

SURVEYING THE DIFFABILITY IN *GAME OF THRONES*

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Abstract In every society people with differences in their physiques and abilities are known as people with disabilities- People First Model, even in the Conventions about the Right of the People with Disabilities. This paper tries to study people with different physiques and abilities in *Game of Thrones* which is created by David Benioff and D. B. Weiss, an adaptation of George R. R. Martin's fantasy novels, *A Song of Ice and Fire*. This article studies the Social Model of disability which has been organized as a one-dimensional standard society. This model focuses on disability as a social not individual problem. Based on social model of disability, this paper discusses diff-ability and introduces new binary opposition of diff-ability/sim-ability for disability/non-disability. Struggle between standard society for people with similar physiques and abilities and dis-standard society for people with different physiques and abilities which is obvious in this novel, clearly illustrates how the environment of the society affects the fate and the condition of these people. Considering universal popularity of *Game of Thrones* and the fact that choice of characters with different physiques and abilities can hardly be incidental and that literary works as cultural artifacts and binary oppositions, which are culturally constructed, this paper attempts to transform negative attitudes of society and create positive attitudes toward this population. Positive terminologies, by emphasizing on abilities, create positive attitudes toward people with different physiques and abilities, and negative terminologies produce negative ones. The disability is a kind of 'problem' which has source in society. By making society standard for the diff-abled, they would be able as well as the sim-abled people.

Keywords: *Game of Thrones*; Binary opposition; Social Model of disability; Diffability; Literature's role.

1. Introduction

Over the years, along with changes in society's attitudes, these people, who are known as people with disabilities in Conventions about the Right of the People with Disabilities, have been described by various terminologies such as: idiot, imbecile, moron, later were replaced by retarded, crippled, handicapped, impaired, disabled, physically challenged. Responses have been changed since the 1970s. There is a social model of disability which emphasizes that disability is not an individual but a social problem, i.e. a society is disabled. This model has been developed in 1970s by activists in UPIAS, it was given academic credibility via the work of Vic Finkelstein (1980,1981), Colin Barnes (1991) and particularly Mike Oliver (1990,1996):

"In our view it is the society which disables physically impaired people.

Disability is something imposed on top of our impairment by the way we are unnecessarily isolated and excluded from full participation in society" (UPIAS, 1976:3-4).

It "has been described as the shift from a 'medical model' to a 'social model' in which people are viewed as being disabled by society rather than by their bodies" (WHO,2011:4). SIGAB is seen the disability as a reality of what happened on the failure of the environment, government, society, as well as the order and the system in responding to the facts of diff-ability.

In recent years, the emphasize is on the individual, not person's disability. They should be recognized by their abilities, not their disabilities. Diff-ability is a word that is absorbed from the English "diffable" (an abbreviation of "differently-able people"). According to Suharto, the term "diffable" was introduced by Manour Fakih and Setia Adi Purwanta in early 1996 (2010: 9), which is used

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against the term “disabled” as well as various negative connotations attached to it. Suharto, Kuipers & Dorsett provide a critique of the issue of language and the labelling of people with impairments and how it influences the paradigm of policy and service responses, and thereby the future role of differently able people. They suggest that ‘difabel’ provides a more positive characterization of people with impairments and reminds us of the importance of emphasizing abilities and acknowledging differences (2016:693).

Binary opposition states that all elements of human culture can only be understood in relation to one another and how they function within a larger system or the overall environment. Binary opposition in cultural studies explores the relationships between different groups of people and creates boundaries between them, leads to prejudice and discrimination. Binary opposites are cultural constructs which learned and accepted as real by a person who grew up by ideas of society. In literature, the authors use binary opposition to explore differences between groups of individuals, such as cultural, class or gender differences.

Bolt in the overview of the book, *Changing Social Attitudes Toward Disability: Perspectives from Historical, Cultural, and Educational Studies*, says that social values and attitudes are shared through cultural artefacts (2014:7). Literary works as cultural artefacts have a deep effect in creating positive collective unconscious toward diff-ability.

