynab Alkali effectively employ the trope of the disabled woman in their novels. However, most of the existing studies on their texts have not adequately examined how these novelists utilised disability tenets to represent the plights and exploits of the postcolonial African woman. Consequently, this paper examines the two-fold issues of gender together with disability as tagged by culture and at the same time incorporated as symbolic portrayal of post colonialism. The paper adopts Postcolonial Feminist Theory and Feminist Disability Studies. The method of investigation is critical, descriptive, comparative and analytical. The study involves a qualitative reading of J. M. Coetzee's *In the Heart of the Country* and Zaynab Alkali's *The Stillborn* which are purposively selected because they are found to be deeply engaged with the postcolonial Africa and they also address a common issue, the disabled African woman, which is central to this study. Magda, the heroine of Coetzee's *In the Heart of the Country* is depicted as a spinster who becomes disabled through patriarchal suppression. In order to cope with the rejection that life throws at her, Magda escapes into a world of fantasy which later blossoms into psychosis and insanity. Magda's father as a farmer like every other African father expects his first child to be a son. Magda is, therefore, a wrong gender in a society that celebrates maleness. Magda is neglected by her father and the society at large. Consequently, she becomes insane. In Alkali's *The Stillborn*, Li, the heroine is not disabled physically but is read as disabled by her father and the society because of her psychic power. Li is seen as an extraordinary body which is another form of disability. Her psychic gift coupled with her gender which is frowned at in Hausa culture is linked to her disability. In both novels, the male gender is portrayed as the oppressor, the colonial master and catalysts of disability. Magda's father and every other male in Coetzee's *In the Heart of the Country* pushed Magda into insanity. This is also applicable to Li who is born with a supernatural gift of seeing into the future. Her father in particular and the society at large rather than seeing this gift as a blessing see it as a disability. Looking at it critically, both writers explore the concept of family members as disabling agents. In the selected texts of Coetzee and Alkali, it is argued that the situation of Magda, Li and other disabled women can be seen as a microcosm of the problems of marginalisation of postcolonial African society from decision making, social life and economic development. The texts, therefore, reveal how women strive to resist sexist practices as a means of empowerment to consciously protest against all forms of oppression and disablement.

**Keywords:** Postcolonial Feminist Theory, Feminist Disability Studies, African Women in Literature, Gendered Disability Narratives

## Introduction

In previously colonised countries, the legacies left behind by the various experiences of colonialism historically, socially, economically and culturally as well as the effects of globalisation, unequal distribution of power and neocolonialism could be referred to as postcolonialism. In other words, challenging the relationships between domination and subordination economically, culturally and politically between races, nations and cultures is regarded as postcolonial criticism. The trauma, violence, exclusion and impoverishment which is an outcome of these relationships create severe disability. Davidson (2008:170) opines that approximately eighty percent of the world's disabled population live in developing countries, signaling a casual link between colonialism and disability. Hence, postcolonial histories are punctuated by disabling events, such as war, population displacement and civil unrest, as well as ongoing poverty. In such societies, disability can sometimes be as a result of differences nationally, culturally or physically.

Disability in postcolonial Africa has been characteristic of the continent itself, rather than of a particular individual. Although images of disability abound in literary history, such images have traditionally marked one individual as different. In essence, it is the continent of Africa itself that exhibits signs of physical and psychological damages. In another vein, copious analogues occur between the societal connotations of the bodies of the female and those of people living with disabilities. The two are stereotyped as abnormal and subordinate; they are both denied access to active involvement in political and economic activities. In a way, the two are read as opposite of normality and superiority physically. Essentially, equating femaleness with disability is common in Africa, occasionally, to disparage women and occasionally as a medium to protect them. In postcolonial African novels, scholarship on disability is generally under-acknowledged in the world of disability studies as it has been largely based on Western representations with scholars like Kriegel, 1987; Norden, 1994; Enns & Christopher, 2001; Micho, 1994; Snyder, 2000; Kiley, 2005 agreeing that bodily difference is frequently employed as a literary device on other social problems.

