

DISABILITY HIERARCHIES AND INTERNALISED ABLEISM IN FLANNERY O'CONNOR'S *THE LIFE YOU SAVE MAY BE YOUR OWN*

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Abstract

Flannery O'Connor's *The Life You Save May Be Your Own* examines the ableist and exploitative attitudes affecting persons with disabilities. The text demonstrates how disability hierarchies intensify marginalisation based on the severity of impairments. It presents two characters with distinct disabilities: one physically impaired and the other psychologically impaired, whose experiences converge through shared marginalisation and exploitation. Through this convergence, O'Connor exposes not only ableism pointed at persons with disabilities by the able-bodied community, but also intra-community ableism, where individuals with lesser impairments marginalise those with more severe disabilities. Accordingly, this study employs a qualitative close reading approach to explore hierarchies within the disabled community and their impact on victimisation and marginalisation of persons with disabilities. The study finds that differing social valuations attached to disability contribute to the reproduction of internalized ableism. Less severely disabled characters exploit and marginalise those with greater impairments, perpetuating othering, systemic discrimination, and lived struggles within the disabled community. The analysis of these findings is grounded in Critical Disability Theory.

Keywords: *ableism; cognitive disability; disability hierarchy; Flannery O'Connor; internalised ableism*

1. Introduction

For decades, global societies have confronted systemic human rights violations such as racism, gender discrimination, and cultural stereotyping that have received significant scholarly attention. These ills emerged as a result of the persecution and marginalisation of specific groups in societies. For instance, racism has a historical trace from the colonial age, where non-white racial groups were systematically handicapped, while gender-discrimination prompted feminist movements all over the world to combat the unjust conditions against women, and religious and cultural stereotypes, seeing particular religions and cultural groups being alienated (Smith & Read, 2024). The extensive focus on these issues has, to some extent, led to the neglect of other marginalised groups, particularly people with disabilities who confront challenges shaped by social structures and cultural perceptions of impairment (Oliver, 1990). Many issues related to the rights of the disabled

community remain underexplored, especially the internalised ones, as most current studies tend to concentrate on the external forces against the rights of persons with disabilities. While disability studies have mainly examined discrimination imposed by able-bodied structures in wider society, limited scholarly attention has been paid to the hierarchies and power asymmetries operating within the communities of people with disabilities themselves. Most of the current disability studies have assessed discrimination inflicted by the dominant ableist structures, neglecting the ways in which persons with disabilities process ableist practices and reproduce the discriminatory practices against each other, especially literary studies (Shakespeare, 2013; Goodley, 2014).

Scholars such as Boehm and Jammaers (2024) observed that, notwithstanding the legislative efforts to improve disability inclusivity and scholarship, especially in the dimension of management and organisations, disability progress in this respect is rather slow. In addition, Beatty and Joffe (2006) note that there is an increasing scholarly attention to disability discrimination linked to invisible disabilities, and there is extensive literature on psychological impairments in workplaces that appear to be the most ostracised form of disability. Complementing this observation, Blanck (2020) argues that, notwithstanding the increasing disability-inclusive policies and working environment frameworks, people with non-physical and cognitive disabilities persist in experiencing exclusion.

Moreover, Stewart (2004) asserts that disability hierarchies position some impairments as more or less disabling compared to others, with the notion that some impairments are better or less severe than others. These hierarchies do not stem from the inherent variations in disabilities, but from socially constructed appraisals that privilege independence, linguistic competence, and productivity. Sandberg, Rosqvist, and Grigorovich (2021) affirm that these hierarchies are further intensified by normative traditions about independence, communication and productivity. These scholars justify the promising scholarly attention on external forces against the disabled; however, few studies engage with the intra-community discrimination, where individuals with lesser impairments marginalise those with more severe disabilities.

