

# Challenging the ‘Normal’: A Study of Representation of Disability in Rivers Solomon’s *An Unkindness of Ghosts*

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## Abstract

Science fiction is known to play with the potentialities of science, technology, and medicine, thus opening up a space for exploring how humans construct themselves. It is a potential genre that can challenge stereotypes and create alternative realities along with projecting contemporary social norms, cultural attitudes, and the ideals of the body. Science fiction emerges as a medium to explore the normative understandings of the body and gender. *An Unkindness of Ghosts* by Rivers Solomon is a science fiction about the lives of people travelling in a spaceship searching for a habitable planet like Earth. This paper attempts to trace and evaluate the representation of disability in *An Unkindness of Ghosts* to understand how it blurs the distinction between abled and disabled characters and thereby challenges the concept of normalcy. The study investigates how the intersection of race and gender oppresses and stigmatises disabled bodies.

**Keywords:** Disability, Normalcy, Science Fiction, Medical Model, Social Model.

## Introduction

Science fiction is an umbrella term that resists a singular definition. It is usually considered as a genre that creates worlds and spaces beyond human understanding, involving aliens, spaceships and technology. Complimentary to this view, science fiction can be considered as speculation about the past and present of the real world (Heinlein 27). Science fiction functions as a medium that mirrors contemporary society and its issues, along with fantastic and futuristic elements. It has the power to critique societal norms, cultural attitudes, and ideals of body and gender by creating alternative realms. Science fiction, since its inception, has featured deviant and disabled bodies. It offers a unique platform to locate and reexamine the portrayals of disability. This study aims to identify and close read disabled characters in Rivers Solomon’s *An Unkindness of Ghosts* (2017) to critically analyse how the representation of such characters blurs the distinction between abled and disabled bodies and thereby challenges the concept of normalcy. The study endeavours to examine the extent to which the intersection of gender, class, race, and ethnicity stigmatises and oppresses the disabled in this narrative.

Rivers Solomon is a non-binary American science fiction writer who writes about transgenerational trauma, queerness, racialisation

and social injustice. *An Unkindness of Ghosts*, published in 2017, sketches the lives of people who are travelling in a space shuttle called HSS Matilda to a promised land after leaving Earth due to a climatic catastrophe 300 years ago. The ship is under the despotic rule of Sovereign Nicholeus, who serves as Matilda's political and religious leader. The ship is categorised into different decks; the upper deck is inhabited by the Whites, who live a luxurious, opulent life, and the lower decks by the Blacks, known as the Tarlanders, who work hard to keep the ship supplied with food and fuel. The novel is about Aster, a Tarlander solving the mystery of her mother's suicide and her struggle to end the tyrannical rule by finding the way to the Promised Land.

The existing studies on Rivers Solomon's *An Unkindness of Ghosts* focus on aspects of race, gender and black identity. Hannah Schultz, in her work "Ecological Identity and Resistance in Plantationocene: Rivers Solomon's *An Unkindness of Ghosts*", situates the novel within Plantationocene and locates the ecological legacy of Blacks by engaging with plantation memory. Schultz suggests that Solomon envisions an alternative resistance that can be achieved through earthy kinship. "Bye Bye Binary: Reimagining Gender in *An Unkindness of Ghosts*" by Kamri Jordan argues that the novel provides a framework for reconsidering blackness, gender subjectivity and sexual agency and engages with conversations about gender and sexuality that are prevalent in the present scenario (Jordan 23-31). "Salvaging Utopia: Lessons for and from the Left in Rivers Solomon's *An Unkindness of Ghosts* (2017), *The Deep* (2019), and *Sorrowland* (2021)" by Megen de Bruin-Mole reads *An Unkindness of Ghosts* as a radical leftist utopia that rejects the false hope of universalism (De Bruin-Molé 1-11). These studies are intense and relevant for understanding the novel from specific perspectives. At the same time, they do not focus on disability and its representation, thus providing a lot more scope for analysis in the current study.