Game of Thrones was awarded a Media Access Award in 2013 for its efforts in "promoting awareness of the disability experience, accessibility for people with disabilities, and the accurate depiction of characters with disabilities" (Winter Is Coming, 2013). It includes a number of characters with different physiques and abilities both acquired and lifelong. *Game of Thrones* is an American fantasy drama television series created by David Benioff and D. B. Weiss. It is an adaptation of George R. R. Martin's fantasy novels, *A Song of Ice and Fire*. It chronicles the violent dynastic struggles among the realm's noble families for the Iron Throne, while other families fight for independence from it. It opens with additional threats in the icy North and Essos in the east. More emphasis of *Game of*

Thrones is on battles, political intrigue, and the characters.

Breaking down social barriers and discrimination toward these people and challenging stereotypes and transforming attitudes, help to increase inclusion. This novel explores various roots of negative attitudes and prejudices toward diff-ability such as ‘halo effect’, “cause-and-effect”, ‘branding’, ... and also much role that society, plays in fate and condition of characters with diff-abilities. This article, through analyzing characters with different physiques and abilities in *Game of Thrones*, tries to reveal social problem/s of disability and substitutes disability/non-disability binary opposition by diff-ability/sim-ability.

2. Binary Opposition

A binary opposition is the system by which, in language and thought, two theoretical opposites are strictly defined and set off against one another (Smith, 1996:383). It first considered by Aristotle in his *Poetics* (Wolfreys, Robbins & Womack, 2006:17) and subsequently appears in the work of the French structural anthropologist Claude Levi Strauss on myth. Many structuralists take this opposition as a starting point (narratologists, such as A. J. Griemas, Roman Jakobson and Householder) and then poststructuralist thinkers followed it (Payne, 2010:74-75). Ferdinand de Saussure defines it as the means by which the units of language have value or meaning, each unit is defined in reciprocal determination with another term. The way we understand words depends on our understanding of difference between the word and its opposite. Another important feature of binary opposition is that one side of the binary pair is always seen by a particular society or culture as more valued over the other. Yet, this feature causes prejudice and discrimination. Binary opposition also uses people for categorizing in two classes of people because of the way of power is distributed among groups of people in a society. According to Maleki, logo-centrism is an idea related to binary opposition that suggests certain audiences will favor one part of a binary over another which is often most strongly influenced by a readers’ cultural background (2014:68). Cultural background and powerful side of a society influence preference for one part of a binary opposition. A person who grew up with

ideas of society, learned and accepted them as real not cultural constructs. Besides these features, “in literary theoretical discourses, neither term in a binary opposition or pair is considered absolute” (Welfreys, Robbins & Womack, 2006:17). And also, Fourie discovers that binary oppositions have a deeper or second level of binaries that helps to reinforce meaning. As an example, the concepts hero and villain involve secondary binaries: good/bad, liked/disliked, and so on (2001:153).

3. Diffability/Simability Binary Opposition

As discussed in the previous section, binary oppositions are words or concepts which are opposed to each other in meaning. It is a relationship of opposition and mutual exclusion between two elements (Baldrick, 2004:40). One part of a binary opposition is more favored and valued which can be traced as a result of cultural background. Neither term in a binary opposition or pair is considered absolute. And binary oppositions have a deeper or second level of binaries.

This study discusses what the problem with disability/non-disability is and by studying Social Model of disability it prepares some reasons for substituting it by diff-ability/sim-ability.

Binary opposition has an extraordinary power in categorizing people in two classes such as with (+)/without (+) or with (-)/without (-). Positivity and negativity are defined by cultural heritage and norms of thinking in society. The meaning of one's own disabled physique to a person with disability and to others who interact with him or her will depend in general upon the values of the cultural group to which they belong (Munyi, 2012:3). Disability is accepted as a negative and non-disability as a positive trait in society. Disability and non-disability are opposed to each other in meaning and defined by mutual exclusion. The society values non-disability over disability:

1. Disability \neq Non-disability
2. People with disability/ people without disability---- disability is a negative trait
3. Disability/ non-disability--- imply absolute meaning

4. Disability/non-disability---- dominant is non-disability
5. People with disability/people without disability----- dominant is people without disability

The clear problem with this binary opposition is that it implies an absolute meaning. To somehow this wholeness and generality of this negativity results from the “Spread Phenomenon”. “Halo Effect” (Wright, 1960:121) or “Spread Phenomenon” is the generalization from one perceived characteristic (physical) to other, unrelated characteristics (emotional or mental). There is neither person with absolute disability or without disability. Naming people as people with disabilities for those who are created or became different and have different physiques and abilities is a wrong name. Another problem is that the disability/non-disability binary opposition implies many of the other negative binary oppositions such as: normal/abnormal, standard/deviant, present/absent and so on.