Against this backdrop, this gap prompts the present study, which aims to examine how Flannery O'Connor's *The Life You Save May Be Your Own* stages disability hierarchies as a hierarchical category that generates internalised ableism and exploitation within the community of persons with disabilities. This study contributes to disability studies' existing body of knowledge by applying Critical Disability Theory to explore intra-disability marginalisation and hierarchy among characters with disabilities in literary representations, addressing the following question: How does Flannery O'Connor's *The Life You Save May Be Your Own* represent disability hierarchies and internalised ableism among persons with disabilities?

2. Literature Review

2.1 Social versus Medical Model of Disability

Disability has been understood through the social and medical models, which continue to inform both policy and scholarly representations. The medical model views disability as an individual impairment that needs to be treated or fixed medically, whereas the social model perceives disability as a result of structural and societal barriers rather than individual impairment (Oliver, 1990; Shakespeare, 2013). These models' varied viewpoints are embedded in various policy frameworks, such as the World Health Organisation (WHO), which argues that disability arises from the interplay between health conditions and

contextual factors through the biopsychosocial approach. Equally, the Conventions of the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) conceptualises disability as a concept that is shaped by social constraints rather than innate impairment (Parker, 2006). However, despite how in-depth these models and frameworks conceptualise disability, they remain limited in how hierarchies and power asymmetries operate within the communities of people with disabilities themselves. This limitation creates a conceptual gap, prompting the present study to examine disability beyond external barriers.

Most scholarly research on ableism has focused on external forces through the social and medical models, often neglecting internalised dynamics within disability communities. The social model views disability as socially constructed exclusion, while the medical model frames it as impairment with personal and social consequences (Wasserman, 2017). Studies on disability have described and critically engaged with this subject within the paradigms of social and medical models against external agents, not limiting disability to physical exclusion. For instance, Wasserman (2017) identifies a wide range of conditions, from physical impairments to psychiatric disorders, underscoring the complexity of defining disability such: “the congenital absence or adventitious loss of a limb or a sensory function; progressive neurological conditions like multiple sclerosis; chronic diseases like arteriosclerosis; the inability or limited ability to perform such cognitive functions as remembering faces or calculating sums; and psychiatric disorders like schizophrenia and bipolar disorder” (2). This scholar further cites paraplegia, deafness, blindness, diabetes, autism, epilepsy, depression, and HIV as forms of disabilities, which raises a concern about who can be considered disabled or really disabled.

Foundational scholars challenges the above medicalised framing as follows: Boorse (2009) assert that the term “disability” evolved as a reference to a distinct group of people, later inability and legal restrictions on rights and power, whereas more recent researchers like Campbell (2019) argue that disability perceptions are also socially and institutionally constructed through structures that regulate the bodies and minds that are deemed legitimate, productive and functional. These descriptions of disability collapse Wasserman’s (2017) confinement of disability within medical diagnosis, prompting a concern about whether disability can exist without medical diagnosis.

Similarly, Davis (2013) introduces the concept of “normalcy,” showing how society views disability through statistical and cultural standards of what is considered normal. Similarly, Garland-Thomson (2002) stresses that disability is culturally formed and represented through visual and textual media that portray certain bodies as “other.” Extending this critical perspective, Goodley (2021) expands disability studies into critical disability studies, emphasising how ableism operates not only externally but also through processes of identity construction, subject formation, and internalised oppression.

2.2 Hierarchies of Disability and Internalised Ableism

Ongoing disability scholarship progressively views disability as a category that is not unified, but rather organised through hierarchies of value, which often advantage certain types of disabilities over others. Siebers (2008) asserts that disability operates within cultural values that judge bodies and determine what is good, normal, and acceptable, in line with productivity, independence, and normality. While the WHO also acknowledges disability standards by noting that persons with disabilities encounter various unequal health consequences, system disadvantages and exclusion informed by disability stigma. These

differences signal not only exclusion from society but also within the disability communities indirectly.

Similarly, CRPD emphasises equality and inclusion; however, its broader framework opens the door to various interpretations, which may indirectly reproduce existing hierarchies that categorise disability according to various standards, leading to inequalities within the community of persons with disabilities (Parker, 2006). Additionally, Campbell (2009) perceives ableism as a hierarchy of unequal valuation, implying that hierarchies are not only imposed externally but also internalised and perpetuated across social and relational settings. This suggests that this unequal valuation can also be internalised and reproduced among persons with disabilities themselves. This present study aims to examine how Flannery O'Connor's *The Life You Save May Be Your Own* theorises disability hierarchies as a hierarchical category that generates internalised ableism and exploitation among the community of persons with disabilities.

