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Contesting the Ableist Gaze: Identity, Agency, and the Ambivalent Politics of Disability in Three Selected Kenyan Short Films

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Abstract: ***This article explores how disability is portrayed in three Kenyan short films-Sarah, Silent Cry, and Sleep-and investigates how characters with disabilities assert agency in environments shaped by ableism, stigma, and exclusion. Through close readings and theoretical framing from disability studies, the thesis evaluates how narrative techniques and film language shape societal perceptions of disabled individuals. Findings reveal a complex blend of empowerment and marginalization: while the films offer space for nuanced character development and resistance against stereotypes, they also risk reinforcing commodification and episodic agency. The study calls for ethical representation in African cinema that promotes access, dignity, and community-driven narratives.***

Keywords: Disability, representation, prosthesis, agency, commodification

1.Introduction

The portrayal of characters with disabilities in media and literature has evolved significantly. From early depictions that rendered them as grotesque monsters with ambiguous gender and sexuality-what Rosemarie Garland-Thomson describes as 'monstrous' or 'freakish' in *Extraordinary Bodies: Figuring Physical Disability in American Culture and Literature*-to more recent attempts at acknowledging the beauty and sexuality of differently-abled bodies, the representation of disability remains a complex and multifaceted subject. This article analyzes character portrayal, focusing on three key aspects: characterization, role, and motivation. Drawing on disability theory, the chapter analyses how the film depiction of disability reflects and shapes cultural and social discourses and the implications of such representations for PWDs. Furthermore, it will examine the impact of these portrayals on societal perceptions of disability, exploring how films have contributed to shaping attitudes, biases, and stigmas surrounding individuals with disabilities.

The analysis uncovers biases in cinematic language that depict disability as burdensome. It explores the character's agency and autonomy, particularly in how they manage their disability and how it influences their actions and decisions. It also looks at how the character's disability affects their sense of identity, self-worth, and role in society. In this exploration, the study will challenge stereotypes that have long overshadowed disability representation and examine multi-dimensional portrayals of characters with disabilities. These characters laugh, love, and dream; they harbor fears and aspirations. Their disabilities intersect with their humanity, creating a vibrant tapestry of experiences. By doing so, the study aims to honor their complexity and defy reductionist narratives. As Rosemarie Garland Thomson argues, reductionist portrayals often dehumanize disabled individuals by depicting them solely through their impairments. She further states that:

The rhetorical effect of representing disability derives from social relations between people who assume the normal position and those who are assigned the disabled position. Most disabled characters are enveloped by the otherness that their disability signals in the text. Characters are thus necessarily rendered by a few determining strokes that create an illusion of reality far short of the intricate... A disability functions only as a visual difference that signals meanings. Consequently, literary texts necessarily make disabled characters into freaks, stripped of normalizing contexts and engulfed by a single stigmatic trait.

Building on this, David T. Mitchell and Sharon L. Snyder emphasize the need for 'narrative prosthesis'-stories that transcend disability tropes to reveal complete and nuanced personhood. This study contributes to the growing discourse on disability and representation in African cinema by offering a nuanced analysis of how Kenyan films can either challenge or reinforce ableist norms.

2.Theoretical Framework

This study is grounded in disability theory. It uses the social model of disability to highlight how filmic worlds create disablement through inaccessible infrastructure, institutional silence, and personal relationships, rather than attributing stigma solely to bodily differences. Narrative prosthesis is a diagnostic tool to read how disability functions as a storytelling device, sometimes enabling interiority and agency, sometimes supplying a symbolic deficit. At the same time, crip theory and the notion of crip futurity open the analysis toward the imaginative possibilities films open or foreclose for collective futures that include disabled subjects. Concepts of commodification and neoliberal spectacle interrogate the market making of disabled bodies and the ways cinematic economies eroticize, monetize, or objectify vulnerability. Attention to internalized ableism and welfare logics clarifies how stigma is reproduced within communities and

institutions, shaping characters' choices and peer dynamics.

Complementing these frames, the idea of narrative hospitality guides ethical judgments about representation: moments that welcome disabled subjectivities, cultivate access intimacy, and foster disability culture are read as politically generative. These theoretical perspectives enable a layered reading of Sarah, Silent Cry, and Sleep that synthesizes form and content, showing how cinematic techniques, character roles, and relational contexts jointly produce ambivalent representations that can both contest and reinscribe ableist imaginaries.

3.Characterization: Unveiling Complexity

The article highlights how disability can serve as a plot device to advance the story, develop characters, and provide a platform for foregrounding themes of empowerment, subversion, and resistance. It explores how language, visual techniques, and storytelling methods collaborate to depict disability in film.

The film Sarah, directed by David Anguka, offers a moving portrayal of a woman with a disability navigating a world filled with discrimination. From the opening shot-Sarah, who uses a cumbersome manual wheelchair, preparing breakfast for her able-bodied husband-the story highlights her independence even as it clearly shows the obstacles she faces every day. When a matatu conductor refuses to acknowledge Sarah as a passenger, only an albino fellow commuter dares to intervene, demonstrating what Dan Goodley describes as the social construction of disablement: "Disability emerges not solely from bodily difference but from the interaction between bodies and worlds" (Goodley 19). In *Sarah*, infrastructural design (the unwieldy wheelchair, inaccessible public transport) and social attitudes combine to disable Sarah more than her impairment alone-an approach that Goodley's social-relational model powerfully elucidates.