### **Normalcy and the Disabled Body**

In his work "Introduction: Normality, Power and Culture", Lennard J. Davis argues that our culture has long enforced the concept of normalcy. He claims that the development of the concept of normality is connected to the emergence of statistics, eugenics, and particular claims backed by science about human anatomy, physical prowess, intelligence, morality, race and gender. He points out that in the nineteenth century, Adolphe Quetelet's development of the idea of the average person (*l'homme moyen*) and Sir Francis Galton's invention of the bell curve led to the notion that the majority of the population should fit within the bell-shaped curve. All of these served as scientific and cultural requirements that compelled the majority to adjust to the comforting but unsettling idea of normality (Davis 1-8).

The central problem faced by people with disabilities is the propensity of eugenicists to categorise all supposedly deviant attributes as unfit. Karl Pearson, a eugenicist, defines unfit as "the habitual criminal, the professional tramp, the tuberculous, the insane, the mentally defective, the alcoholic, the diseased from birth or excess" (Davis 9). The concept of norm idealises the body of an average man, establishes it as standard and places it on the normal curve. Disabled people are considered to be the minority who diverge from the norms of an average, normal body. The identity of the person is tied to his or her body, which one cannot alter. Any deviations from the normal body were considered undesirable and, therefore, to be eliminated. The concept of normalcy constructed the image of a normal body and the disabled figure.

Disability studies examine the social connotations, images, and stigmas associated with disability and explore how they contribute to institutionalised exclusionary and oppressive structures (Siebers 3). Disability studies propose that rather than being an embodied deficit dwelling within the individual, disability is a social and cultural construction. The medical model of disability considers disability as an impairment that can be cured and treated. The medical model of disability tends to define disability as impairment, a loss of body function that can be cured with medical

intervention, rehabilitation and proper institutional care. The social model defines disability as a social construct. It differentiates impairment from disability by stating that disablement is a social process that marginalises people who deviate from the norms of an average human body, from the mainstream. It is in opposition to the medical model, which reduces the experience of disability merely into medical issues that have cure by stating a counter-argument that the medical professionals and organisations are the contributors to the subjugation (Shakespeare 198-199).

The medical model highlights disability solely as an embodiment. In contrast, the social model argues that disability is constructed by disabling social environments and calls for changes at the social-justice level (Siebers 290). The theory of complex embodiment stresses the effect of disabling environments on the lived experiences of the disabled while also highlighting factors like chronic pain, discomfort, health consequences and ageing on the body (Siebers 290). This framework will serve to analyse and understand the representation of disability in the novel *An Unkindness of Ghosts* by Rivers Solomon.

### **Representation of Disability in *An Unkindness of Ghosts***

How we interpret disability through narratives influences how the material world is configured, how resources are distributed, how we relate to each other, and how we view ourselves (Thompson 523). On the surface, *An Unkindness of Ghosts* may appear to be a novel about the racial discrimination that black people experience while flying in space in pursuit of a planet that can support life. The author interrogates the concept of a typical body by introducing characters who deviate from the norms of a hegemonic body. According to Allison Kafer, studies on disabilities have frequently given more attention to visible physical and sensory impairments than to mental and cognitive impairments, as well as persistent illnesses and diseases (Schalk 141). Contrary to this, Solomon depicts characters with physical, cognitive, and mental disabilities and chronic illnesses. Rather than presenting disability as a metaphor to denote something, the author illustrates their lived experience.

Aster, the protagonist of the novel, is presented as a character who is black, non-binary, and neurotypical and lives in the lower deck 'q'. Through Aster's character, Solomon demonstrates the struggles and marginalisation faced by autistic people. Autism is marked by "persistent deficits in social communication and social interaction" (Carpenter 1) and "deficit in nonverbal behaviors used for social interaction" (2). It is also characterised by "stereotyped or repetitive speech, motor movements or use of objects" (3), "excessive adherence to routines or ritualised patterns of verbal or nonverbal behavior", and "highly restricted and fixated interests that are abnormal in the intensity or focus" (4). Aster grapples with challenges in initiating and sustaining conversations, making it arduous for her to express her emotions and engage in emotional responsiveness towards others. She is characterised as an "Insiwa" (Solomon 17), an individual primarily dwelling within her own thoughts, where most of her mental processes occur internally rather than through spoken communication. Her verbal expressions are infrequent in comparison to her internal contemplations. Aster confronts considerable difficulty in locating the appropriate words to articulate her emotions, frequently resorting to the memorization of terms from a dictionary to convey her intended message. Aster's cognitive process involves linking past events to assign meaning to her current circumstances, yet she often struggles to discern when and where meaning is appropriate.