Shakespeare et al. (2017) assert that institutional and bureaucratic systems are often used to consider disability authenticity through medical verification, productivity and normative conventions about independence. This determining mechanism tends to nurture hierarchies of disability by privileging visible impairments while marginalising complicated cognitive and psychological impairments. This reinforces the 'really disabled' notion by advancing a criterion through which other conditions are substantiated and other challenged. Jammaers and Fleischmann (2025) also point out that individuals with a vast diversity of impairments often share the experiences of subtle and more clearer forms of disability-driven discrimination, justifying the existence of hierarchies within the disability communities, with those challenged with exposed disabilities more susceptible to discrimination. Within the same lines, Jammaers and Williams (2021) note that these hierarchies are also gender-motivated, where disabled men and women experience different treatment due to sexist and paternalistic anticipations that make women more accountable for nurturing others and men to compete in the workspace.

Henekam et al (2023) find that people with mental illnesses often hold themselves accountable for their failures to fit in rather than the lack of accommodation that the physically impaired often receive. He highlights how individuals with mental illnesses often internalise blame, reinforcing hierarchies that privilege physical impairments. This noted, Jammaers and Zanoni (2021) show that organisational inclusion practices often reproduce ableism, distinguishing between categories of disabled employees. These scholars found that "varieties of ableism" here, meaning each organisation upheld clear distinctions between the constructed categories of disabled employees and followed ableist ways of organising work, based on assumptions of workers as able-bodied and neurotypical. Existing studies rarely address internalised discrimination within disability communities, a gap this paper seeks to fill by drawing on O'Connor's text, as the text foregrounds disability hierarchies as central to exploitation. This literature review establishes the theoretical foundation for analysing disability hierarchies in O'Connor's text, which in turn informs the methodological framework adopted in this study.

Moreover, internalised ableism establishes a critical lens for understanding how discrimination operates within disability community. Before interrogating internalised ableism, it is crucial to define ableism. Ableism refers to the structured privileging of able-bodied norms that are constructed through institutional, cultural, and interpersonal practices and under-privileging individuals that appear to deviate from these standards of normality, whereby disability is considered a deficiency. Additionally, internalised ableism can be

defined as the process which persons with disabilities adopt and reproduce the able-bodied norms and reinforce hierarchies among themselves. While intra-disability discrimination further emphasises this hierarchical valuation by stating that certain disabilities are considered more acceptable than others (Goodley, 2014).

In addition, the existing data acknowledge that ableism is a framework of beliefs that sets norms of values that allocate inferior value to disability, of which individuals, including persons with disabilities themselves, may process and reproduce. This framework of beliefs perpetuates inequality and oppression among persons with disabilities, as they also discriminate against each other based on disability types. As the WHO (2011) asserts that persons with disabilities encounter various unequal health consequences, system disadvantages and exclusion informed by disability stigma. Additionally, the concept of psycho-emotional disablism highlights how the internal discrimination within the community of disability influences the relationship between individuals with disabilities (Thomas, 2014; Campbell, 2009; WHO, 2011; Reeve, 2014). Hence, the present study examines how Flannery O'Connor's *The Life You Save May Be Your Own* portrays disability hierarchies as a hierarchical category that generates internalised ableism and exploitation among the community of persons with disabilities.

2.3 Theoretical Framework

This study is guided by Critical Disability Theory (CDT), which theorises disability as a socially and politically shaped phenomenon constructed by hegemonic relations, marginalisation, and cultural views rather than solely by medical impairment. The CDT predominantly focuses on the analysis of disability as a cultural, historical, relative, social and political phenomenon (Hall, 2019). The CDT frames disability as a political and cultural phenomenon, emphasising power relations both between abled and disabled groups and within disability communities themselves.