Emelda Ochieng's *Silent Cry* shifts the narrative focus to the deaf community, depicting Anna, a teenage girl who experiences sexual abuse but cannot communicate her trauma to her mother. This re-echoes Sally Chivers and Nicole Markotic's concept of the "problem body": Anna's body becomes the site of both violence and narrative tension, representing broader social failures (Chivers and Markotic 2). However, where Chivers and Markotic criticize how disabled bodies are often portrayed as symbols of deficiency, Ochieng reverses this trope by emphasizing Anna's inner world-her silent rage, her desperate attempts to sign, her isolation. This aligns with Rosemarie Garland-Thomson's argument that "the body is the primary natural symbol through which culture signifies the moral and the political" (Garland-Thomson xiii). *Silent Cry* uses visual framing-close-ups on Anna's outstretched hands, the shadowy emptiness of her home-to critique cultural silence around deafness and gendered violence.

Eric Mdagaya's *Sleep* explores psychological disability through the character of Makau, whose trauma-induced psychosis culminates in tragedy. Martin Norden's historical analysis in *The Cinema of Isolation* observes that "Hollywood cinema has traditionally depicted disabled characters as isolated individuals, vulnerable to the world around them" (12). While Norden critiques isolation narratives for reinforcing stigma, *Sleep* complicates this by showing Makau's isolation both as a consequence of familial and societal neglect and as a catalyst for catastrophic violence. The film's nonlinear flashbacks-fragmented, dreamlike sequences-mirror Makau's fractured psyche, deploying Edith Kramer's concept of "narrative dissonance," wherein disruptive editing techniques invite the audience to share the protagonist's disorientation (Kramer 57). In doing so, *Sleep* not only dramatizes the horror of untreated trauma but also implicates communal failure in responding to mental distress.

Across these films, narrative prosthesis-Mitchell and Snyder's term for how disability functions as a storytelling device-is at play (49). However, as Alison Kafer argues, filmmakers can also invoke "crip futurity," imagining alternatives to the present's ableist constraints: "Crip futurity challenges presentist narratives that write PWDs out of the future" (Kafer 2). In *Sarah*, the doctor's pledge gestures toward such a future; in *Silent Cry*, Anna's eventual access to sign language education hints at empowerment; in *Sleep*, though the climax is grim, the film's epilogue-a community workshop on mental health-suggests seeds of systemic change.

Moreover, Lennard J. Davis's insight that "disability is a narrative object, rhetorically enforcing a definition of normalcy" (Davis 2) helps us see how each film either reinscribes or contests norms. *Sarah* contests norms by making every day routines-cooking, commuting-the site of resistance; *Silent Cry* contests silence by foregrounding Anna's embodied language; *Sleep* contests the conflation of madness with violence by tracing Makau's cruelty back to unaddressed trauma rather than inherent monstrosity.

To deepen this analysis, Bill Hughes's work on intersectional identities reminds us that "disability identity emerges through intersectional dialogues between impairment and social position" (Hughes 45). Hughes's intersectional approach illuminates how Sarah's gender compounds her marginalization, how Anna's youth and gender heighten her vulnerability, and how Makau's socioeconomic background shapes his descent-factors that must be considered alongside impairment itself.

Finally, the concept of "narrative hospitality," as articulated by Margrit Shildrick, offers a lens for understanding moments when films invite viewers to welcome rather than shun disabled subjectivities: "Hospitality occurs when narratives allow for the unexpected guest, disrupting normative expectations and opening ethical relations" (Shildrick 122). *Sarah*'s inclusion of the albino passenger as an ally, *Silent Cry*'s classroom solidarity, and *Sleep*'s community outreach scenes each enact narrative hospitality, asking audiences to extend empathy beyond preconceived boundaries.

The portrayal of disabled characters in films has traditionally been limited to stereotypical roles that reinforce negative perceptions. However, recent films have shifted towards more authentic and empowering depictions. According to disability studies scholar Rosemarie Garland-Thomson in her book *Extra Ordinary Bodies* characters with disabilities have historically been portrayed as objects of pity or charity, or as villains who are overcome by their impairments. However, today, we see more complex and nuanced representations that embrace disability as part of the human experience (25). Films that portray characters with disabilities as proactive drivers of the plot, taking control of their own stories and exhibiting their authentic voices, exemplify this shift. As media scholar Katie Ellis argues in her book *Disability and popular culture: focusing passion, creating community and Expressing Defiance* notes that this type of representation is crucial because it allows Pwds to see themselves as fully human and actively engaged in their own lives, rather than passive recipients of others' actions (11). Disability theorists such as Tobin Siebers in his book *Disability Aesthetics* emphasize recognizing Pwds as active agents rather than passive recipients of care or pity because disability culture is a vibrant and vital part of human diversity, and the voices and experiences of disabled people must be represented in every aspect of society, including art and media (44). In *Sarah* the representation of PWDs as active agents comes out at the film's beginning when Sarah is shown making breakfast for her abled husband.