The scantiness of discourses which are critical regarding the dual challenge of postcolonialism as well as disability in African scholarly studies engineered this work. Previously, the subjugation of this dual challenge by foreign critical discourses were apparent. Consequently, critical voices of African scholars are mostly excluded. However, both superficial and fundamental exploration of scholarly works from Africa reveal preoccupations about being disabled, being ill and postcolonialism. As yet, regardless of the fact that assortment of writers from Africa invent disability and postcolonialism as a knot which must be entangled, these discourses do not lay emphasis on disability as a trope of the disabled African continent. Therefore, coming on the heels of Bolt (2012: 287)'s argument, this investigation endeavours to arbitrate the perceptible crucial evasion which apparently is woven around the controversy enclosing postcolonialism and disability within literary debates in Africa. More than the physical and the social, through concentrating on a certain emplacements within Africa in a corporeal period of postcolonialism, this investigation equally showcases the consequences of politics that is deformed and how it creates enslaved Africans historically and culturally especially in African literature.

This study offers a productive approach to the issue of disability and postcolonialism in African fiction. The specific objectives of the work are:

- i. To examine how the selected postcolonial African novelists, depict disability in their novels.
- ii. To investigate the images and roles exhibited by the characters in the selected novels.
- iii. To critique how the bodies of the characters are marked as able/disable.

## Theoretical framework

The theoretical insights for this study come from Postcolonial Feminist Theory and Feminist Disability Studies. A common thread that justifies the selection of the theories is their social-

cultural orientation and their links with social identity. The main focus of Postcolonial Feminist Theory is how women are represented in countries that were once colonised and in Western locations. While the postcolonial theorist struggles against the initial colonial discourse that aims at representing him as inferior, the task of postcolonial feminist theorist is far more complicated. Postcolonial feminism was born as a response to colonialism, imperialism, and Euro-centric feminists' emphasis on Sisterhood which is one way Euro-centric values are imperialistically imposed on other cultures (Tyagi, 2014: 1). The theory resists White feminism's tendency which ignores the crucial differences in the way women from various national, ethnic and religious backgrounds experience gender. Feminism in a postcolonial frame begins with the situation of the ordinary woman in a particular place, while also thinking her situation through in relation to broader issues to give her the more powerful basis of collectivity (Young, 2003: 18; Schwarz and Ray, 2005: 30).

The Social Model of Disability has been highly influential in the development of disability politics and disability theory. Since its introduction in the late 1970s, the social model of disability has changed international disability discourses. This model basically implies three assumptions (Davis, 1995: 250). First, disability is a form of social inequality and disabled persons are a minority group that is discriminated against and excluded from mainstream society. Second, impairment and disability need to be distinguished and do not have a causal relation; it is not impairments per se which disable, but societal practices of disablement which result in disability. Third, it is a society's responsibility to remove the obstacles that persons with disabilities are facing. Thus, Disability Studies refers generally to the examination of disability as a social, cultural and political phenomenon.

Feminist Disability Studies seeks to challenge the common assumption about people with a disability while situating the disability experience in the context of rights and exclusions. In consonance with feminism which challenges the belief that femaleness is a natural form of physical and mental deficiency or constitutional unruliness, Feminist Disability Studies similarly questions the assumptions that disability is a flaw, lack, or excess. Consequently, Feminist Disability Studies defines disability broadly from a social rather than a medical perspective. It argues that disability is a cultural interpretation of human variation rather than an inherent inferiority. Informed by Foucault's concept of "disciplinary normalisation" (1979:56), Feminist Disability Studies interrogates the complexities of institutionalised techniques of normalisation that sustain patriarchy, white supremacy, class power, "compulsory able bodiedness and compulsory hetero-sexuality" (MeRuer, 2006: 234).

The theory, by following two main primary traditions which Garland-Thomson (2005) describes as contrary to intuition, is inclined to evade the usage of impairments through viewing how people with a wide range of physical, mental, and emotional differences are collectively imagined as defective and excluded from an equal place in the social order. Additionally, Feminist Disability Studies equally questions the general assumptions by using precise language that may seem complicated when talking about disability. Words like "deformities" or "abnormalities" are queried. It is believed that differences should be established between the bodies themselves and the ascribed achieved identities should be attached to them in social relations and cultural representations.