Disability hierarchies are ranks constructed through social relations, in which certain disabilities are considered more functional than others, with the notion that some impairments are better or less severe than others. These hierarchies determine access to social value, care, and recognition (Stewart, 2004). On the other hand, ableism refers to a systematic structure that favours able-bodied people over persons with disabilities. This favouritism is shaped by cultural, institutional, and interpersonal standards. According to this perception of ableism, anyone who does not meet the standard of what is considered normal based on the constructed cultural norms, that individual is considered defective, hence disability is considered a deficiency from ableism point of view. Additionally, internalised ableism refers to the process by which persons with disabilities adopt and reproduce the able-bodied norms and reinforce hierarchies among themselves (Goodley, 2014).

Moreover, the CDT conceptualises power not only as a domination of abled-bodied people over persons with disabilities, but also as a social influence among marginalised people. As Devlin and Pothier (2006, 2) state, "disability is not fundamentally a question of medicine or health, nor is it just an issue of sensitivity and compassion; rather, it is a question of politics and power (lessness), power over, and power to." In this context, power does not only function as dominance asserted by the abled persons over the disabled ones but also as a social force that operates within marginalised groups, affording some persons with disabilities the ability to approximate normative ideals while positioning others as disposable.

Rather than perceiving disability as an individual medical condition (biomedical model), the CDT modifies analysis to a human rights approach that argues for equal access to all aspects of social life. This calls for equal access extends beyond inequalities between disabled and abled persons to include disparities within disability communities, which this study identifies as analytically important. Thus, Garland-Thomson underlines disability identity as a socially constructed aspect that is guided through cultural representation and embodiment. Williams (2001, 134) states that "If disability is seen as a personal tragedy, disabled people are treated as the victims of circumstance. If disability is defined as social oppression, disabled people can be seen as the collective victims of an uncaring, discriminatory society." This present study builds on this line of argument by focusing on how oppression is replicated through hierarchical valuation within disability communities. Therefore, instead of adopting CDT as a theoretical lens in general, this study will use the above analytical categories, such as disability hierarchies, to examine how Flannery O'Connor's *The Life You Save May Be Your Own* theorises disability hierarchies as a hierarchical category that generates internalised ableism and exploitation within the community of persons with disabilities.

3. Research Method

This study uses a qualitative textual analysis anchored in Critical Disability Theory (CDT) to examine the representation of internalised ableism in Flannery O'Connor's *The Life You Save May Be Your Own*. The study employs a close reading approach, focused on characterisation, dialogue, and conventions of ableism in the text. The primary data comprise Flannery O'Connor's *The Life You Save May Be Your Own* (1953), in which the researcher will interpret the text through close reading to examine how disability hierarchies are a hierarchical category that generates internalised ableism and exploitation within the community of persons with disabilities. The closed reading is appropriate to this study, as it equips the researcher to interpret the text using literary strategies through which internalised ableism, hierarchies of disability, and exploitation are constructed (Tyson, 2015).

The analysis in this study includes characters' interactions, narrative descriptions, and dialogue in line with disability representation in the text. The systematic qualitative procedure guides the data analysis in this study as follows: first, disability representations will be identified within the text, including portrayals of physical and cognitive impairment. Secondly, the textual evidence is coded, and relevant extracts are selected in line with the emerging themes. Thirdly, data are categorised into the key analytical categories of disability hierarchies and internalised ableism. Lastly, the findings are interpreted using CDT to examine the study's phenomenon. In essence, the analytical approach in this study involves a systematic interpretation of selected textual extracts, focusing on how representations of physical and cognitive disability are outlined and how these outlines reveal the hierarchies of disability and internalised ableism (Tyson, 2015; Creswell & Poth, 2018).