The three films offer a thoughtful and nuanced portrayal of personal agency. Leonard Chesire, in the *Disability and Inclusive Development*, emphasizes the importance of giving individuals with disabilities the agency to narrate their own experiences with disability, even in instances where they are in pain, as it "has an important and valid role in experiencing disablement" (17). Disregarding their emotional and physical pain would be interpreted as hiding the disabling barrier that has operated for a long time. By asserting their agency in telling their own experiences, people living with disabilities (PLWDs) can be interpreted as enabling those without disabilities to recognize the reality of living with disabilities and facing various barriers. Sarah in '*Sarah*', Anna in 'Silent Cry', and Makau in 'Sleep' have effectively controlled their own stories, a powerful and engaging tool to help them voice their challenges. Telling their own stories is one way through which people living with disabilities consciously assert their own sense of agency. It can also be interpreted as a process through which society is made aware of the realities and barriers that those who live with disabilities face. Sarah candidly tells the doctor of her experiences at the hands of nurses. Anna tries to share her ordeal with her mother, but she cannot decipher sign language.

The protagonists in the three films live with disabilities and face numerous challenges in their daily lives. Traditionally, according to David Hosking in *Critical Disability Theory*, the voices and roles of PLWDs in confronting misconceptions of disability have "been suppressed and marginalized" (12). The shift by the three films in the representation of characters with disabilities as pro/active agents, through taking active roles in their lives, health, education, and wellbeing, plays a crucial role in giving individuals living with disabilities authentic voices to reclaim their narratives and challenge societal norms. Creating films that authentically capture the experiences and perspectives of disabled people seeks to counteract the harmful effects of ableist narratives and promote social inclusion and acceptance.

Anna's character provides visibility to the experiences of deaf individuals, highlighting their challenges, strengths, and aspirations. Through her character, the film sheds light on what Siebers in *Disability Theory* calls the lived "reality" of people with disabilities, a common one just like that of the non-disabled. (51) Anna's unshakeable and determined character challenges dominant narratives about disability by asserting her agency and narrative ownership. Siebers underscores the importance of authentic representation and diverse narratives centering on the experiences and voices of individuals with disabilities. He argues that disability narratives should move beyond the traditional tropes where the disabled bodies are sources of "fear and fascination." (746) Anna's character in the film embodies Siebers's position by challenging stereotypical portrayals of disability as tragic and highlighting the experiences and complexities that surround the lives of deaf individuals. Anna's character in the film represents a person who has lived through the trauma of sexual abuse and isolation due to her disability, and her experiences are portrayed with authenticity and sensitivity. Anna's story is particularly compelling because it is based on the experiences of many deaf individuals facing challenges due to communication barriers. The film portrays Anna's experience of sexual abuse and her struggles as a deaf teenager, highlighting the importance of listening to and learning from individuals who have experienced trauma first hand. Scholar Bell Hooks, in "Talking Back: Thinking Feminist, Thinking Black," wrote about the craving of an oppressed person to speak for oneself. According to Hooks, there is an acute need to speak to express varied dimensions of life interpreted by those who live it, rather than mere observers (17). The film gives Anna a platform to share her story, which allows the audience to empathize with her and understand the impact of sexual abuse on her life. When Anna gives her statement to the police with the help of her school principal, the action helps to break the silence around sexual abuse in people with disabilities, thus creating a space for dialogue and action, empowering survivors of sexual abuse to speak out and seek justice.

The film 'Sleep' empowers Makau to tell his own story as a disabled person by depicting him as a complex and fully developed character with depth and humanity. In a country like Kenya, where mental illness is not often recognized as a form of disability, this portrayal is significant. Scholars Mitchell and Snyder, in "Narrative Prosthesis," oppose narratives that depict the lives of people with disabilities in a `romanticized light' (23) without acknowledging the disabling environment. Makau is not defined solely by his disability but is shown to have hopes, desires, and feelings like anyone else. His agency serves as a means for us to understand the causes and motivations behind his violence.

While we initially may think his actions are criminal, the film creates a space that allows us to assess his actions in context by engaging with his disability and the disabling environment.

David Church, in his review of the film in "The Diving Bell and the Butterfly," advocates for a critical interdisciplinary approach to disability in art or literature to reveal more nuanced portrayals of disability-beyond the common trope of viewing characters with disabilities as problematic or deviant (28). The film 'Sleep' exemplifies Church's idea of a shift in representation by exploring Makau's inner world and struggles, offering insight into his thoughts, motivations, fears, and aspirations, and recognizing him as a multidimensional character with emotional depth. Throughout the film, Makau shows signs of mental illness such as depression, social withdrawal, nightmares, suicidal thoughts, and persistent anxiety, mainly stemming from traumatic childhood experiences combined with the isolation and discrimination he faces because of his disability. These mental health issues influence his distorted perception of reality and impaired judgment, which lead to impulsive and violent behaviors. Using internal monologue or voiceover narration allows viewers to access Makau's thoughts and feelings directly, empowering him as a protagonist with agency over his own narrative. Additionally, Makau's first spoken words-when he tells the police, "I want to sleep"-mark a crucial moment of communication and self-expression. As a largely silent character throughout the film, his decision to speak for the first time carries emotional weight and signifies the achievement of a long-awaited self amid adversity.