## Literature Review

The disabled body has become a cultural construct, based on society's attitudes toward disability and has obtained its own position in literary interpretations. However, disability has not been studied frequently in literary and cultural studies. It has been primarily the object of study in biological, social and cognitive sciences. (Mitchell and Snyder, 2000 214) Thus, the study of disability in narrative texts is therefore a vital contribution to Disability Studies. Davis (1997 11) distinguishes three phases in the emerging cultural disability studies. In a first phase, texts were analysed to demonstrate how badly characters with disabilities were represented. The second phase spring out of actively seeking for positive images of disabilities in texts. The current and third phase is a theoretical one in which the nature of representation of in examined. Disability in Literary texts, therefore, offers a way so critically engage with social attitudes and forms of representation. Garland- Thomson (1997) observes that in

Literature, static meetings occur between the disabled characters and the able bodied readers, while encounters in real life are always dynamic, consequently, the disabled character has no agency, and remains "different throughout the text" (11). For Hall (2011: 5) literature has the potential to convert disability into a social, rather than a medical phenomenon.

The disabled women are considered to have a double disadvantage as they belong to two "passive groups". While comparing a woman to the disabled body, Garland-Thomson posits that both are seen as deviant and are excluded from full participation in life. Disabled women are thus, socially "invisible" (19). Further, they are often seen as unfeminine and asexual. To Fine and Asch (1981), the disabled woman is considered to be inadequate to fulfil either the economically productive roles traditionally considered appropriate for males or natural reproductive roles reserved for females" (223). The disabled woman is, therefore, excluded from fulfilling social roles, they are role-less (239). In literary texts, the disabled woman regularly is a symbol of otherness, which can be either positive or negative. Accordingly, Kent (1987: 47) describes a disabled character as an independent, vital woman whose disability does not determine her identity as a woman. This can be regarded as a positive image, while the negative image portrays the disabled woman as an object of pity or contempt. She clearly lacks self-respect, proceeds unnoticed by man, and often is bitter and desperate (60). Essentially, the disabled women usually feel inferior and are represented as vulnerable and dependent beings (Barnes and Mercer, 2001: 519).

Fisher (1988) focuses on colonisation and feminism in J. M Coetzee's *In the Heart of the Country*. The study reveals how Magda, the heroine of the novel becomes the victim of the patriarchal society in which she lives According to Fisher, the larger colonial system subjugates Magda and dictates her role in the society; however, it is the individual such as Magda's father whose actions directly affect Magda. In consonance, Roberts (1980) and Watson (1985) also read *In the Heart of the Country* as a postcolonial text. To them, Magda is like a territory and her father the subjugator, the subjugation is rather mental than physical. The papers major strength is the more explanations they offer on Magda's insanity which occurs through the tensions generated by the influence of gendered racial oppression.

Poyner (2015:7) identifies that the mythologies of colonial and imperial enterprise emerge from Magda's narrative. Thus, Magda's experience in the novel is seen as "madness of civilization"(Foucault, 1988:1). Poyne posits that *In the heart of the Country* centres on the unremittingly Draconian power of white hegemonies - colonialism, apartheid, imperialism and on the modern day myths. Kehinde (2006) examines the women's plight in J. M. Coetzee's *In the heart of the country* through the lens of feminism. Through the diary of Magda, issues such as gender discrimination, stereotyping, objectification, oppression and patriarchy are examined. Patriarchal suppression which is the focus of the paper has a negative impact on Magda's psyche. Magda sees herself as unfit and, as a consequence of her experiences, develops emotional problems and becomes psychologically unstable. In a way, Kehinde affirms that the novel foregrounds symptoms of madness that emerge as a result of excessive patriarchal suppression. This study benefits from Kehinde's view that J.M.Coetzee's *In the heart of the country* foregrounds symptoms of madness which emerges as a result of excessive patriarchal suppression which include memory lapses and forgetfulness.