4. Results and Discussion

4.1 Perceptions about Persons with Disabilities

O'Connor's *The Life You Save May Be Your Own* stages externalised ableism and the birth of internalised ableism. The story centres on three characters: Mother Lucynell Crater, daughter Lucynell Crater, and Tom Shiftlet, all of whom are disabled. Daughter Lucynell and Tom Shiftlet are exposed to discriminatory and exploitative attitudes based on their medical conditions. Mother Lucynell's first assumption that Tom is a perfect fit to marry daughter

Lucynell shows how disability serves as a key criterion to determine social compatibility. Rather than considering the two characters' individual preferences or values, she reduced them to a collective disability identity. This demonstrates an ableist mindset that persons with disabilities belong together in a way that they should rely on one another in terms of companionship.

The above reflects Hosking's (2008) observation that disability is a social construct rather than a consequence of impairment, and that it is best characterised as a complex interrelationship among impairment, the individual's response to impairment, and the social environment. Mother Lucynell's conceptualised limitations about the disabled characters represent the societal imaginations and restrictions concerning persons with disabilities, excluding them from practices that their impairments do not necessarily prevent them from taking part in.

Following the above sentiment, Rohleder, Braathen, and Carew (2018, 1) asserts that persons with disabilities are often regarded as asexual where "many people believe that the disabled cannot perform sexually, although it is obvious that they are sexual beings like everyone else" and raising questions such as, "is it possible for someone in a wheelchair to have sex? Can she have children? Can they bring up a child?" (1). This scholar further affirms that "there is no evidence to suggest that people can't get these things just because they get around in a wheelchair, are blind, deaf or suffer from a mental illness" (1), underscoring Hosking's (2008) position that disability is often treated with social imagination rather than material fact. Mother Lucynell's ideal husband for her daughter, within the confines of the disabled community, unveils the silent discrimination, distancing the disabled from the abled in terms of negotiating intimacy. Zewude and Habtegiorgis (2021, 5) assert that "many young people without disabilities may doubt that people with disabilities can be fulfilling partners in any loving adult relationship," highlighting the fears that often haunt such relationships. It is this fear that also shapes Mother Lucynell's marital decision for her daughter, a decision that is both justifiable and stereotypical. This remark, "although the old woman lived in this desolate spot with only her daughter and she had never seen Mr Shiflet before, she could tell, even from a distance, that he was a tramp and no one to be afraid of. His left coat sleeve was folded up to show there was only half an arm in it, and his gaunt figure listed slightly to the side as if the breeze were pushing him," (1) reveals that Mother Lucynell had a preconception about Tom, one that unveils the extent to which she emasculated him based on his disability. She uses Tom's blatant physical disability to convince herself that he is as vulnerable as her daughter, thus qualifying him to marry her, among other factors.

The above is interpreted to mean that Tom's missing arm serves as a visual marker that led Mother Lucynell to assess his social worth and perceived harmlessness. In other words, this narrative implies that Tom's impairment is represented as being associated with perceived harmlessness and diminished masculinity. Therefore, Mother Lucynell's judgment unveils not only disability perception but also a mentality that men with disabilities have limited power in relation to masculinity. In essence, one's character and capability are hastily evaluated through disability lens.

Moreover, Rohleder et al. (2018) conducted an online survey utilising non-disabled participants who emphasised their reluctance to be in an intimate relationship with a disabled person, citing that the "disabled are different – they have less sexual desire and less need for sexual health services and sex education" (3) and this led to their finding that "disabled people are not only excluded from romantic relationships, but that in some

countries they are often also prevented from taking part in sex education at school or in programmes that focus on sexual health related to HIV/AIDS and sexual illnesses” (5). Thus, Mother Lucynell cites her daughter’s disability as a factor that reduces her chances of locating marriage, especially with an abled person: “You see that girl yonder? She asked, pointing to [daughter] Lucynell, who was sitting on the floor a foot away, watching him, her eyes blue even in the dark. If it was ever a man wanted to take her away, I would say, 'No man on earth is going to take that sweet girl of mine away from me!' but if he was to say, 'Lady, I don't want to take her away, I want her right here,' I would say, Mister, I don't blame you none” (4). This accentuates negative social constructs about the disabled without affording them a moment to prove otherwise. Mother Lucynell judged that any man would have reservations about marrying a disabled woman like daughter Lucynell.