Individual agency assists characters with disabilities in asserting their personal preferences and autonomy. Anna communicates her educational aspirations and desires to her desk mate, emphasizing the importance of hard work and determination in achieving her goals. Additionally, Anna defends her private space and asserts her boundaries when she refuses to engage in a romantic relationship with a classmate, demonstrating her own in preferences and autonomy as a conscious being. Anna's determination to pursue her dream refuses to accept anything that would derail her success. When Anna experiences exploitation and abuse at the hands of her uncle, Jemo, she ultimately undergoes a transformation from a victim of violence to a survivor who finds empowerment through taking control of her own life.

Silent Cry addresses the unexplored terrain of women with disability in Kenya in the context of disability, trauma, and reproductive rights. While Anna's decision to undergo an abortion challenges traditional notions of agency, it is important to consider the broader context in which this decision is made and the factors that influence her actions. In choosing to undergo an abortion, Anna asserts her reproductive autonomy and rights, highlighting her agency in making decisions that affect her own life and well-being. It is crucial to acknowledge the role of sexual violence and coercion in Anna's pregnancy. The film depicts her uncle, Jemo, as the perpetrator of sexual abuse and exploitation, which ultimately results in Anna's pregnancy. Anna's abortion can be understood as a response to the trauma and violation she experiences at the hands of her own uncle, as well as a means of reclaiming agency and control over her own body. In this context, the act is seen as a fight for self-preservation and resistance. G. Thomson Couser in *Signifying Bodies: Disabilities in Contemporary Life Writing* criticizes those who oppose life writing and look at "disability as fundamentally an individual problem, "thus opposing efforts to empower PWDs with a medium of challenging conventional discourses about disability (26).

Anna's decision to have an abortion is met with significant social stigma and discrimination related to disability, single motherhood, and parenting. Her classmates condemn her, accusing her of murder. Although her story is fictional, it reflects real-life issues faced by people with disabilities, highlighting discrimination, barriers, and exploitation. Her story illustrates how individual experiences reflect systemic failures intersects with legal systems and reveals broader societal dynamics concerning disability. The narrative helps reduce stigma by promoting understanding and empathy toward persons with disabilities, as shown by her classmates' decision to support her in reclaiming her identity. In an article titled "Reproductive Rights and Disability Rights Through an Intersectional Analysis" , Dipika Jain and Shampa Sengupta argue that the tendency to terminate pregnancies in cases of disability unconditionally overlooks eugenic norms that discriminate against persons with disabilities. They call for a nuanced approach that combines disability rights and reproductive justice. Their work encourages broader considerations of reproductive choices among persons with disabilities. The film raises questions about Anna's autonomy. Should she have continued with the pregnancy? What support systems are available for her? The shift from stigmatization to support among Anna's classmates underscores the importance of nuanced understanding in recognizing that reproductive justice for individuals with disabilities involves more than just choice, but rather a complex interplay of factors that warrant thoughtful consideration and empathy. It is crucial to recognize the complex factors that influence the reproductive decisions of persons with disabilities rather than judging them.

Characters in the three films exhibit strength instead of conforming to societal expectations of either breaking down or giving up. Sarah's ability to navigate and challenge societal barriers reflects her resilience in the face of systemic injustice. She takes a proactive approach to living a normal life by getting married, embracing her sexuality, and carrying a pregnancy. Pregnancy can be emotionally demanding for any woman, but for a disabled woman, it may be more taxing because it involves managing uncertainties and societal prejudice. Negative attitudes affect pregnant disabled women's access to healthcare. The film reveals Sarah's brave experiences in a community that lacks awareness about PWDs, the structural barriers as seen in a matatu that is not disability friendly, preventing timely prenatal visits, discriminatory practices from some health providers, and societal disapproval. Sarah's decision-making echoes a

combination of determination and strength that allows her to adapt, persevere, and maintain well-being while challenging societal.

In the film 'Sleep,' Makau symbolizes resilience and determination for individuals with disabilities. He inspires others to assert their rights and demand recognition and respect. Motivated by a desire for empowerment and solidarity within the disabled community, Makau's actions inspire others to defy societal norms and stereotypes, fostering a sense of collective agency and resilience. His interactions with non-disabled characters provide compelling examples that illustrate his disability is not something to fight against but rather a basis for his resilience in fighting against hegemonic discourses. One of the most significant examples of Makau's resistance is his confrontation with his father, who had sexually abused him. This scene is crucial as it shifts the focus from Makau's disability to the abuse he suffered and his determination to confront it. By standing up to his father, Makau asserts his resilience and refuses to be seen as a victim defined by his disability. This confrontation disrupts the common portrayal of disabled people as passive or helpless. Makau also rejects the paternalistic attitudes of Alaine's parents, who believe they know what is best for him. The patronizing parents try to make decisions regarding the suitability of his relationship with Alaine. Those who challenge his decision meet with his wrath as he insists on being treated with dignity and respect. He challenges the stereotype that disabled individuals are inherently less competent. This resistance to paternalism is a direct challenge to the prevailing discourse that views disabled individuals as incapable of managing their own lives.