Johnson's (1988) focus is on Alkali's social vision which can be said to have emanated largely from the predominantly feminine perspectives of the literary world Alkali created in her novel. Johnson examines Alkali's social visions in the context of the traditional society under the catalysis of social mutation and modern development. Okereke (1996) investigates women's quest for autonomy in Zaynab Alkali's *The Stillborn*. Okereke submits that African women are always in quest of extricating themselves from the grip of patriarchal society" sexist norms which view a woman as a male appendage, a male adjunct with no identity of her own apart from her father, husband and male relations For Okereke, a woman is equally seen as a failure in society's power structures, specifically education and the economy. Amase, Tsavmbu and Kaan (2014) opine that the issues in Alkali's novel transcend gender imbalance. Their study is based on Alkali's treatment of the clash of westernization, tradition and city life. They also condemn the branding of female writers in Africa as feminists which they consider as a disturbing trend.

J.M.Coetzee's *In the Heart of the Country* reflects the account of a neurotic woman, Magda, who lives on an isolated sheep farm in the Cape desert at the beginning of the 20th century. Magda's story is set during a crucial period of South African history, a critical look at the novel shows that madness takes a centre stage. Coetzee enters into the consciousness of a female narrator, Magda who is of a Boer farming stock and inhabits the psychically and textually precarious position of being both disabled and a female. Thus the novel is preoccupied with the female colonial writer's psychic struggle with identity through the portrayal of an author-figure who descends into madness. Magda, by choosing to write, battles against those conditions that oppress and disable her.

The duality of madness in Coetzee's *In the Heart of the Country* is clearly seen by reading the silences spoken in Magda's psychosis and the literary history in which it is placed. Magda feels alienated by the sexual relationships that she imagines have been built between her father and his new bride, between the black servants Hendrik and Klein- Anna, and between her father and Klein Anna: "Tines have been drawn. I am excluded from communion (Is the Heart of the Clownery, 57). In a way, Magda experiences both electoral and colonialists fantasies of the fear of and desire for the black Other Magda conceives of Hendrik as a father figure and the women with whom her father and Hendrik have relationships as mother figures. Magda's own mother had apparently died. *In the Heart of the Country* opens with Magda referring to herself, her father and her father's "new bride" as the antagonists rather than the protagonists (In the Heart of the Country, 1), this, in a way, can be said to be similar to the Oedipal breakdown of familial relations which also invite a feminist critique. Later, Magda undermines this version of her story by stating that her father did not remarry. Understanding Magda's plight entails addressing a "hierarchy" of oppressions, those of women and of colonized peoples, as well as that of the lunatic as Other. Magda imagines herself as an "O" which connotes femininity that is realized only negatively:

I am a hole crying to be whole I am not unaware that there is a hole between my legs that has never been filled, leading to another hole never filled either. If I am an O,I am sometimes persuaded it must be because I am a woman. (In the Heart of the Country, 41).

In essence, Magda finds it difficult to reconcile her needs as a woman with her position as a colonizer. The "O" or lack with which Magda identifies herself, her vagina, parodies Freud (1937)'s supposition that female genitalia are the 'atrophied' version of the male's, and that the girl-child is always initially homosexual, erotically desiring the body of the mother before bestowing her affection upon the father (Lecture xiii: Femininity). On her own part, Poyne (2015) discloses that not only does "O" signify the atrophied condition of femininity in Coetzee's novel; it also represents a double signification of unfulfilled desire since Magda is a virgin. Magda showing a perverse sense of logic even wonders if her fantasy of rape will have made her a woman (In the Heart, 107). This actually agrees with Fanonian discourse To Fanon (2008: 154) In: When the Negro makes contact with the white world, a certain sensitizing action takes place If his psychic structure is weak, one observes a collapse of the ego.

Fanon, in deconstructing the notion that race is a biological category argues that 'blackness can be historicised and is therefore socially constructed. Fanon imagines this psychic confrontation with his own otherness: "I came into the world to find a meaning in things....and then I found that I was an object in the midst of other objects" (109). Magda's loss of reason reveals a systemic exclusion that spelled something more chilling: a rejection of the perceived "other" from the human category. Magda's experience is immersed so thoroughly in a narrative of abnormality that it borders on the impossible to imagine an alternative text In a way, a multi-layered discourse of monstrosity always permeates the environment around those labelled ""disabled", thereby, justifying their alienation and sub-human treatment by the society.