4.2 Hierarchies of Disability and Exploitation

During the marital negotiation of Tom and daughter Lucynell, both Tom and the mother actively lead the talks, whereas daughter Lucynell remains passive. In this case, it is Tom who is able to make a choice to participate in the marital union that Mother Lucynell proposes between him and daughter Lucynell. His impairment does not pose a hindrance towards his ability to make life choices; unlike daughter Lucynell, whose impairment interferes with her ability to make decisions about her future. This variation reveals that disability in this context is perceived as a ranked social category rather than a uniform condition, in which Tom’s disability does not impose limitations on him in terms of negotiations of economic benefits and freedom, as compared to daughter Lucynell, who has a cognitive impairment that imposes limitations on social independence. Thus, this narrative reflects a hierarchy of disability where social systems assign unequal value to impairment.

Relatedly, Lucynell is technically being married off to Tom against her will, due to her inability to consent or not consent to the marriage. This positions daughter Lucynell as the most exploited disabled character, underscoring the prevalence of hierarchies in the ableist underpinnings. Her impairment makes her prone to externalised and internalised discrimination, being reduced to domesticity: “Is she your baby girl? He asked. My only, the old woman said, and she's the sweetest girl in the world. I wouldn't give her up for nothing on earth. She's smart, too. She can sweep the floor, cook, wash, feed the chickens, and hoe. I wouldn't give her up for a casket of jewels” (3). This reflects Hosking’s (2008) notion that the social disadvantage that affects persons with disabilities is occasioned by the physical, institutional and attitudinal environment which fails to meet the needs of people who do not match the social expectation of normalcy.

Notably, despite disability, Tom appears to be able to match the dominant social expectations especially as a man, making Mother Lucynell to go to extreme lengths to persuade him to marry her daughter so that she, amongst other reasons, can benefit from having him work on the farm: “The next morning he began on the roof of the garden house while Lucynell, the daughter, sat on a rock and watched him work. He had not been around a week before the change he had made in the place was apparent. He had patched the front and back steps, built a new hog pen, restored a fence” (4). This narrative suggests that because Tom is able to engage in productive labour, it confers social validity on him over Lucynell. Thus, the text links value not only to disability status but also to the ability to meet able-bodied norms of productivity and independence. In other words, disability hierarchy is framed around social functioning rather than disability itself.

The above-mentioned also echoes Sauder's (2015) sentiments that the hierarchy of disability is a social construct that makes certain kinds of disabilities more acceptable than others, and it is an arbitrary system through which disabled people are judged and categorised. Consequentially, daughter Lucynell's impairment that handicaps her from meeting social expectations of normalcy that Tom can meet notwithstanding his impairment, results in a belonging crisis for a disabled person of daughter Lucynell's nature. Sauder (2015, 3) affirms that "the basic idea behind the hierarchy is the prejudicial idea that disability is equated with being a burden or public nuisance (by this I mean that people are immediately forced to deal with the fact that the disabled person exists and might interact with them unexpectedly)." Thus, Mother Lucynell even went to the extent of buying Tom into marrying her daughter: "You'd be getting a permanent house and a deep well and the most innocent girl in the world. You don't need no money" (5), substantiating Sauder's (2015) aforementioned view as the passage presents her value as passive and dependent.

While disability hierarchy offers a central analytical lens in this study, daughter Lucynell's exploitation cannot be solely associated with disability. Her vulnerability can also be influenced by other factors such as commodifying logic behind marriage arrangements, economic dependence, gender and other factors. As a young woman, daughter Lucynell is not encouraged to work, which portrays patriarchal expectations more especially that mother Lucynell is willing to trade her for labour and security, which depicts economic imperatives. However, these factors coexist with disability rather than replacing it since Lucynell's cognitive impairment increases her vulnerability to exploitation and boosts dependency opinions.