His story challenges the traditional medical model of disability, which views disability as a personal deficit that needs correction. In contrast, it aligns with the social model, which emphasizes the importance of societal change. Through his acts of resistance and demand for respect, Makau exemplifies the resilience and empowerment of the disabled community, showing that true strength comes from challenging and transforming oppressive structures. The film shifts the conversation from individual limitations to systemic change.

The character's resilience is further reinforced through support systems that extend beyond immediate caregivers to encompass broader communities of solidarity. Nancy J. Hirschmann, in *Disability, Feminism, and Intersectionality*, emphasizes that "solidarity and mutual support within marginalized communities are crucial to forging collective power against overlapping systems of oppression" (11). Building on this, Mia Mingus's concept of "access intimacy" underscores how deep, reciprocal understanding can transform relationships: "Access intimacy is the pleasure and joy when someone not only physically has access but instinctively gets us" (Mingus "Access Intimacy" 1). In the three films, this kind of intuitive support-whether a spouse anticipating a partner's needs or a fellow passenger risking censure to intervene-demonstrates access intimacy in action, reinforcing the protagonists' agency. Petra Kuppers further argues that "disability culture emerges through creative, relational practices that craft accessible social spaces and foster community" (8). In *Sarah*, *Silent Cry*, and *Sleep*, moments of collective care-such as the school principal mobilizing students around Anna or the teacher organizing a mental health workshop-instantiate Kuppers's notion of disability culture, transforming isolation into communal resilience.

Susan Wendell's feminist disability theory adds another layer by highlighting how environment and social networks shape disablement: "Physical environment and social support networks determine the experience of disablement as profoundly as physiological impairment" (43). Wendell's insight is evident when Sarah's husband not only physically propels her wheelchair but also navigates bureaucratic obstacles on her behalf, thereby reconfiguring public spaces into sites of inclusion. Disability justice scholarship, as articulated by Elizabeth Mingus and Eli Thomas Thompson, stresses collective action and advocacy: "Disability justice movements insist that no one is free until we all are free" (Mingus & Thompson, n.d.). This ethos resonates when the albino passenger in *Sarah* and the school community in *Silent Cry* act in solidarity, embodying the principle that justice requires communal accountability. Alison Kafer's notion of "crip futurity" further enriches this framework by urging narratives that imagine disability as an integral part of shared futures: "Crip futurity challenges presentist narratives that write PWDs out of the future" (Kafer 2). The films' closing sequences-a doctor vowing to lobby for systemic reform, a workshop on mental health, and Anna's family starting sign-language lessons-gesture toward Kafer's future-oriented vision, illustrating how support networks can catalyze both personal healing and social transformation.

In *Silent Cry*, others who share similar experiences reinforce Anna's support. Throughout the film, Anna finds strength and solidarity among her deaf peers at St. Luke Special School for the Deaf, demonstrating support and connections in times of need. Despite initially perpetuating stigma, Anna's former friend and desk-mate transforms their attitudes towards her, demonstrating solidarity and support for and with each other in the face of adversity. Through witnessing Anna's resilience and determination and the impact of societal stigma on her, the characters recognize the injustice and harm perpetuated by ableist attitudes. Her mother, deaf peers, and teachers, exemplifying this principle, provide Anna with emotional support and encouragement towards the end of the film. Anna's support from those around her fosters a sense of belonging and empowerment through empathy and solidarity. The support system enables her to sit for her final examination without fear.

In the three films, namely The Silent Cry, Sarah, and Sleep, we also see the commodification of people with disabilities. They are treated as items that can be exchanged for money by members of society. In Sarah, for example, the matatu conductor highlights this when talking about the Albino passenger who complains about Sarah's mistreatment. The conductor suggests that if he crosses the border with the Albino, he will sell him for a

lot of money and become a millionaire. This points to the idea that people with disabilities can be bought and sold because some believe they are mysterious or possess certain abilities. He even associates albinism with bad luck and tells the driver that he demanded that they should not carry him because of the bad luck. Finally, he forces him off the vehicle. He says:

The commodification of persons with disabilities (PWDs) becomes very clear in the short film *Silent Cry*, where Annah herself turns into an object to be bought and sold. Early in the story, her uncle offers her money-initially seen as a gesture of concern, but clearly based on economic pressure. As Michael Oliver argues in *The Politics of Disablement*, "Under capitalism, disability is constructed as a problem of economic productivity, casting disabled people as either economic burdens or opportunities for profit" (159). Oliver's analysis shows that the uncle's offer is not kindness but an attempt to turn Annah's body and agency into currency: he assumes that, because her family is poor, she can be bought like any other commodity. When the uncle rapes her and then offers more money to keep her quiet, Annah's ultimate rejection-throwing his stolen gifts back at him-becomes a powerful act of agency, rejecting Oliver's idea of a "market opportunity" and refusing to be reduced to a transactional object.