The most consistent feature in the treatment of persons with disabilities in most societies is the fact that they are categorized as “deviants rather than inmates by society” (Lippman, 1972:89). The social model of disability, which is a reaction to the dominant medical (individual) model of disability, identifies syntagmatic barriers, negative attitudes and exclusion by society (purposely or inadvertently) that means society is the main contributory factor in disabling people.

In different times, because of considering disability as an individual problem, various terminologies have been used for people with diff-abilities such as: retarded, cripple, handicapped, impaired, disabled, physically challenged, people with disabilities (as People-First Language). Foucault (1973) suggests that the way we talk about the world and the way we experience it are inextricably linked- the names we give to things shape our experience of them and our experience of things in the world influences the names we give to them. Hence our practices of normalizing people and normalizing services both constructs and maintains the normal/abnormal dichotomy (Oliver, 1999:6). It is clear that names are so powerful and important in addressing people. In the first episode of the first season of Game of Thrones, before we see Tyrion Lanister , Aria

Stark says: “Where is Imp?”. People with different physiques usually are addressed and referred by some negative adjectives not their names. Or the Unsullied do not have human names but of animals and flies such as Black Rat, Red Flee,... . All the unsullied are emasculated by their masters as a kind of ‘branding’, was essentially to depict ownership which has roots in historical practices of slavery and the animal husbandry industry where they were burnt or branded with the markings or symbols of the owner using a hot iron rod.

Different (diff) / similar (sim), opposed to each other in meaning, is a culturally opposed idea- a binary opposition. It is tried to divisive ideas about ability based on one-dimensional standard society. According to standards and structures of such societies, people with diff-abilities are called, people with disabilities. But actually it is society that is disabled and not standard for different physiques and different abilities. Imagine that a three-story building was built, but there are no steps, ramp or elevator. How can you go to the second or third floor? Can we say that you should fly, if you cannot then you are disabled? It is architecture which is not based on our physiques and abilities. What makes a person disabled is an inaccessible physical environment, lack of assistive devices, and negative attitudes that erect barriers for their participation in society. Therefore, disability is not synonymous with a medical diagnosis but rather emerges from an interaction between personal functioning and the environment (Adioetomo, Mont and Irwanto,2014:34). For example, in season one, episode four, Tyrion provides plans for a saddle that will allow Bran to ride a horse once more:

Maester Luwin: The boy has lost the use of his legs.

Tyrion: What of it? With the right horse and saddle, even a cripple can ride.

Bran: Will I really be able to ride?

Tyrion: You will. On horseback you will be as tall as any of them.

By making society standard for the diff-abled, they would be able as well as the sim-abled people. Based on social model of disability, we are introduced with diff-ability/sim-ability. The advantage of diff-ability/sim-ability over disability/non-disability

is that there is not any absoluteness anywhere. Both could involve some abilities and some disabilities and using it make the social problem of disability more emphasized. It is society which is disabled for people with diff-abilities (put them as secondary) and non-disabled for people with sim-abilities (put them as dominant). A sim-able individual can be named disabled if s/he doesn’t use her or his abilities and for a diff-able person it is the same. And also the deeper or secondary binaries of this binary opposition are positive. Applying diff-ability/sim-ability binary opposition challenges a lot of negative attitudes and prejudices against people with diff-abilities and decreases discrimination in society.

4. Literature as Representation of Diffability (Game of Thrones)

In literature and cultural representation, there has always been an abundance of disability more broadly (Bolt,2016:2). “The universal relevance of disability becomes manifest in the cultural artefacts on which so many lessons, courses, projects, and critical works are based” (1). Mitchell and Snyder demonstrate that “the disabled body represents a potent symbolic site of literary investment” (2000:49).

There is sorry, because “the majority of the examples of disabled characters in contemporary literature... are bad” (Cohen,1977:151). Literature is production, representative and constructor of culture. There are many literary works which include people with diff-abilities by the name and picture of people with disabilities in children and adult literature. Fiedler writes that ‘what children’s books tell’ provide part of the foundation for “maturity [which] involves the ability to believe the self normal, only the other a monster or a Freak” (1976:23).

