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Research Article

Voices from the Margin: The Cultural and Social Dimensions of Disability in Leroy F. Moore's "Buried Voices"

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Abstract

This paper explores the cultural and social dimensions of disability in Leroy Moore's poem, "Buried Voices." Throughout the poem, Moore unpacks the marginalized voices of people with disabilities while exposing the challenges they face within familial, social, and political contexts. By invoking Tom Shakespeare's critical realist approach, which critiques the social model of disability for neglecting the personal experiences and realities of living with impairments, this paper argues that Moore's poem works as a rallying cry for equality and justice for people with disabilities worldwide. This study employs Robert McRuer's Crip theory to explore how social norms and discrimination shape the lives of people with disabilities. It also draws on Giorgio Agamben's concept of "homo sacer" to highlight how their exclusion operates as structural violence, undermining fundamental human rights. The paper further concerns that the maltreatment, exclusion, and marginalization of people with disabilities across various aspects of life constitute a form of structural violence that violates their human rights. Therefore, it is essential to hear their voices and integrate them into familial, social, and political frameworks rather than merely offering sympathy and charity. This paper makes a significant contribution by not only bringing the issues faced by people with disabilities into the limelight through critical discussion but also advocating for their inclusion in key institutions-family, society and politics.

Keywords: Cultural dimensions, disability, human rights, social dimensions, structural violence

Introduction

Disability is generally discussed through the limited lens of medical or charitable perspectives, but its real meaning goes beyond these limited views. People with disabilities are not just individuals living with impairments but are also active members of families, communities, and societies. Their voices, however, are often ignored, their identities are pushed to the margins, and their struggles remain unnoticed. In many societies, they continue to face discrimination, exclusion, and unequal treatment in daily life, from family relations to social spaces and political structures.

The poem “Buried Voices” by Leroy Moore brings attention to these hidden experiences. It reveals how people with disabilities are silenced and marginalized, while also asserting their right to be seen, heard, and respected. To understand these issues more deeply, this paper takes recourse to Tom Shakespeare’s critical realist approach, which focuses on the importance of recognizing both social barriers and personal experiences.

This paper argues that the selected poem exposes the cultural and social marginalization of people with disabilities and calls for their meaningful inclusion in family, society, and politics. It shows that exclusion is not just a personal problem but a form of structural violence that violates basic human rights. Therefore, listening to and empowering these voices is essential for building a more just and inclusive world.

Critical Disability Theory: Rethinking Social and Cultural Exclusion

Recent scholarship in Critical Disability Theory emphasizes centering the authentic voices and lived experiences of people with disabilities, rather than relying solely on medical or institutional perspectives. Many traditional approaches fail to show the emotional and social realities of living with disability. As a result, they often support stereotypes and lead to further exclusion. To address this gap, scholars have begun using arts based methods such as performance poetry. These methods help people with disabilities express their daily experiences in more meaningful ways. In “Performance Poetry as a Method to Understand Disability,” Fenge et al. explain that performance poetry allows young people with disabilities to share insights that are often missed by traditional research. They also point out that “cultural norms rooted in ableism, along with stigmatizing language and negative portrayals, continue to reinforce the marginalization and oppression of disabled people” (3). When society uses harmful words or shows people with disabilities in negative ways, it increases unfair treatment and keeps them excluded and oppressed.

Disability is now understood as more than just a medical or personal issue. Dan Goodley, in “Dis/entangling Critical Disability Studies,” explains that late-twentieth-century disability studies focused on the “structural, economic, and cultural exclusion of people with sensory, physical, and cognitive impairments,” while contemporary studies develop “nuanced theoretical responses that address both these structural barriers and the lived experiences of disabled people” (631). This shows that understanding disability requires looking at both social structures and the personal experiences of people with disabilities, which is a key idea in Critical Disability Theory. As Carol Thomas defines, disablism is “a form of social oppression involving the social imposition of restrictions of activity on people with impairments and the socially engendered undermining of their psycho-emotional well being” (qtd. in Goodley Thomas 631). This approach is in the line with Critical Disability Studies, which sheds light on the importance of examining societal structures, cultural norms, and power dynamics rather than treating disability as merely a medical condition.