When measured by social ideologies of reasoning, Magda's reasoning is dysfunctional, abnormal and worthless. The white society has not allowed discursive space in dominant narratives for Magda's attributes as a unique human being or for her place in the white world. Magda while rejecting subjectivity declares: you think I am too spineless to acknowledge my guilt ?..... I am not simply one of the Whites, I am 1. I am I, not a people. Why have I to pay for other people's sins (In the Heart of the Country, 10). Magda's insanity eradicates the

dominance her whiteness demands of her. This insanity does not only situate Magda as the Other alongside her femininity, and in particular alongside her spinsterhood, it also defines any authority she possesses. Magda's status as a spinster serves as an exaggeration of her marginality in what is considered, a patriarchal society which positions women as wives and mothers. Thus, Magda becomes a victim of the patriarchal and phallogocentric society and due to the hostility she experiences daily as a disabled in such a society she becomes mute, mad and marginal.

Magda develops emotional problems and becomes psychologically unstable as a result of excessive patriarchal suppression. In Kehinde's (2006) opinion, issues such as gender discrimination, stereotyping, sexual objectification, oppression, patriarchy and so on are examined through Magda's diary. To Kehinde, Magda's constant repetition of the phrase "or perhaps can be described as semiotic signifier of mental atrophy"(3). On his own part, Macaskill (1998) explains that the term "perhaps is one of the text prevalent terms which occurs not less than eleven times. The novel is made up of 266 numbered sections, written in the present tense, narrated by Magda. These sections are referred to as diary entries since they proceed in chronological order and loosely followed the events of Magda's life. Magda, the narrator is a repressed, introverted, spinster of indeterminate age who lives in virtual seclusion on a remote sheep farm with her widowed father, who she regards as a domineering martinet

At the beginning of the novel, Magda is highly troubled emotionally and in need of succour: "in my solitude I hear voices" (In the Heart of the Country, 36). Surprisingly, she is denied this much needed succour by her only parent (her father) who does not even acknowledge her existence. To Magda, as far as her father is concerned, she is "an absence". She says:

My father pays no attention to my absence. To my father I have been an absence all my life Therefore instead of being the womanly warmth at the heart of this house I have been a zero, null, a vacuum towards which all collapses inward, a turbulence, muffled, grey, like a chill draft eddying through the corridors, neglected, vengeful. (In the Heart of the Country, 2).

Magda is even ignored at meal by her father "I sit year after year across the table from my silent father listening to the tiny teeth inside me (In the Heart of the Country, 21). Her attempts to be friendly with the black servants are equally rebuffed. Thus, in her thirst for communication with others, Magda turns to the insects for companionship. According to Magda, she is the wild woman of the veld who talks to her friends, the insects" (In the Heart of the Country, 43) Isolation, therefore, becomes Magda's constant companion which makes her to suffer emotional anguish and a host of other mental crises. In essence, the father's codes entrapped the daughter, who finds her behaviour circumscribed by the inherited patterns of dominance and subservience.

In the father-daughter dissonance that emerges in the novel, the father symbolises the colonial order, a representative of a colonial system in which the colonisers have an overbearing presence. Magda as a colonial subject is supposed to occupy the position of a master but as a female and a disabled, she occupies the position of a soboliers and a slave. Thus, she finds herself between the position of a victor and a perpetrator, Magda who is implicated in the settler- colonialism and patriarchy tries to defy her position and the systematic violence and oppressions involved. In a way, Magda creates her own narrative and proves to be an exemplarily unstable narrator" I make it all up in cedar that it shall make me up" (i.e the Heart of the Country 73 This unreliability and discourse on her unstable identity point to a discourse on madness. Heister (2014) suggests that Magda's condition could be referred to as Schizophrenia.

Magda, in line with this, explains her reason for resenting Klein-Anna venting torrents of mean- spirited resentment on the girl, swelling with ire and self-righteousness, do I become for a blessed interval a woman among women", Sacks (1985) says that in some patients severe migraines may either co- exist with neuroses or cocur in their place paradoxically, the headaches may serve as an escape from the psychological conflicts the patients simultaneously

conceal and express. This is clearly seen in Magda who suffers from migraines and insomnia throughout the text. According to Sacks, they would be most unhappy if they could not fall sick from time to time. In essence, it does not take a long time for neurosis to become psychosis and Magda's complete madness is shown when she becomes delusional.