Most literature about diff-ability have more emphasized on the differences of these people rather than their similarities in wishes, goals, talents, ... with other people. “Physical characteristics have always been used to set evil people apart from good people, probably because people only understand that which is most parsimonious and visible, or have” (Beauchamp,2015:56). Most of literary works use diff-ability as a tool, the diff-able people are aid, not main characters. Garland-Thomson

asserted that “[d]isabled literary characters usually remain on the margins of fiction” (1997:9). For them diff-ability has helped to define sim-ability (they name as non-disability) as its contrasting image. In literature “the disabled character is never of importance to himself or herself. Rather, the character is placed in the narrative ‘for’ the nondisabled characters – to help them develop sympathy, empathy, or as a counterbalance to some issue in the life of the ‘normal’ character” (Davis,2002:45).

Wright (1960), in a comprehensive literature review, discussed attitudes toward different physiques according to different categories which one of them is cause-and-effect relations. He means that there is phenomenal causality between certain “sinful behaviors” and disability as an “unavoidable punishment” (Livneh,1982:338). Negative attitudes toward the diff-abled are same for female even in more pathetic way. Shireen Baratheon’s mother (Selyse) says to her husband (Stannis Baratheon): “Lady Melisandra gave you a son but I gave you nothing”(season3, episode5). And in season four, episode five: “I should give you a son. I’ve given nothing than weakness and deformity”, or

Selyse: I fear for our daughter's soul.

Lady Melisandra: Every mother should fear for her child's soul.

Selyse: She's a stubborn little beast.

Stannis: She's a child.

Selyse: You barely know her. You think she's sweet because she smiles when you visit. She's sullen and stubborn and sinful. Why else would the Lord of Light have seen fit to mark her face? She needs the rod.

(season4, episode2)

As it is noticed Shireen was burned alive in season five, episode nine.

Longmore observes that “deformity of body symbolizes deformity of soul. Physical handicaps are made the emblems of evil” (2003:133). Here we notice ‘halo effect’ which Selyse generalizes different in her daughter’s face to her soul and explains Shireen’s different face as an effect of a sin which she should be punished for that.

In this series there are a lot of scenes which portray that differences in physiques results from sinful behaviors and violation of

rules of society and its power which has their rules and disciplines for punishment people to control them. Stannis Baratheon before knighting Ser Davos removed his four finger as punishment for years of smuggling. Or Aria Stark becomes blind when she robbed one face of Many-Faced God for revenging.

Another example of cause-and-effect relations is a singer who sang in tavern about King Robert Baratheon. King Jeffery commands to Sir Ilyn to cut singer’s tongue: “who better than you carry out the sentence?” (season1, episode10). It is necessary to know who Sir Ilyn is. Sir Ilyn lost his tongue for speaking ill of Aerys II during the Mad King’s reign. Beside this that he is the king’s executioner, Jeffery’s sentence about Sir Ilyn produces a negative image that a person with different physique has more reason and revenge desire (from all world) and ability than others to torture and make people like himself/herself. For punishment, the right side of Sandor Cleagan’s face was burned in burning coals by his brother, because he was playing with his toy. Or emasculating Theon by Ramsy, Lord Bolton’s sadistic bastard son, is another example of punishment for his act in Winterfell.

“The media and film industry’s stereotypical disabling imagery sets disabled people unhelpfully outside the rest of society” (Braye,2017:224). They portray this people as “something less or more than simply human” (Oliver & Barnes,2012:103). Carrol (1990) said that monster is a horror made visible by categorizing following attributes:

- Monsters are deformed and ugly;
- A monster’s physical deformities reflect conflict-good-vs. evil;
- Monster can be possessed, incomplete. They are being who are not like us;
- Monsters are unnatural according to a culture’s conceptual scheme of nature;
- Monsters violate the scheme of nature;
- Monsters challenge a culture’s way of thinking.

(Beauchamp,2015:74)

Carrol’s definition of monster is similar to the portraying of the people with different physiques and abilities in most of literary works which are represented as incomplete, less-than-human, half-man and as a tool to picture better horror, fear, violence....