Throughout the narrative, Aster contends with the challenge of distinguishing between words that appear similar in appearance or sound. In an effort to maintain structure in her life, Aster creates a meticulously colour-coded task list that she strictly adheres to, systematically marking off completed tasks. Her engagement in these obsessive behaviours, deviating from what is commonly considered "normal" behaviour, results in her social exclusion and the pejorative label of 'freak' by others.

The character Dr. Theodis Grafton (Theo) can be analysed as a complex representation that challenges stereotypes surrounding individuals with neurodiversity and physical differences. Theo, a non-binary surgeon, is a notable figure who exemplifies characteristics often found within the neurotypical spectrum. Theo uses the pronouns they/them and has post polio syndrome, which necessitates the use of a prosthetic leg. This novel delves into Theo's experiences as they navigate life and fulfil their responsibilities as a surgeon while incorporating their prosthetic leg into their identity. The prosthetic leg is depicted as a central element of Theo's lived experience throughout the narrative. Additionally, Theo exhibits autistic traits, such as obsessions with compulsive hand washing and cleanliness. They have a preference for order and become agitated when that order is disrupted. Theo's room, which is full of meticulously arranged soaps, further illustrates their commitment to these rituals. The portrayal of his character resists the reduction of their actions into the conventional stereotypes often attributed to neurotypical characters. Instead, the narrative delves deeper into the multifaceted aspects of their lives, highlighting the intricate nature of their cognitive processes. The religious dimension of Theo's character further underscores the complexity of their cognitive landscape. Their devoutness is not portrayed as mere conformity to religious norms but is instead intricately woven into their coping mechanisms and efforts to address perceived wrongs in the world. Their routines of fasting, recitation of verses, and self-purification rituals demonstrate a profound connection between their spiritual beliefs and their psychological processes.

By presenting characters like Aster and Theo, both neurotypical and medical experts, the novel challenges the pervasive stereotype that individuals with cognitive disabilities are intellectually inferior and less competent. This portrayal underscores the multifaceted nature of individuals with neurodiversity, emphasising that their abilities and complexities are not defined by stereotypes. Giselle, a lifelong companion of Aster, endures both physical and psychological abuse from the ship's ruling elite. Her behaviour exhibits distinct signs of psychosis, a mental disorder characterised by disorganised thinking, hallucinations, and delusions (Aracena 7). Giselle exists in a realm that blurs the lines between reality and fantasy, causing profound paranoia. She firmly believes that she has the power to will death upon others with her thoughts, recounting an instance where she believes she caused the Sovereign's demise merely by wishing it (Solomon 118). She constructs elaborate fantasies, erroneously attributing actions to herself that she has not committed, and subsequently struggles to manage the emotional turmoil and paranoia that ensue. In her desperation, she flees her usual surroundings, hiding in seclusion where she is unreachable. Giselle becomes fixated on a persistent delusion that she is being relentlessly pursued and punished for a crime she did not commit. Throughout her struggles, Giselle recurrently speaks of fire and an overwhelming desire to use it as a destructive force to annihilate everything. This ultimately culminates in a harrowing suicide attempt as she tries to set fire to the papers within Aster's botanarium. In her attempt to burn herself alive, she experiences a state of euphoria. Tragically, she takes her own life by using a blade thrown by Aster. Solomon endeavours to depict the multifaceted dimensions and intricate nature of mental illness by utilising the character of Giselle as a vehicle for this exploration.