In “Social Model: A New Approach of the Disability Theme,” Bampi et al. bring in the idea that “the experience of disability is part of the daily lives of people who have a disease, lesion or corporal limitation” and that “disability is still understood as personal bad luck; moreover, from the social and political points of view, the disabled are seen as a minority” (816). They emphasize that disability should not be seen only as a personal problem or the result of a bodily impairment. Instead, the social model of disability shows that many challenges arise from the barriers and restrictions imposed by society. The critics also note that “difficulties and barriers society imposed on people considered different make disability a reality and portray social injustice and the vulnerability situation lived by excluded groups” (816). This approach puts stress on how social structures can oppress and marginalize people with disabilities and shifts attention from individual limitations to

society's responsibility. Understanding disability in this way can help policymakers and society at large promote social inclusion, justice, and the protection of rights for people with disabilities.

Lars Gronvik, in his review of Robert McRuer's *Crip Theory: Cultural Signs of Queerness and Disability* (2008), spotlights on how McRuer explains the relationship between disability, normality, and power. Gronvik points out that McRuer shifts the focus "from the disabled to the construction of the abled and able-bodiedness" (68). This suggests that disability is not the only category requiring analysis; the very idea of being non-disabled is also socially produced and reinforced by cultural norms. Gronvik further emphasizes that crip theory is not a fixed or closed framework. Instead, he describes it as "a collection of positions, practices and perspectives against compulsory able-bodiedness and compulsory heterosexuality" (35). This openness encourages scholars to rethink the rigid boundary between abled and disabled identities and to view disability as a flexible, critical, and culturally shaped position rather than merely a medical classification.

In his review of Tom Shakespeare's book *Disability Rights and Wrongs*, Lennard Davis explains that Shakespeare calls for a balanced relationship between theory and lived experience in disability studies. Shakespeare argues that earlier approaches have gone to extremes. The strong social model focuses only on society, while cultural and critical models lean too heavily on theory. Because of this imbalance, he notes that "disability studies has failed to balance the demands of radical social change and intellectual rigour" (1). To resolve this, Shakespeare proposes a critical realist approach that recognizes both social structures and the material realities of impairment. Davis writes that critical realism accepts an "external reality ... the independent existence of bodies which sometimes hurt" (73). Shakespeare also stresses that disability is diverse and often overlooked because scholarship ignores "actually existing disability," including "the diversity of illness and impairment experiences and contexts" (4). He argues that people are "disabled by society and by their bodies and minds" (5), challenging the view that disability is only socially created. Likewise, he critiques cultural disability studies for rejecting biology and treating "deficits as differences" (60), which hides the lived realities of pain, illness, and medical needs. Shakespeare's critical realism, thus, asks us to think more practically and sensitively. It asks scholars to combine theory with real life, to respect the body, and to avoid ideological extremes.

Building on these theoretical insights, especially Tom Shakespeare's critical realist approach, it is clear that disability must be understood both through lived experience and the social structures that shape exclusion. However, no study has applied this perspective to Leroy Moore's poem "Buried Voices." The poem captures the silenced struggles and emotional realities of disabled people exactly the kind of experiences critical realism highlights. This study aims to interpret "Buried Voices" as both artistic expression and testimony, showing how Moore gives voice to social injustice while supporting disability identity.

Voices from the Margin: Socio-cultural Dimensions of Disability in "Buried Voices"

Disability is shaped not only by physical conditions but also by social and cultural forces that influence how people are seen and treated. Leroy Moore's poem "*Buried Voices*" gives voice to experiences often silenced, reflecting the everyday struggles and emotions of people with disabilities. This study reads the poem through a socio-cultural lens, showing how Moore's words convey both the realities of impairment and the social barriers that shape the lives of people with disabilities. The speaker acts as both witness and advocate, sharing the experiences of disabled Black youth who face violence, neglect, and social exclusion.

The next generation
Is being plucked off one by one
On the streets, in schools and in prison
Little ones snuggled

In small coffins
Buried voices have many stories (line 1-6)

The opening lines of the poem immediately draw attention to the vulnerability and premature loss of young lives. Phrases like “The next generation / Is being plucked off one by one” emphasize the systematic and repeated harm faced by disabled Black youth, suggesting that societal neglect and violence target them consistently. Similarly, the imagery of “streets, in schools and in prison” highlights public, educational, and institutional spaces where systemic oppression occurs. This also shows how societal structures contribute to the marginalization of people with disabilities. “Buried voices” are numerous but ignored, indicating a societal failure to acknowledge or protect them. These lines reflect the poem’s main concern regarding how personal pain and social injustice are connected, revealing the ways society and culture make life even harder for disabled Black youth.