Coetzee in *Doubling the Point* (1992) is, however, sceptical about the usefulness of reading Magda as mad: "Magda is passionate in the way that one can be in fiction (I see no further point in calling her mad). However, it is argued in this study that Magda is neurotic both literally and literarily, working on the principle that the categories of the real and the literary in this novel are entangled, deriving meaning from each other. Significantly, Magda is seen displaying a lot of schizoid and neurotic tendencies in the text. As a lonely spinster, living in a society which sees her spinsterhood as abnormal, ignored by her domineering father and the uncaring servants, Magda becomes completely insane as evidenced by her communicating with the sky gods, talking with her dead father, child-like delight in mundane things like the dinner-bell and talking with insects. As her mental condition deteriorates rapidly, Magda is still aware that the basis of communication has been undermined in her isolated society. Magda says to herself:

I cannot carry on with these idiot dialogues. The language that should pass between myself and these people was subverted by my father and cannot be recovered. What passes between us now is a parody. I was born against the dominant patriarchy (In the Heart Of the Country, 131).

Magda, due to loneliness, neglect and abuse has many philosophical discussions with herself and the uses of language around her. Magda struggles to write her own story thereby rejecting cultural and historical definitions of her subjectivity. Although Magda is not considered a 'destroyer' (Coetzee, 1999), she imagines herself to be one by fantasizing to execute her father. Soon she wants to eliminate Klein-Anna, her servant's bride or rather she wishes to eliminate both her father and his mistress at the same time. She imagines: "I have broken a commandment and the guilty cannot be bored. I have two grown bodies to get rid of" (In the Heart of the Country, 12). Magda also imagines the coming of some insects. She is so frightened that she tells Hendrik and Klein-Anna that "We must be aware in general..... of the revival of insect life....I mention plague of caterpillar....the wasps are predators too" (In the Heart of the Country, 91).

Magda, between fantasy and reality is sexually attracted to her father. The father, however, does not acknowledge her existence let alone love her in return. In reality, the setting of colonial/ apartheid South Africa has simply provided a climate of psychological oppression sufficient to make Magda become neurotic. In any African family, a male child is preferred to the female child and is regarded as "a king" (Kambarami, 2006). Consequently, Magda feels that her father considered her an unwanted child. Her father never expects a daughter in such a male dominated society where a son will supposedly survive and perform better. Magda vividly explains this:

My father's first wife, my mother was a frail, gentle and loving woman who lived and died under her husband's thumb. Her husband never forgave her for failing to bear him a son. His relentless sexual demands led to her death in childbirth. She was too frail and gentle to give birth to the rough rude boy-heir my father wanted, therefore she died. (In the Heart of Country, 2).

Magda later has a nightmarish fantasy in which she gives birth to the much-awaited "son of the father, Anti Christ of the desert..... an epileptic Fuhrer" (In the Heart of the Country, 10). In

a manner, an abnormal relationship exists between Magda and her father, that of husband - wife. This can be seen in Magda's daily routine as the mistress of her father's house: she draws her father's bath, prepares his meals, cuts his hair, takes off his boots and so on. This wifely routine, coupled with their isolation must have led Magda to have incestuous desires for her father unlike Li in Zaynab Alkali's *The Stillborn*

In most of Zaynab Alkali's works, except perhaps *The Virtuous Woman*, where the leading character is incapacitated by a physical deformity, Alkali portrays the male in most circumstances as the lame gender and therefore, incapable of wielding homogeneity in family or community matters, while the female protagonists like Li, Sheytu and Magira Milli often come in like the super woman character and make amend for the overall good of family and community. The heroine of Zaynab Alkali's debut novel, *The Stillborn*, which is set in Northern Nigeria, is Li. The story opens with Li at age thirteen, just out of primary school, rejecting restrictive parental authority and full of romantic dreams of a luxurious life. Li's initial quest for independence is defined within the context of her home which has become a microcosm of patriarchal society. The restrictive traditional norms that disabled women are personified in Li's parents especially her father whose rules she "considers stupid and unnecessarily rigid" (*The Stillborn*, 3). Li thinks of her father in antagonistic terms and vocalises her revolt against domestic confinement when she desires to "go ease myself without having someone breathing down my neck demanding to know where I have been to" (*The Stillborn*, 3).