Prince Oberine , in a conversation with Tyrion Lanister, narrates his first acquaintance with him:

Oberyn: you had just been born. The whole way from Dorne all anyone talked about was the monster that had been born to Tywin Lannister. A head twice the size of his body, a tail between his legs, claws, one red eye, the privates of both a girl and a boy.

Oberyn: ... Your head was a bit large. Your arms and legs were a bit small, but no claw. No red eye. No tail between your legs. Just a tiny pink cock. We didn't try to hide our disappointment. "That's not a monster," I told Cersei, "that's just a baby." ... (season4, episode7)

This kind of literature about people with diff- abilities describes them in a way people talk about Tyrion when he has been born.

Or in a conversation with Sansa , Tyrion says: "[...] people have been laughing at me [...] I'm the Half-Man, the Demon-Monkey, the Imp" (season3, episode10). He is called by people including his father, Tywin, "a drunken little lust-fulled beast" (season3, episode8), by Jeffery (his nephew) "little monster" (season3, episode10).

Sir Jamie Lanister said to Catelyne about her guard, Brienne , "where did you find this beast?" (season2, episode7). Or soldiers of Lord Bolton organize a battle between Knight Brienne and a bear in a cage, which give an image of Brienne equal with a beast just because of her physique (season3, episode7).

Hodor, his name originally was Wyllis and possessed similar abilities of speech, is the character who only can say the word "Hodor". All call him, Hodor. One of Soldiers of Theon Grayjoy calls him, giant (season2, episode7) or Osha (wilding girl) calls him, "sweet giant" (season2, episode7).

People with diff- abilities in most of literary works are also represented as asexual, without same emotional or sexual need as other people their age. "Even the most minor impairments result in romantic rejection" (Longmore,2003:142). Hosey notes "the enduring stereotype that disabled women [...] are incapable of initiating or maintaining mutually fulfilling romantic relationships" (2009:40):

Brienne of Tarth: [...] my father held a ball [...] he wanted to make a good match for

me. He invited dozens of young lords to Tarth. [...] None of the boys noticed how mulish and tall I was[...] I had never been so happy. Till I saw a few of the boys snickering. And then they all started to laugh, [...] They were toying with me. "Brienne the Beauty", they called me. Great joke. And I realized I was the ugliest girl alive. A great lumbering beast. I tried to run away [...].

(season5, episode3)

Because of the expectations and limitations of the society, people with diff- abilities are learned and accepted to see themselves by the eye of society. It is 'double consciousness' , looking at one's self through the eyes of others. In a conversation between Lord Baelish (Little Finger) in season one, episode ten, Lord Varis says: "I must be one of the few men in this city who doesn't want to be king". The word "must" emphasizes societal idea that a person with different physique can't be a king. He himself learned and accepted that (seeing himself by the eye of society), that's why he uses the word "want". In continue, Lord Baelish says: "you must be the one of the man in this city who is not a man", which shows the way other people see them.

There is a belief that people with diff- abilities come from lower class with a poorer environment. In each noble family in this work, there is at least one person with different physique and ability which challenge this belief:

Kings' families

Shireen-Bratheon(beer)

Brandon and Arya- Stark (wolf)

Tyrion and Jaime- Lanister (lion)

Master Aemen - Targarion (dragon)

Other noble families:

Lord Doran - Lord of Dorn

Khal Drogo - Dothraki

Brienne-

Tarth

Theon- Greyjoy -Iron land

People with diff-abilities are subjected to a lot of unfair judgements, because charging and sentencing them is acceptable by disabled society. Tyrion is arrested and trailed for crimes he didn't commit, twice. First, he is arrested by Catelyn, Bran's mother, believed to be responsible for hiring an assassin to murder Bran. The second time, King Joffrey is poisoned and dies at the feast of his wedding. Tyrion is falsely accused of the crime. Tywin,

Tyrion's father, attempts many times to kill him. His efforts for killing his son is an attempt for eugenics .

This work presents the diff-abled characters in the communities. The diff-abled characters in this series don't segregate themselves from society, in spite of society's attempts for suppressing them. They don't try remain out of sight of the society. They participate in society and show their abilities. They are not embarrassed about themselves and completely accept that and want to be accepted and respected as they are.