The following lines offer a poignant glimpse into the harsh realities of disabled Black youth, capturing the ongoing violence, neglect, and systemic pressures that shape their lives. They also illustrate how early trauma and social neglect trap them in cycles of fear and struggle.

Hunting the soulless
Young spirits creeping in the minds of the old and wary
Their hit list is endless
Years of abuse
Caught up And can’t get loose (11-15)

The struggles of disabled Black youth are ongoing, marked by abuse and neglect. Phrases like “hunting the soulless” and “young spirits creeping in the minds of the old and wary” suggest that their trauma affects both their own lives and how older generations perceive them. The lines “years of abuse / caught up and can’t get loose” show how difficult it is to break free from cycles of harm. These lines reveal the personal suffering and social pressures that shape the daily experiences of disabled Black youth.

Black, young and disabled
Always been labeled
Home was not stable
Elders set in their ways
They want to lock us away
Can’t teach old dogs new tricks (16-20)

These lines reflect the multiple challenges faced by disabled Black youth. Being “always labeled” points to the stigmas and social judgments that mark their identities from an early age, while “home was not stable” suggests a lack of safety, support, and security in their personal environments. The lines also convey how both societal prejudice and family or community norms contribute to the ongoing marginalization and vulnerability of these young individuals.

In “Intersectionality of Disabled People through a Disability Studies, Ability-Based Studies, and Intersectional Pedagogy Lens: A Survey and a Scoping Review”, Wolbring and Nasir examine the intersectionality of disabled people through the lenses of Disability Studies, Ability-Based Studies, and intersectional pedagogy. The writers emphasize that “being ability-judged is a general cultural reality, and ability judgments are often used to justify the social superiority of one group over another and as a tool for social oppression” (2). They argue that negative ability judgments represent a central challenge at the intersection of multiple forms of marginalization, contributing to systemic discrimination or disablism against disabled people. This analysis shows how social

judgments about ability combine with other forms of oppression, highlighting the social and cultural barriers faced by disabled people.

Moore's depiction in the selected poem shows the fact that the oppression of disabled Black youth cannot be understood through a single lens. It emerges at the intersection of race, disability, and social judgment, emphasizing the urgent need for recognition, inclusion, and structural change.

The following lines show the experiences of disabled Black youth and how society often ignores them. They face many forms of discrimination, like racism and ableism, which limit their opportunities. Social and cultural pressures trap them, leaving little room to speak or be recognized.

Buried in mainstream news
 Buried in the community
 Can't breathe, can't hear, can't see
 Layer after layer
 Ism after ism
 Wrapped up like a mummy (23-28)

These lines suggest that disabled Black youth are repeatedly ignored or hidden, both in the media and in their communities. The phrases "can't breathe, can't hear, can't see" evoke a sense of suffocation and silencing, showing how social and cultural pressures prevent them from being fully recognized. "Layer after layer, ism after ism" shows that disabled Black youth face many kinds of discrimination, like racism and ableism. In the same way, being "wrapped up like a mummy" suggests that these pressures trap them and silence their voices.

The experiences of disabled Black youth described in these lines reminds us of Giorgio Agamben's concept of "homo sacer", in which certain individuals are excluded from legal and social protections and reduced to "bare life." Agamben, in *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life* (1998), draws on Pompeius Festus's homo sacer, "whom the people have judged on account of a crime... he who kills him will not be condemned for homicide" (46) to illustrate bare life, a life exposed to killing without legal consequence, yet excluded from ritual and political protection.

Just as the "homo sacer" can be killed with impunity yet is disconnected from ritual, the poem portrays these youth as buried under layers of systemic oppression: racism, ableism, and other "isms" rendering them invisible, silenced, and socially unprotected. They are trapped within a society that simultaneously recognizes and erases their existence.

The following lines also unpack the plight of disabled youth whose voices and histories have been systematically silenced and ignored. They also capture the struggle against social invisibility, showing how oppression confines and buries their lived experiences. These lines unfold the plight of marginalized bodies navigating a world that refuses to fully see or hear them.

