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From Rejected Body to Ecological Self: Disability, Nature and Agency in Leela Gour Broome's *Flute in the Forest*

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Abstract

In Indian children's literature the representation of disability is still limited and under-explored. Usually, the role of disabled characters is shown as either tragic or villainy. This paper presents a critical reading of Leela Gour Broome's novel *Flute in the Forest* (2010), in which the intersection of disability and ecocriticism have been explored. Atiya Sardare, the protagonist of the novel, faces rejection in school and also from society because of her disabled body. Atiya was affected by polio and people treated her as a "rejected body". The forest gives her peace that she never experienced at home. This paper argues that the forest is not merely an escape for Atiya but also an enabling space where she develops her agency and becomes "ecological self". The ideas of Tobin Siebers and Rosemarie Garland-Thomson of disability studies have been used for analyzing the text. By using disability and ecocriticism as a theoretical framework, this paper shows that the physical disability of Atiya doesn't affect her relationship with nature, rather it becomes stronger. She finds forest a suitable place where she loves to play flute, feels human-animal bonding and freedom. This paper explores the journey of Atiya from "rejected body" to "ecological self". This study highlights the under-explored and positive connection between disability and environment.

Keywords: Disability, Ecocriticism, Agency, Rejected Body, Children's literature.

Introduction

Disability is understood here as an embodied and socially produced experience that encompasses physical, psychological, and social dimensions. Disability studies, as illuminated by Berger (2013), provides a critical framework that understands disability not merely as a physical impairment but as a social and cultural construction. In the Indian context, Ghai (2015) emphasizes the necessity of rethinking disability beyond prevalent stigmatizations, situating disabled identities within complex socio-political realities. Tobin Siebers observes that "Disability marks the last frontier of unquestioned inferiority because the preference for able-bodiedness makes it extremely difficult to embrace disabled people and to recognize their unnecessary and violent exclusion from society" (Siebers 6). Rosemarie Garland-Thomson similarly notes that "Constructed as the embodiment of corporeal insufficiency and deviance, the physically disabled body becomes a repository for social anxieties about such troubling concerns as vulnerability, control, and identity" (Garland-Thomson 29). As Charlton (2000) famously advocates, the motto "Nothing about us without us" underlines the importance of empowerment and agency in disability narratives. In this paper, disability is examined as an experience of identity, belonging, and agency.

Nature is defined here beyond its role as mere physical background. Ecocriticism frames nature as active, relational, and meaning-making (Cella). The concept of eco-ability develops the idea that

nature and the disabled body can meet to generate new capabilities and ecological belonging (Nocella II). Agency is understood as the capacity to make decisions, affect one's environment, and actively construct identity (Kafer). In Atiya's case, she realizes this agency through choice, resistance, and her deepening bond with the natural world.

In Indian children's literature, the representation of disability remains limited and under-researched (Boss). Disabled characters are frequently portrayed through tragedy or as sources of inspiration and sympathy (Sulaiman). Works that explore the relation between disability and nature are rarer still. Leela Gour Broome's *Flute in the Forest* (2010) fills this gap (Ajith & Mathews). The novel centers on Atiya Sardare, who contracts polio at the age of five and lives with her father in a wildlife sanctuary in South India. Her disabled body is rejected by school and society, yet the forest accepts her.

The research problem is to explore the representation of disability in the novel and to examine the role played by nature. The paper investigates whether the forest is merely a place of escape or something more. It argues that Atiya's journey moves from "rejected body" to "ecological self." Society rejects her body as inferior and unwanted; the forest accepts that same body and enables the development of agency through sensory experience, music, and human-animal relations (Siebers; Garland-Thomson; Cella).

Research Gap

Existing studies of *Flute in the Forest* mostly focus on the social model of disability, stigma, rejection, and linguistic construction. They emphasize Atiya's polio-affected body, her mother's abandonment, the taunts of classmates, and the solace she finds in the forest. Aesthetic readings highlight everyday beauty and connection with nature. In these studies, however, nature is viewed merely as a peaceful background or a space of escape. The novel remains largely unexplored from the combined perspective of disability studies and ecocriticism. How nature becomes an enabling space, how agency develops within it, and how Atiya becomes an "ecological self" have not received sustained attention.

Existing scholarship (Ajith & Mathews 2022; linguistic identity chapter 2023; aesthetic readings) mainly treats nature as passive solace. This paper fills the gap by reading the forest as an active space that fosters agency and ecological identity. The concepts of eco-ability and the journey from rejected body to ecological self-form the central analytical lens.