4.3 Internalised Ableism

The enduring position of daughter Lucynell as passive and Tom as active during their marital negotiation unravels the hierarchies of disability, which give way to internalised ableism. It is the external forces that mould these hierarchies, setting a precedent that stretches to the internal site. For instance, Mother Lucynell exposed daughter Lucynell's helplessness to Tom, convincing him that he is marrying a woman whom he will be able to control. Her extreme efforts to have her daughter Lucynell married suggested desperation to get rid of her, especially when she did not even require a bride price for her, the money or gifts usually paid as a token of appreciation to the bride's family by the bridegroom. This corresponds with Adhikari, Aryal, and Khatiwata's (2024) finding that most of the early marriages of persons with disabilities took place among the females, and they were married off at an early age by the parents, who no longer wanted to take their responsibility and were concerned about their ineligibility as wives. It is the mother's emasculating contemplations that set a negative precedent against the mentally disabled daughter Lucynell, framing her as a "cheap", "passive" and "innocent", thus opening a portal of exploitation in her marital life. This description further reduces Lucynell's personhood and positions her as an object in a financial transaction, thereby presenting marriage as a mechanism of exchange rather than an interpersonal commitment. In essence, Lucynell is situated within the ableist economy of value, in which she is assessed according to her manageability.

In similar sentiment, it is because of such depictions demonstrated above that "disabled people do buy into this idea that they should avoid and shun other people with disabilities or deny themselves accommodations to be perceived as less of a burden" (Sauder, 2015, 3), more especially in the case of daughter Lucynell who is shunned by her

own mother who perceives marriage as the perfect opportunity to get rid of her. Tom agrees to marry daughter Lucynell, but he does this for his own benefit: "On Saturday the three of them drove into town in the car that the paint had barely dried on, and Mr Shiftlet and Lucynell were married in the Ordinary's office while the old woman witnessed" (5). He shows no affection, emotional care, or commitment to daughter Lucynell. This collapses Mother Lucynell's belief that her disabled daughter could find affection from a disabled man who shares in her vulnerability. She said to him, "Lemme tell you something: there ain't any place in the world for a poor disabled friendless drifting man" (5), and this accentuates that she perceived him as vulnerable due to his disability. Adhikari et al. (2024, 53) assert that "marriage seems to be an unattainable goal to many persons with disabilities. The persons with all kinds of physical disabilities have a hard time finding a partner for marriage because many people in society cannot look beyond the appearance of a disability," with scholars like Rohleder et al. (2018) finding that most abled persons do not prefer to marry a disabled person. This, according to Jalal and Gabel (2014) and Hassouneh-Phillips and McNeff (2005), even escalates to the degree that persons with disabilities, particularly men, prefer marrying a non-disabled woman over a disabled one who could actually compensate for and complement their disability.

Returning to the narrative, on their wedding day, Mother Lucynell said, "Don't Lucynell look pretty? Like a baby doll...You got a prize! But Mr. Shiftlet didn't even look at her" (6), demonstrating regret, unhappiness and disapproval. The term "prize" serves as significant evidence, as it portrays daughter Lucynell as an object of reward rather than a spouse in a mutual relationship. This metaphor of "prize" also reveals an ableist hierarchy of value, presenting Lucynell as a controllable, exchangeable object, as her marriage demonstrates no aspect of affection. Therefore, the language in this narrative reveals how disability is turned into something valuable when it is manageable or possessed by others.

Furthermore, Tom's affection and commitment to the marriage are tested more when he and his wife have to participate in public activities as a married couple, and also his reaction when his wife - daughter Lucynell's mental challenges manifest in the public domain. This demonstrates internalised ableism in practice and even more when Tom becomes frustrated by his wife's mental problems, such as "pulling the cherries off the hat one by one and throwing them out the window" (5) and would get embarrassed when they are in open spaces such as restaurants. For instance, "there was no one in The Hot Spot but Mr Shiftlet and the boy behind the counter, a pale youth with a greasy rag hung over his shoulder. Before he could dish up the food, she was snoring gently" (6). This incident resulted in Tom abandoning her in the restaurant, leaving her behind, and this highlights the internalised ableism, as Tom proves his lack of affection for the fellow disabled character due to her condition. This restaurant incident unmasks the hierarchical patterns of disability as daughter Lucynell's behaviour due to her medical condition makes her stand out or be more visible as a disabled person in public, and Tom dissociates himself from her to fit into patterns of the abled.