Solomon's narrative includes characters with physical disabilities and chronic health conditions hailing from the disadvantaged lower decks of the Mathilda, offering a lens through which to examine how their respective ailments are influenced by their impoverished environment. Among these characters, Aunt Melusine, who holds significance as both Theo's biological mother and a maternal figure to Aster, grapples with chronic arthritis, a condition characterised by joint inflammation and pain, limiting her physical mobility. Mabel, a resident of the lower decks, contends with the burdens of eczema, which manifests as rough patches on her skin, and asthma, a condition exacerbated by the frigid lower deck atmosphere. This combination of ailments results in laboured breathing, rendering her voice strained and frequently punctuated by panting and coughing. Sixteen-year-old Jay Lucas, a member of the Yarrow wing labouring in the Shuttle Bay, confronts the challenges associated with Achromatosis, also known as Albinism. This genetic condition manifests in

reduced melanin production, leading to a notably light pigmentation of the skin. Lucas bears pale skin adorned with brown blotches that resemble malignant growths, remnants of moles surgically removed. Flick, a young child residing in the lower decks, experiences the loss of a foot due to frostbite, a tragic consequence of the relentless cold and harsh working conditions. These health afflictions are a testament to the oppressive living circumstances and inadequate medical care that plague those dwelling in the lower decks, their origins rooted in the unforgiving environment and limited access to proper healthcare.

The novel places a strong emphasis on respecting patients' autonomy in matters of medication, prioritising their consent over coercive treatment. Giselle's explicit rejection of medication, as she states, "I don't want your medicine. Your pills or your syrups or your poisons" is met with Aster's acknowledgment of Giselle's choice. Aster's response, "I offered pills because you've requested them in the past" (Solomon 24), underscores the importance of giving individuals agency over their treatment decisions. This approach shifts the authority from medical practitioners and the families of people with disabilities to the patients themselves, creating a model in which patient consent holds paramount significance. Solomon's intent is not to negate the value of medication but rather to establish a new framework that respects the patient's consent in the treatment process. The narrative of the novel does not gloss over the inherent challenges, discomfort, and pain associated with disabilities, such as postpolio syndrome and arthritis, but rather confronts them. The role of medicines in alleviating this pain is evident in the story, with Aster administering poppyserum to Theo, Ainy, and others to mitigate their suffering and discomfort. Furthermore, the representation of disability in the novel serves as a critique of the medical model of disability. The medical model tends to label disabled individuals as the 'other,' promoting the idea that their disabilities should be eradicated to conform to established norms. In contrast, the novel does not portray disability as a loss that characters lament or yearn for a cure or charity from others. Instead, it aligns with the social model of disability, redefining disability as a social construct in which the societal environment imposes restrictions and exclusion upon disabled individuals. This perspective places a primary focus on eliminating barriers and reinstating autonomy for disabled individuals. The novel goes beyond viewing disability merely as a personal physical impairment and highlights its status as a social construct while acknowledging the pains, discomforts, and the use of medication to alleviate them.

### **Intersection of Disability, Race and Gender in *An Unkindness of Ghosts***

The colour of the skin was also considered to be part of the norm. Certain ethnic groups who were not whites, especially the Africans, were considered to be feeble-minded, unintelligent and poor. Disability became associated with criminality, inefficiency and mental incompetence. American eugenicist Charles Davenport feared the ingress of European immigrants to America would make the population smaller, darker in complexion, and more prone to crimes like theft, assault, rape, and sexual immorality (Davis 9). Davenport's fear points out that dark skin also deviates from the norm. It fabricates an assumption that this change in physical characteristics is closely linked with a person's moral behaviour.