Methodology

This study employs qualitative close textual analysis of Leela Gour Broome's *Flute in the Forest*. Disability studies and ecocriticism supply the theoretical framework. Within disability studies, the concepts of the "rejected body" and the social construction of disability associated with Tobin Siebers and Rosemarie Garland-Thomson are central. Under ecocriticism, the ideas of eco-ability and the ecological self are applied. The novel constitutes the primary source; secondary sources include works on disability studies, ecocriticism, and Indian children's literature. The analysis traces Atiya's movement from social rejection to ecological belonging.

Objectives

- To critically analyze the representation of disability in *Flute in the Forest*, especially through Atiya’s “rejected body.”
- To determine whether the forest is merely a place of escape or becomes an enabling space where Atiya develops agency.
- To understand Atiya’s journey through the intersection of disability studies and ecocriticism—from “rejected body” to “ecological self.”
- To explore the roles of nature, music (the flute), and the human-animal bond in the construction of Atiya’s identity and freedom.
- To highlight the positive connection between disability and environment in Indian children’s literature.

Research Questions

1. How does society treat Atiya’s disabled body as a “rejected body” in *Flute in the Forest*?
2. Is the forest merely an escape for Atiya, or does it become an enabling space where she develops agency?
3. How does Atiya transform from a “rejected body” to an “ecological self” through the intersection of disability and nature?
4. How do the flute, sensory experiences, and human-animal bonding shape Atiya’s identity and freedom?
5. How does the novel present a positive connection between disability and the environment in Indian children’s literature?

Literature Review

The representation of disability in Indian children’s literature has traditionally been limited and predominantly negative. From ancient epics to medieval narratives, disability has frequently been portrayed as a curse, divine punishment, or marker of moral failing (Debroy). Even in modern children’s literature, disabled characters are often constructed through the lenses of tragedy, pity, or inspirational overcoming, thereby reinforcing able-bodied norms (Sulaiman; Boss; Davis). Traditional portrayals of disability in Indian children’s literature often reduce characters to objects of pity or sources of inspiration (Berger, 2013; Ghai, 2015). Scholars argue that such representations reduce disabled characters to narrative devices that serve the emotional or moral development of able-bodied readers (Mitchell and Snyder; Quayson). Although a gradual shift toward more nuanced portrayals has been observed, engagement with disability remains inadequate and under-theorised (Debroy; Boss).

Critical engagement with Broome’s novel has largely centered on the social model of disability. Ajith and Mathews (2022) examine how Atiya’s polio-affected body becomes a site of stigma, maternal abandonment, and peer rejection, arguing that while society excludes her, the forest offers acceptance. A subsequent study focuses on the linguistic construction of disabled identity through Lacanian theory (Springer chapter, 2023). Aesthetic approaches have drawn on Berleant’s theory of aesthetic engagement to highlight sensory richness, while ecofeminist readings have positioned Atiya and the natural world as parallel figures of oppression.

Despite these contributions, existing scholarship predominantly treats the forest as a passive backdrop or temporary space of solace. The active role of the natural environment in enabling agency, fostering interspecies relations, and facilitating ecological identity has received little attention. Consequently, the novel's contribution to disability-environment intersections remains underexplored.

The theoretical intersection of disability studies and ecocriticism—often termed eco-crip or eco-ability theory—has emerged as an important development. Nocella II (2012, 2017) introduces “eco-ability,” which foregrounds interconnections among disability, nonhuman animals, and ecological systems, emphasizing interdependency and respect for difference. Cella (2013) advances an “ecosomatic paradigm” that underscores the contiguity between the human body and the environment. Kafer (2013, 2017) examines the environmental politics of disability, arguing that disabled bodies are routinely excluded from dominant narratives of nature and outdoor belonging. Ray and Sibara (2017) call for sustained dialogue between disability studies and the environmental humanities. Garland-Thomson (1997) and Siebers (2008) provide foundational insights into the social construction of the “rejected” or “extraordinary” body. Charlton (2000) critiques depictions that marginalize rather than empower disabled individuals. Davis (2006) and Linton (2006) contribute to scholarship advocating that disability be understood as an embodied identity deeply intertwined with social context. Together these frameworks offer powerful tools for analyzing how disabled subjects negotiate identity, agency, and belonging in relation to nonhuman environments. Yet eco-ability and eco-crip approaches have not been substantially applied to Indian children's literature, and no sustained study has examined how they illuminate the relationship between disability and nature in *Flute in the Forest*.