4.4 Power relations and intra-disability hierarchies in Critical Disability Theory (CDT)

The CDT theorists, such as Devlin and Pothier (2006, 2), state that "disability is not fundamentally a question of medicine or health, nor is it just an issue of sensitivity and compassion; rather, it is a question of politics and power(lessness), power over, and power to." In this study context, power not only functions as dominance asserted by the abled persons over the disabled ones but also as a social force that operates within marginalised

groups, affording some persons with disabilities the ability to approximate normative ideals while positioning others as disposable. O'Connor's *The Life You Save May Be Your Own* sees the hardships against persons with disabilities meted out by other persons with disabilities due to holding more power and ability than the others, highlighting the consequential effects of disability hierarchies within the community. In this case, the CDT shifts from the individual pathology of disability (based on the biomedical model), and beyond liberalism and a social model of disability, towards a human rights approach that argues for equal access to all aspects of social life (Barnes & Oliver, 1993). The call for equal access extends beyond inequalities between disabled and abled persons to include disparities within disability communities. Hence, Garland-Thomson (2002) affirms that CDT explores heritage and disability identity construction, which is in flux and connected to the very nature of human embodiment.

In O'Connor's *The Life You Save May Be Your Own*, the daughter Lucynell Crater experiences an identity and belonging crisis; she is neither desired by the abled nor by the fellow disabled community, resulting in various tactics emerging in the story to get rid of her from all communities. She moves from the abled to the disabled community, only to be still exploited and rejected. Her exclusion by both abled and disabled communities illustrates the compounded marginalisation of those with severe impairments. Williams (2001, 134) states that "If disability is seen as a personal tragedy, disabled people are treated as the victims of circumstance. If disability is defined as social oppression, disabled people can be seen as the collective victims of an uncaring, discriminatory society." This study argues that O'Connor's text exposes disability hierarchies as mechanisms of internalised ableism, where exploitation and exclusion are perpetuated within the disabled community itself.

5. Conclusion

This study has critically examined internalised ableism, a dimension often overlooked in disability scholarship. The analysis demonstrates that marginalisation arises not only from external forces but also from intra-community dynamics, where persons with disabilities themselves perpetuate discrimination. O'Connor's text delineates manifestations of internalised ableism, pointing out the diverse severities of disabilities as the driver of discrimination for specific groups within the disabled community. This creates an identity and belonging crisis as portrayed through the disabled characters, Tom and his daughter Lucynell, who experience discrimination from the abled persons. Mother Lucynell, who embodies ambivalence, arranges marriage both as a hopeful act of inclusion and as a discriminatory attempt to rid herself of her daughter. She called for the marriage due to her discriminatory perception of persons with disabilities. Yet these hopes are undermined by internalised ableism, as Tom, less severely disabled, exhibits discriminatory attitudes toward Lucynell. Tom's physical impairment did not prevent him from negotiating marriage terms and asserting autonomy, unlike Lucynell, with cognitive and communicative impairments, who remained passive throughout the negotiations, unable to exercise agency over her future. This dynamic exposes entrenched hierarchies within disability communities, revealing how differing severities of impairment shape power, agency, and vulnerability. This study contributes to disability scholarship by foregrounding internalised ableism as a critical dimension of marginalisation, demonstrating how literary texts can illuminate intra-community hierarchies and their social consequences. By highlighting how literary text represents ranked disability experiences, this study increases scholarly understanding of how hierarchy and internalised ableism are formed and maintained. This study further

contributes towards practical implications on disability awareness, advocacy, and education in general, as it demonstrated how ableist hierarchies can be formed even within disability community. Also, underlining the significance of challenging the notion of dependency in line with family structures, education, and care practices. Therefore, future studies may expand this phenomenon by assessing internalised ableism across a wide range of Southern Gothic texts or by comparing representations of disability hierarchies in contemporary fiction.

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