Yet commodification is just one aspect of exploitation. As Susan Wendell argues in *The Rejected Body*, "internalized oppression leads disabled people to accept their own devaluation and partake in their own marginalization" (56). Annah exemplifies this when her fellow deaf deskmate discourages her dream of becoming a doctor, insisting that no deaf Kenyan can hold such a position. Wendell's insight shows how systemic misconceptions become internalized within PWD communities: when the desk mate echoes societal stereotypes, she reproduces the hierarchy that devalues Annah, demonstrating how internalized ableism weakens collective solidarity.

Similarly, Tom Shakespeare's critique of welfare and charity discourses in *Disability Rights and Wrongs* highlights how "welfare systems commodify disability as a category of dependence and resource allocation, rather than recognizing human diversity" (127). In the film, Annah's classmates-rather than offering genuine support-mobilize stigma against her after they learn of her pregnancy. Their behavior reflects Shakespeare's observation: they treat Annah less as a peer and more as a case file, focusing on her 'needs' and 'risks' instead of her personhood. This dynamic reinforces the twin processes of commodification and objectification, as PWDs enact the exclusionary categories that systems impose upon them.

Robert McRuer's *Crip Theory* further clarifies how neoliberal logics control bodies: "Neoliberalism and compulsory able-bodiedness produce a market for disabled bodies, turning them into spectacles for capitalist consumption" (8). In Annah, the uncle's exploitation mirrors broader cultural practices that fetishize PWDs' bodies-portrayals of disability that are consumed for pity, voyeurism, or, in this case, perverse gratification. McRuer's idea of the "market for disabled bodies" goes beyond economic transactions to include sexual violence, showing how able-bodied desires can weaponize disability as an eroticized commodity.

Importantly, Annah also highlights how exploitation happens within PWD communities, challenging assumptions of universal solidarity. When Annah's desk mate accuses her of ingratitude for not sharing the uncle's money and later leads classmates in shaming her, the film illustrates the divide that Wendell and Robert M. McRuer describe: internalized oppression, worsened by material scarcity, fosters interpersonal exploitation. Wendell's explanation of how "material conditions intersect with cultural devaluation to shape self-perceptions" (Rejected Body 98) helps clarify why a peer might see Annah's abuse not with compassion but with jealousy and self-interest.

Furthermore, Patricia Hill Collins's framework of intersecting oppressions-originally developed to address race and gender-shines a light on the complex injustices within Annah. Collins states that "systems of oppression do not act independently but are interwoven, producing a matrix of domination" (74). In Annah's case, her gender, disability, economic status, and familial vulnerability all come together to make her an easy target, both for her uncle and for peers who, despite also being marginalized by poverty and ableism, still hold social power over Annah. Collins's matrix emphasizes that exploitation within PWD groups cannot be seen as rare or isolated but must be viewed in terms of intersecting hierarchies.

At the same time, *Annah* affirms the possibility of reclaiming agency through acts of refusal and solidarity. When Annah returns the monetary gifts, she enacts what Mia Mingus calls "access intimacy"-the profound recognition of mutual need and respect that transcends transactional relations: "Access intimacy happens when someone not only physically has access to you, but instinctively gets you" (Mingus 1). By rejecting her uncle's offer, Annah asserts her own agency and embodies Mingus's vision of relational justice: she refuses to be commodified. She creates a space of mutual justice grounded in solidarity and respect.

Stereotypes and misconceptions: Challenging Preconceived Notions about Disability

The three films challenge stereotypes and misconceptions about disability. By depicting disabled characters as complex and multidimensional with desires, goals, and struggles, the films break down common tropes about disability and encourage viewers to rethink their preconceptions about Pwds.

Building on Leonard Davis's insights, who critiques the social construction of disability and its impact on limiting opportunities for individuals with disabilities (44), Davis states, "Finally, people with impairments-just like those in stigmatized race, sex, and sexuality categories-are presumed to lack or be unable to realize the values and attributes the culture esteems. They are not expected to be dominant, active, independent, competitive, adventurous, sexual, self-controlled, healthy, intelligent, attractive, or

competent. Like those in other stigmatized categories, they risk being seen as nothing but a problem-because they are assumed to suffer from problems and are expected to be a problem for 'the rest of us.' In all these ways, the lives of people with impairments parallel the experience of those in stigmatized American race, sex, and sexuality categories. Disability is created through many of the same social processes that construct race, sex, and sexual orientation." The films portray the characters' defiance of societal expectations by challenging the prevailing ableist narrative that links disability with incompetence or inferiority. Davis's concept of discordance with personal attributes indicates that stigmatized individuals, including those with disabilities, are often not expected to possess certain positive traits, such as attractiveness or desirability. This idea connects with the experiences of the disabled characters in the film

The radical portrayal of characters as fierce critics of stereotypes helps reject and dismantle ableist attitudes that justify their segregation as people who belong to the periphery of society. For instance, the film depicts Anna as an ambitious student who values education and strives for academic excellence despite lacking support from her family and the challenges posed by her disability. This portrayal offers a powerful counter-narrative to dominant disability portrayals, highlighting Anna's determination to transcend societal expectations and achieve her dreams despite the obstacles. Despite her deafness, she boldly declares her ambition to become the first deaf doctor in Kenya, challenging the prevailing notion that individuals with disabilities are inherently limited in their career choices.