While existing scholarship has productively addressed social stigma, linguistic identity, and aesthetic connections with nature, it has largely treated the forest as a passive site of refuge. The present study addresses this gap by examining the forest as an active and enabling space. Drawing on the “rejected body” (Siebers; Garland-Thomson), eco-ability (Nocella II; Cella; Kafer), and the broader eco-crip framework (Ray and Sibara), this paper analyses Atiya's transformation from a socially rejected body to an ecological self and thereby contributes to the still under-explored intersection of disability and environment within Indian children's literature.

Theoretical Framework

According to Siebers (2008), disability occupies the “last frontier of unquestioned inferiority,” where social preferences for able-bodiedness create systemic exclusion. Garland-Thomson's (1997) work on the “extraordinary body” further explains how disabled bodies become sites of social anxiety surrounding vulnerability and identity. Davis (2006) elaborates on the cultural narratives that reinforce disability as a form of “otherness,” necessitating new frameworks for understanding disabled agency. Building on this, Linton (2006) advocates for the reassignment of meaning to disabled bodies beyond deficit models. These insights are brought into dialogue with eco-ability theory, which refuses the separation of somatic experience from ecological context and values interdependency across species and bodily difference.

Analysis

In *Flute in the Forest*, Atiya's disabled body becomes a focal point of social rejection from the outset. Because of polio, her body appears incomplete and unwanted in the eyes of society. Classmates mock her; at home her mother focuses on an ideal of physical perfection: "Saroj began to focus on teaching her daughter to be the best dancer in the world" (Broome 7). This rejection constructs her body as a "rejected body." Atiya's initial social rejection aligns with Siebers' (2008) observation that disabled bodies are often positioned as markers of inferiority and exclusion. "Because her reactions were much slower than theirs, they called her slow and dumb" (Broome 9). Her body exemplifies Garland-Thomson's (1997) notion of corporeal insufficiency, symbolizing broader societal anxieties about vulnerability and control.

The novel does not end with rejection. When Atiya enters the forest, her experience changes fundamentally. The forest becomes not merely a peaceful escape but an active and enabling space in which her disabled body poses no barrier: "She was more comfortable with trees and wild animals around her, than with scores of loud, yelling, teasing children" (Broome 3). Nature does not judge her physical difference. There she feels free, plays the flute, and forms natural bonds with animals. Sensory experience becomes empowering: "Someone deep in the forest was playing the flute... It was pure, blissful and sweet!" (Broome 50). Music breaks through isolation and fosters agency.

The human-animal bond is equally significant. Wild animals do not reject her physical difference. Atiya shares a deep connection especially with the rogue elephant Rangappa; she calms him with the flute, enacting interspecies communication and mutual respect. Anthony Nocella II's concept of eco-ability fits precisely here: it recognizes the intersection of disability, non-human animals, and ecology as a space of interdependency, inclusion, and respect for difference. This process shapes Atiya into an "ecological self"—an identity that is no longer limited to human society and its rejections but extends to nature and non-human beings. Disability ceases to be a weakness and becomes part of a deep, active connection with the natural world.

Yet her transformation resonates with Charlton's (2000) call for reclaiming agency in disability narratives, moving beyond rejection to empowerment. This journey is consistent with Davis' (2006) emphasis on challenging normative constructions of disability in culture. The Indian social realities reflected in Atiya's story also echo Ghai's (2015) critiques of discrimination and the need for reconceptualization. The novel thus shows that physical disability does not weaken Atiya's relationship with nature; it intensifies and renders it more meaningful. *Flute in the Forest* presents a positive, empowering, and transformative relationship between disability and environment in which the rejected body becomes an ecological self.

Conclusion

This paper demonstrates that Atiya's journey in *Flute in the Forest* moves from "rejected body" to "ecological self." Society views her polio-affected body as inferior and excludes her. The forest, however, offers a non-judgmental space where she develops agency through the flute, sensory experience, and human-animal bonding. Drawing on Berger's (2013) and Charlton's (2000) insights, Atiya's experience highlights the shift from marginalization to ecological belonging. As

Davis (2006) and Siebers (2008) suggest, disabled identities must be understood as complex sites of agency that challenge dominant notions of normalcy. Thomson's (1997) framework of the "extraordinary body" also illuminates how physical difference can be redefined through relational environments such as the forest. Together, these perspectives demonstrate the potential for children's literature to envision disability as a source of strength rather than deficit. The novel thus presents a positive, empowering connection between disability and environment in Indian children's literature—one that moves beyond tragedy or inspiration toward ecological belonging. Future research could productively apply an eco-crip lens to other works of Indian children's literature.

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