Li, despite the euphoria of homecoming easily sees her home as a disabling environment, to Li, her home symbolises bondage:

after a few weeks at home. Li began to find the atmosphere in her father's compound suffocating. She felt trapped and unhappy Already she missed the kind of life she had lived at the primary boarding school, free and gay. At home, the little ones were too young to understand the restriction and the older ones too dull to react... It's worse than a prison Li complained (3)

The words "suffocating", "trapped", "restrictions" and "prison" create images of entrapment and asphyxia which aptly describes Li's claustrophobic feelings about her home and the stifling effect of restrictive traditional norms on woman.

Looking at it critically, everything about Li, right from birth is unconventional and not normal signifying that she is an unusual and abnormal woman. Li as a disable was born with the bag of water intact, she did not cry at birth like every other normal children, thereby refusing "to adhere to this all important tradition" (*The Stillborn*, 6), she also had adult features. Awa (Li's elder sister) puts it this way: "Your hair was as kinky as an adult's and your eyes were like old Yakumha's As for your cars. They were rolled up like banana shoots. Mama had to cover her head and ears until you were nine months old". (*The Stillborn*, 6) Awa's reply to Li's question on why their mother took all those steps is illuminating: "Mainly to save the visitors and the family from embarrassment. They kept on exclaiming and making embarrassed apologies when they saw you" (*The Stillborn*, 6). These visitors reactions to the so-called disability perceived in Li showcases African culture which never discusses impairments for fear of causing offence.

Li's body, is not perceived as a disabled one, but as one that Garland-Thomson (1997: 4) would call an extra-ordinary body Garland-Thomson explains that extraordinary bodies are different from able bodies and the body ability in a different way or in an extraordinary way. Li has psychic power which allows her to see into the future through dreams. The dream trait confers on Li the status of a visionary and a clairvoyant. Li's dreams are revelatory and meaningful which add a supernatural dimension to her already unconventional character. Thus, unlike the non-disable, Li "sees into the future beyond the ordinary. According to Garland-Thomson

The meanings attributed to extraordinary bodies reside not in inherent which one group is legitimated by possessing valued physical characteristics and maintains



its ascendancy and its self-identity by systematically imposing the role of cultural or corporeal inferiority on others. (7)

Li's father represents to her the image of the colonial oppressor and her psychic power physically assaulted and publicly stripped her father of his revered invincibility which is ascribed to the male gender in Africa. An encounter between Li and her father depicts Li's power over him vividly:

Li turned and stared at him fearlessly. Baba stared back with growing irritation. Suddenly, the irritation turned into anger and he trembled. Li had the power to stir such emotion in him. He thought she was impudent, but it wasn't just this that worried him. It was something else. He hated to admit it even to himself, but there it was. Those piercing eyes that stripped him naked and saw through his soul, assessing, judging and condemning him, weighing his strength against his weakness. They were no child's eyes (The Stillborn, 9).

Mainly, in the figural sense, this experience is for baba (Li's father), a process of castration from which he never fully recovers physically and psychologically. In another way, Baba's constant illness equally operates symbolically to effectively disable him from being a strong and capable head of his family. The foreign culture that Baba is some much in love with, combined with modern living, also helps to disable him. Not only is he blind to the beauty in African culture, he is equally referred to as being fragile (The Stillborn, 8, 26). His gesture too is described as "impotent" (The Stillborn, 24). Thus, Baba like every other male character in Alkali's *The Stillborn* is read as a disable.