When Tyrion was wounded from the battle (Black water), after he has won the battle and saved the city, his family stripped him of power and pretend he had nothing to do with it, Shae, his beloved- makes offer that they flee. His nature won't let him choose anonymous contentment in exile over a miserable life with the Lannisters:

Shae: Leave King's Landing. They tried to kill you. They will try again. Going into wars, fighting soldiers, you're terrible at this. [...] You don't belong here.

...

Shae: [...] Your father, your sister, all these bad people, they can't stop you. Forget about them. [...].

Tyrion: I can't. I do belong here. These bad people are what I'm good at. Outtalking them, outthinking them. It's what I am. And I like it. I like it more than anything I've ever done....

(season2, episode10)

Game of Thrones with a strict method portrays abilities of people with different physiques and abilities. It is necessary to point that in this series, people with diff-abilities are addressed by a lot of prejudice and negative words, but as narrative explores, the wrongness of these names realize by audiences and society becomes more criticized. As story goes on, the environment of people with different physiques changes, the picture of this population and their abilities for good purposes become clear for audiences. These useful and peaceful characters for the world are valued as well as the others in society.

The story has a critical view about good-vs. evil as traditional feature of literature. The wrong traditional hierarchy of the diff-abled as bad, abnormal, incomplete, deviant, evil, ... and

the sim-abled as good, normal, complete, standard, ... is broken in this narrative.

The much advantage of this series in relation to diff-ability is that it clears differences between old (disabled/ dis-standard) and new (abled/ standard) environment for people with different physiques and abilities. New environment accepts them as normal people, most of its armies are unsullied (who are eunuch), the old society doesn't even consider them a reasonable goal for fighting:

Bronn: Men without cocks. You wouldn't find me fighting in an army if I had no cock. What's left to fight for?

Jaime Lannister: Gold?

Bronn: ... [soldiers]. What do you think they spend that gold on?

Jaime Lannister: Family.

Bronn: Not without a cock, you don't.

(season7, episode7)

But in new society, for example, love for Grey Worm (an Unsullied) is accepted and respected.

New environment creates a room which they are accepted and respected by their abilities not their physiques. In new environment there are 'diversity', Mitchell defined it as "including more different kinds of people" (Bolt,2016:14) and 'inclusion', "an embrace of diversity-based practices through which we include those who look, act, function, and feel different (9).

People with diff-ability who are excluded by force, like Tyrion, or by themselves, like Sandor Cleagan, from old environment move toward inclusive society. It welcomes them without questioning their physiques. In new society, literature is almost better in addressing, portraying the diff-abled. In old environment, mocking Tyrion was accepted by his family and society, his life has no value even for his father but as we saw in season7, episode7, he is an important member in new society. Daenerys said to her Hand, Tyrion,: "I didn't come all this way to have my hand murdered". Shireen was burned alive in old society but when Daenerys, who wants establish new society of diversity and inclusion, learns of Jorah's greyscale, sadly demands that he figure out a cure so he can be by her side when she takes the seven kingdoms. In this society diverse people acting as one movement with common aim.

Conclusion

Positive terminologies create positive attitudes toward people with different physiques and abilities, and negative terminologies produce negative ones. The disability is a kind of 'problem' which has source in society. It is disable in creating suitable condition for this people. In the word "disability", there is just negativity, it implies that there is not any kind of ability, but there is no person that be, completely, abled/disabled. Disability is a common feature of all human beings, both diff-abled and sim-abled.

Literature as an effective media, by proper portraying this people, it can change the huge negativity toward them. This novel and its adaptation series, as two powerful and popular media, can give voice to an oppressed group by critiquing one-dimension standards and structures of society and are valuable and effective works for surviving, introducing and re-recognizing this population clearly. Game of Thrones uses many characters with different physiques and different abilities. Considering the effect and role of literary works and their adapted works in creating positive or negative collective unconscious toward people with different physiques and abilities and as it has been portraying in Game of Thrones in the battle good-vs. evil, they are not all bad men necessarily.

It is hoped that one day by societal progression and cultural acceptance, there is not any binary opposition like disability/non-disability and even diff-ability/ sim-ability, they are valued as normal human being. It is not possible unless societies are corrected and there is enough room for the whole population.

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