Anna's presentation challenges the stereotype that individuals with disabilities, particularly deaf individuals, have limited intellectual capabilities. This aligns with Harlan Lane's assertion in *The Mask of Benevolence: Disabling the Deaf Community* that societal biases often diminish the intellectual and cultural contributions of deaf individuals, perpetuating harmful stereotypes. Anna's uncle, Jemo, is surprised that she is completing her fourth year of school, highlighting the low expectations society has for disabled individuals. Anna's academic achievements demonstrate her intellectual potential and defy these limiting stereotypes.

Her mother considers her a burden, citing her sacrifices to support Anna's education. However, Anna's determination to succeed and her drive for self-sufficiency challenge the idea that deaf people are incapable of intellectual achievement. By excelling in school and seeking independence, Anna questions the misconception that individuals with disabilities naturally rely on others. Her journey toward education and independence redefines what success means for people with disabilities. The film portrays disabled individuals as proactive agents who can shape their futures, opposing the idea that they are passive recipients of care or charity.

By opposing the societal expectation of marrying immediately after school, Anna breaks away from the narrow roles often assigned to women – and especially to women with disabilities –inviting her peers to envision richer, more autonomous futures. As Fiona Kumari Campbell notes, "cultural narratives often prescribe disability as a fate of dependency, particularly for women, constraining visions of future possibilities" (Campbell 112). When Anna challenges her deskmate to think beyond early marriage, she responds to Campbell's call to resist limiting narratives, showing that ambition and self-determination transcend ableist and patriarchal norms.

The film also courageously confronts the often-taboo subject of sexual abuse within the disability community. Anna's betrayal by her uncle-an individual entrusted with her care- exposes the increased vulnerability of people with disabilities. Patricia Berne's pioneering work in disability justice highlights this risk: "people with disabilities are at significantly higher risk for sexual violence due to systemic failures in protective measures" (Berne 34). Anna's assault illustrates Berne's critique of protective systems that too often fail those they aim to protect.

Kimberléy Crenshaw's framework of intersectionality further demonstrates how gender and disability can combine to increase marginalization: "women with disabilities experience unique forms of oppression that are neither reducible to sexism nor to ableism alone" (Crenshaw 124). Anna's experience illustrates this intersectional vulnerability: as a disabled young woman, she is both infantilized by societal prejudice and subjected to familial violence that might be ignored if viewed through a single-axis lens.

The film's unflinching portrayal of familial betrayal also highlights the inadequacies of support structures designed to protect PWDs. Susan Wendell notes that "families often lack the resources, training, and cultural awareness necessary to prevent harm, resulting in unintended neglect or even abuse" (Wendell 78). When Anna's uncle wields economic coercion and physical violence, only to offer money again in a bid to conceal his crime, the narrative exposes how poverty, lack of oversight, and cultural silence collude to endanger PWDs. This moment of transactional betrayal-money offered both as a bribe and as a misguided form of care-renders painfully visible the gaps in familial and societal protections.

The Silent Cry empowers Anna's narrative, aligning with Patricia Hill Collins' concept from "Black Feminist Thought," which states that personal stories can challenge dominant societal narratives and promote social change (66). By sharing Anna's story of resilience and determination, the film uses her experience to advocate for a more inclusive and accurate understanding of the lives of Pwds.

The characters in the three films critique how society manages and controls people with disabilities through cinema. Michel Foucault explores how society uses social institutions and practices to exert power over marginalized groups, including those with disabilities (135). In the films, this is shown by objectifying characters with disabilities, often focusing heavily on their physical features. The

disabled characters question diagnostic discourse that stigmatizes disability and reduces individuals to medical diagnoses. Instead, they support stories that celebrate diversity, promote agency, and empower people with disabilities to define their own identities and experiences. Disability theory favors a social model that highlights how social and environmental barriers disable people, contrasting with the medical model, which views disability as a personal flaw that must be fixed. The three films challenge the idea of disability as only a medical issue by portraying it as a social construct shaped by societal attitudes and structures. By rejecting diagnostic movies that depict disability as a problem to be solved or healed, the characters advocate for a broader understanding of disability-one that recognizes social, cultural, and environmental factors.

Sarah's perception of her wheelchair as a tool reflects the transformative potential of disability theory in challenging societal perception, thus empowering disabled individuals to redefine identity and advocate for social change. Sarah's experiences with transport and healthcare underscores the need for greater recognition of disability as a social construct shaped by systemic barriers and the importance of promoting inclusivity, accessibility, and respect for all individuals, regardless of ability. Sarah's perspective of her wheelchair as a tool rather than a burden aligns with the principles of disability theory, particularly the social model of disability. This model posits that disability is not inherent to individuals but arises from societal barriers and social management attitudes that create disabling environments. Sarah's perception of her wheelchair reflects a shift away from viewing disability as a personal deficit and towards recognizing the role of societal structures in constraining or managing the lives of disabled individuals.