Essentially, in Alkali's *The Stillborn*, except for the visibly, physically marked bodies of Manu (the hunch back), Baba who became partially paralysed after collapsing in front of his hut and Habu Adams who became lame towards the end of the novel, all the other characters seem able-bodied, yet, they all seem to be crucially disabled at some defining points in their development. Li's mother is "disabled" by her autocratic husband. Throughout the novel, she is only referred to as mama with no name to identify her. This somewhat substantiates Garland-Thomson's (2013: 8) observation that previous conceptual traditions see the woman's body in terms of a negation or subtraction of the man's. In this vein, all the female characters in *The Stillborn* seem to suffer various kinds of sexual mutilations and are unable to find full sexual expression and satisfaction in their relationship, they seem to live incomplete lives. Li sees her mother's authoritativeness as "monotony and her step as "mechanical", On top of this, she is "hard of hearing (The Stillborn, 11). To Li, women molded in tradition as symbolized by her mother are sapped of life because they had been socialized into repeating the same boring domestic activities that Willet (1971:368) describes as the "lubricating trivia "of the home. This, as de Beauvoir (1952) contends, offers a woman:

no escape from immanence and little affirmation of individuality  
She becomes a robot fired into the clay of immanence by lack of variety and lack of freedom. She has no prospects for growth, for transcendence. She then shuts herself out of world that confines and stifles her by being half- alive to its sounds and movement",  
(35),

Awa, Li's elder sister has never moved out of the village unlike her younger sister who had travelled to go to school. Awa as a traditional and conventional woman becomes "disabled" through her marriage and her fear of change. Her personality and psyche are stunted as she is forced into bearing both her immediate and extended family responsibilities at a very tender age. Against her expectations in life, the colonial power disabled her husband, Fiam, who was once the headmaster of the village school. Fiam in turn becomes a drunkard and an irresponsible man who is not even ashamed to be living off his wife.

Acharya (2012:12) affirms that disability garners different negative cultural constructs of ideological categories, such as ugly, old, aberrant, deformed, derailed, debilitated or feeble minded, and all of them devalue the human body. Hence, aging is a form of disablement that disqualifies older women from the limited power allotted females who are young and meet the criteria for attracting men. Thus, Li 'step grandmother could also be referred to as a disable. She is viewed by many of the characters in the novel as a "wicked, barren woman (14)" who is

16th the root (23) of many troubles especially for Li's father and grandfather Li's grandfather brands his wife "a witch" (25) in a manner that is reminiscent of villainous characters in children's folktales and folklore Grandma, despite her wisdom (53) is relegated by her community to a shadowy corner of the village compound and many of her dreams as the title of the novel suggests become stillborn. While grandma remains a disturbing signpost in *The Stillborn* as the woman who found no medium through which to express her true self through her tirades she constantly warns Li (as the new generation African woman) not to forfeit her individual aspirations:

Listen to my words. I was married fourteen times in the eastern part of this land. I left for this part because I could find no lion among them... Did I know gods of my fathers, that I was coming to meet a worse pack? (53).

Thus, marriage that is supposed to make her whole as an African woman aids in turning her into a disabled. The city serves as a disabling agent in the lives of Habu Adams (Li's husband); Faku (Li's friend); Garba and Li. Li's dreams of going to the city to become a Grade One teacher is truncated as her husband lost interest in her. Faku, Li's best friend is disabled emotionally through her marriage to a polygamist in her quest for freedom. She is trapped to a man who deceived her into marriage. Habu Adams becomes lame, and Li decides to go back to him out of sympathy for his plight. In another vein, Manu the hunchback becomes a laughing stock to the whole community due to his disability. To Manu, his inability to father children can even be a thing of joy as the children born by a disabled are not to be associated with in Hausa culture. Essentially, Li (the heroine of Alkali's *The Stillborn* is disabled emotionally in her relationship with her husband, Habu. Thus, Alkali's use of the pair of crutches towards the close of the novel is powerfully symbolic. The crutches may be seen as a reminder that Li and Habu will have to renegotiate their relationship which has suffered emotional disabilities.

### Conclusion

This study examined gender and disability as both culturally defined and as a representation of postcolonial subjects. Through the use of disabled women's bodies as tropes in postcolonial African novels, this study argues that the use of disabled women's bodies as symbols of the disabled postcolonial African nation creates a catharsis through which colonial relations is erased. Magda and Li erase subjugation and patriarchal suppression through their disabilities While Magda escapes into a world of fantasy which later culminated into neurosis and psychosis. Li overcomes oppression and emotional injury through her psychic power and her education.

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