The norm is constructed in every sphere of human life. According to Lennard J. Davis, Freud developed the eugenics of mind. He formulated the concepts of normal sexuality and normal function. Any alteration from this was considered perverse, diseased and heinous (Davis 10). The queers lie outside this norm and are therefore considered to be abnormal. Society has internalised these norms created by the people in power, including all the sub-sections that remain outside this hegemonic system. This, in turn, has created certain stereotypes about these subpopulations for centuries. The novel emphasises the intersection of race, gender and disability. It focuses on the experience of Black, non-binary and disabled people in a generation ship who have been tortured and treated as slaves for centuries. In Matilda, "the power not only operates on people but also in their action, attitudes, discourses, learning processes and everyday lives (Foucault 37). All the upper

deckers conform to “white, Eurocentric, ableist, developed-world, heterosexual, male notion of normality” (Davis 3). The author depicts lower deckers as black and non-binary people who do not fall into the rigid gender binary. In Flick’s deck people are addressed by using “they” and in Aster’s deck “all children are addressed with feminine pronouns” (Solomon 7). They are oppressed based on their race, sexuality and disability simultaneously. All the stereotypes regarding the disabled, Black and queer come down together on them, making their condition more pathetic. Solomon effectively illustrates how structures of gender, race, and class intersect with the experiences of disabled individuals, depending on their social positions. For instance, Theo requires an artificial leg due to post polio syndrome, whereas Flick’s leg is amputated because of frostbite. Theo’s prosthetic leg, as Aster notes, is significantly different from the one that Flick would receive, highlighting the exclusive access to proper medical care restricted to a specific class. Through these examples, Solomon seeks to normalise the use of prosthetics, thereby challenging the stereotypical portrayal of individuals with prosthetics as antagonists within science fiction narratives. Solomon’s world-building revolves around characters who are black, non-binary, and disabled. At the intersection of these three concepts, she endeavours to depict the collective experience of oppression. Through the lens of intersectionality, Solomon underscores how systems of power create interwoven oppressions, a concept akin to what Patricia Hill Collins termed a “matrix of domination (Roberts and Jesudason 314).

### **Conclusion**

By emphasising the social concept of disability, the novel challenges the medical paradigm of disability. The novel portrays disability as a social construct rather than a personal deficit. However, it does not eliminate the chronic pain and associated health effects associated with the disabled body. The relationship between social representations is seen from the perspective of complex embodiment and the body, but in a mutual way (Seibers 290).

The novel also discusses how a disabled person’s experience is defined by their race, gender, and disability intersections. The experience of being disabled is worsened when the person is black and non-binary. The common assumptions and stereotypes regarding these people who do not fit in the standard curve, such as low intelligence, sexual promiscuousness and passiveness, are deconstructed through the characters who possess traits that are highly opposite to the characteristics expected by the norm. Normalising, classifying, and stereotyping are techniques the authorities use to remain in power. The authority injects these stereotypes either by consent or by force. These norms will be created concerning those in power to ensure they fall into the standard category, and those who deviate can be termed inferior. In Mathilda, a white heterosexual person with an able-bodied body is considered normal. The authorities point out the differences of others as a deficiency or a lack and take up the task of guiding, controlling, and ruling them, which may turn into pure dictatorship in the future. By presenting the intersectionality of disability, race and gender, Solomon illustrates how systems of power create a “matrix of domination” that leads to the stigmatisation or exclusion of individuals whose bodies deviate from the accepted norms.

By including disabled characters in the narrative, Solomon attempts to provide visibility and representation for a group of people who are often marginalised and underrepresented. Solomon debunks the stereotypical portrayal of disabled characters in science fiction narratives and portrays disabled characters as fully realised individuals with complex lives, emotions, and aspirations. This helps to challenge ableism and promote a more inclusive and accepting society. It helps create a more accurate reflection of the diverse human experience and encourages readers to embrace and celebrate the full range of human diversity. Solomon challenges the concept of normality through the novel *An Unkindness of Ghosts*. Resisting against norms and questioning the concept of the norm itself is very significant, as every human being is unique. There is nothing like normal and abnormal; embracing every individual as equal is crucial. Since diversity applies to a wide range

of the population in contrast to normality and shuns the aberrant, diversity is a more democratic concept than normalcy (Davis 2). The novel celebrates the idea of diversity over the concept of normalcy, abandons the universal standard for body and acknowledges that there is no regnant or ideal body - “that all are in play concerning each other and should be equally valued” (Davis 2).

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