Buried voices are singing in the cemetery
 voicing their short and painful history
 Buried voices rising with the sun
 Young disabled corps walking the earth
 Talking back and heading north (30-34)

These lines unlock the predicament of disabled individuals who are forced to live unseen, unheard, and marginalized in a society that often renders their experiences invisible. "Buried voices are singing in the cemetery / voicing their short and painful history" reflects how their struggles and histories have been suppressed, yet continue to assert themselves despite neglect. The imagery of "rising with the sun" conveys the emergence of agency, as these voices claim visibility and recognition. "Young disabled corps walking the earth" portrays them as active participants in the

world, moving beyond victimhood. Likewise, “talking back and heading north” signifies resistance, empowerment, and the pursuit of a future shaped on their own terms.

The following lines, likewise, unveil how suppressed voices demand acknowledgment and recognition, insisting that society confronts the injustices they endure and responds to their call for visibility, justice, and inclusion. The lines emphasize the urgency and intensity of social accountability, demanding immediate attention and action.

Now everybody is scared
Running in fear
Cause judgment day is here
Parents, teachers and politicians
Listen to the voices
They demand your attention (35-40)

The metaphor of “judgment day” highlights the urgency of these voices. Neglect can no longer be tolerated. The poem calls on parents, teachers, and politicians to listen and act in familial, social, and political spheres. These voices break the silence and insist on being seen. They confront indifference and assert their presence. True empowerment begins with being heard. Acknowledgment is not optional, it is a moral and social responsibility.

In this context, the poem also reflects Johan Galtung’s concept of “structural violence”. In his essay “Violence, Peace, and Peace Research,” Galtung emphasizes that harm does not always come from direct physical actions but can be embedded in the very organization of society. He explains that such violence occurs when social structures systematically prevent people from meeting their basic needs, writing that structural violence is “harm embedded in social structures that prevents people from meeting their basic needs” (Galtung 171). This idea underscores how inequality, discrimination, and neglect can be built into institutions, policies, and cultural norms, creating conditions where certain groups, like disabled Black youth in Moore’s “Buried Voices”, experience persistent disadvantage and marginalization.

Buried voices
Are always with me
They are in my head guiding my pen
I write with the blood of disabled youth
I’m their agent
Writing and speaking their messages (41-46)

The speaker conveys a profound connection with the lives of disabled youth whose experiences have been overlooked or silenced. These voices persist in the speaker’s mind, shaping the way they express and document their struggles. The poet assumes the role of an advocate, channeling the pain, stories, and realities of these marginalized individuals into words. By taking on this responsibility, the speaker ensures that the experiences of disabled youth are witnessed, acknowledged, and heard, turning their silenced histories into a form of active testimony.

The poem continues to give voice to those who have been silenced and overlooked. It highlights the harsh realities faced by marginalized individuals in a society that often ignores their pain. The following lines capture the ongoing suffering of these individuals. They reveal that many continue to endure physical violence and social oppression:

And they told me to tell you
 Many are still in pain
 Bullets and fists falling down on them like pouring rain (47-49)

The image of “bullets and fists... like pouring rain” shows how constant and widespread their pain is. The speaker shares these stories with others. The lines stress the need to recognize their suffering and take action. The metaphor also reflects the systemic oppression that surrounds them daily. By giving voice to this ongoing violence, the poem demands attention and accountability from society.

Conclusion

Leroy Moore’s “Buried Voices”, hence, gives voice to the experiences of disabled Black youth who have long been overlooked. The poem reveals how racism, ableism, and neglect shape their lives, restricting their opportunities and safety. The poem captures both their struggles and determination, turning suffering into a message that demands attention. Through vivid imagery, Moore conveys the heavy social and cultural barriers these youths face every day. Their pain is real, and so is their determination to be noticed. The poem exposes how society often silences marginalized voices, keeping them “buried” and “invisible”. Moore’s words break through that silence, bringing their stories to the fore. He bears witness to their lives, calling for recognition, justice, and dignity. The poem urges readers to listen to them actively and respond with empathy. It challenges society to confront systemic neglect and take responsibility. The poem transforms personal and collective suffering into urgent testimony, making it a powerful call for visibility, respect, and action for those long unheard.

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