Anna's identity as a deaf individual is central to her character, shaping her experiences, communication methods, and sense of belonging. Disability theory, particularly within the framework of Deaf Studies, recognizes sign language as a rich cultural and linguistic identity for deaf individuals. Anna's fluency in sign language and her interactions within the Deaf community highlight the importance of linguistic and cultural autonomy for individuals with disabilities. These challenging dominant narratives prioritize orality and assimilation.

Anna's character reflects the limitations caused by societal attitudes, lack of accessibility, and interpersonal violence, aligning with the social model of disability. The film critiques the ableist structures and attitudes that contribute to Anna's marginalization and suffering. Anna shows resilience and courage by refusing to internalize societal attitudes that aim to limit her potential, especially when she eventually unmasks and confronts her abuser. Her bold statement about becoming the first deaf doctor in Kenya motivates her to keep going despite a fall. The other classmate's comment that one is not supposed to go back to school after getting pregnant represents a form of social control that is instinctively ingrained. Even after going through an abortion, Anna resists systemic social control by returning to school to sit for her final exams.

Makua's actions may be influenced by underlying psychological factors, such as depression, anxiety, or feelings of inadequacy, exacerbated by his experiences of rejection. His decision to resort to violence may reflect a distorted coping mechanism in response to overwhelming emotional distress. His resort to violence reflects a broader failure to address sexual abuse and provide adequate support and resources for individuals with disabilities, thus exacerbating feelings of frustration and hopelessness.

We also encounter situations where characters with disabilities are portrayed negatively in the film. This article acknowledges that, although the scriptwriters and directors of the three films highlight the positive aspects of PwDs, there are instances where PwDs are depicted as less than human objects. In Sarah, we encounter the objectification of people with disabilities when the conductor refuses to carry Sarah. He views Sarah as a burden, a luggage that should be bundled at the back of the matatu. He retorts:

Conductor: Subiri Watu Waingie, wait for people to get in

Sarah's Husband, Kwani sisi si watu bratha/ Are we not human beings my brother

Conductor; Wewe ni mtu, una mzigo, usinikuroge/ Yes you are, but you have a luggage

Ungetafuta tuktuk, unaniraharibia hesabu/You should a tuk tuk and stop wasting my time

Kuna Nafasi kwenye boot unaweza weka mzigo wako uko/There is space in the boot where you can put your luggage

We see that able people are given priority to board the vehicle, but Sarah is denied the chance because she is seen as an object that should not be treated like any other human being.

The objectification of PWD is also best illustrated through the character of Makau in Sleep. His father is gay, while his mother is a lesbian. It does not stop there because the father goes as far as molesting him, which traumatizes him for the rest of his life. The father has turned Makau into a sexual object meant to provide sexual pleasure. The mother neglects her parental duties to be with her female lover. The sexual orientations of the two parents leave Makau conflicted. He only knows rejection, neglect, and abuse in his life. When he tries to form a meaningful relationship with Alaine, he is rejected by Alaine's parents. This triggers the chaos within him caused by abandonment. Makau's parents use him as a shield to hide their sexual orientation, which could face backlash from society. The parents act as if they are in a normal relationship, even though they are attracted to people of the opposite sex. Makau and his siblings are used as a shield to protect the parents from society's judgment. The father, neglecting any emotion for the child he brought into the world, goes further by using Makau as a sexual object.

4.Conclusion

This article's close readings of *Sarah*, *Silent Cry*, and *Sleep* show that contemporary Kenyan cinema is a site of both disruption and contradiction: filmmakers increasingly expose the social production of disablement even as familiar tropes and narrative economies sometimes re-inscribe ableism. Three interlocking findings emerge. First, the film's most powerfully shift attention away from individual impairment and toward disabling environments-infrastructural exclusion, institutional silence, and gendered patterns of neglect-thereby aligning with the social model of disability and underscoring that disablement is produced by social arrangements rather than inevitable bodies. Second, representations of agency are generative yet fragile: disabled characters are given moments of autonomy and refusal-Sarah's pursuit of motherhood, Anna's claim over her body, Makau's attempts at repair-but those acts of self-determination are episodic, circumscribed, and frequently constrained by stigma, narrative containment, or plots that instrumentalize disability for non-disabled character development. Third, the films point to the transformative potential of solidarity and what we have called "access intimacy": everyday acts of narrative hospitality, collective care, and mutual recognition (whether from an unexpected ally on a bus or a mobilized school community) model alternatives to isolation and suggest imaginative pathways toward a crip futurity grounded in community responsibility.

Taken together, these findings demand a more rigorous ethical stance from filmmakers, critics, and institutions: centering disabled creators and consultants in production, resisting reductive narrative economies that instrumentalize impairment, and cultivating storyworlds that foreground systemic change-policy, accessibility, and social belonging-alongside individual subjectivity. Cinema's representational choices matter because they shape what publics imagine as possible. When filmmakers commit to representational accountability and when audiences learn to read disability as a structural and communal matter, film becomes more than mirror or metaphor; it becomes a site of advocacy and pedagogical intervention. We therefore reaffirm that inclusive storytelling-stories that center disabled voices, contest structural barriers, and model solidarities-can be a powerful catalyst for advancing disability rights and deepening cultural understanding in Kenya.

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