



**SITE OF SIGHT IN THE BLINDNESS OF STEPEHEN KUUSISTO'S
*PLANET OF THE BLIND***

J.S. Jahangir

Assistant Professor of English

Iqbal College, Peringammala

Thiruvananthapuram, Kerala, India

Abstract

Stephen Kuusisto is a prematurely born visually impaired American poet. He refuses to acknowledge his blindness and accepts a living as sighted. The memoir *Planet of the Blind* is a powerful narration of the imaginary shapes he thinks and the glint light he sees. The lyrical passages are blessed that change the reader's perception of blindness. *Planet of the Blind* is a stubborn denial of his disability elaborated using analogies, poetic allusions and crystalline images. Committed to live a life as normal as possible, Kuusisto was raised by parents who offered no assistance and denied his handicap. Written with all the emotional precision of poetry, the paper tries to unravel the evocative memoir that explores Stephen Kuusisto's love for reading, painting, bird watching and everyday activities of the mundane world.

Keywords: Blindness, Disability, Identity, Normality.

Planet of the Blind is a prosaic sermon aimed at the disabled, instructing them to face up to their disabilities and addresses the issue of disability. Kuusisto is permanently blind and blindness is grouped under physical disability. Physical disability is both related to and distinct from illness. The two are often related- illness may cause disability and vice-versa- yet two conditions are two distinct entities. The common sense difference between disability and illness is that illness is temporary and can be treated for cure, whereas disability is permanent and can only be rehabilitated. A more important difference for my purposes is that whereas most illnesses are not stigmatic, disability is, almost by definition; to use Erving Goffman's term from his seminal work *Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity*, "spoiled identity" is ascribed to people with disabilities who occupy the same devalued status as ex-convicts, certain ethnic and racial minorities, and the mentally ill.





“Blindness is a profound misfortune, a calamity really, for ordinary life can’t accommodate it” (Kuusisto 13) resonates that the society commonly considers disabled people the embodiment of trauma, personal disaster, or failure; ignoring the profound ways in which we are all interdependent, Western culture’s individualism stigmatizes or blames those who fail to be “self-sufficient” (Connors 97). Estimating the self-sufficient quotient, Kuusisto himself quizzed: “Am I not a sighted boy? Am I not attempting bravely to see? What must I do” (Kuusisto 10)? Thus people may shun disability as though it were contagious. And it might be for this reason that Kuusisto’s mother believes that “I (Kuusisto) should live like other children - at least as much as possible” (13). Behind such a construction of disability are powerful but unconscious attitude toward the body: “our culture idealizes the body and demands that we control it. Thus, although most people will be disabled at some time in their lives, the disabled are made ‘the other,’ who symbolize failure of control and the threat of pain, limitation, dependency and death (Wendell 63).

Whatever the physically impaired person (Kuusisto) may think of him, he is given a negative identity by society and much of his social life is a struggle against this imposed image. His photographic memory and the exceptional efficiency in memorizing images, makes him affirm that “I am not blind, am not the target of pranks” (21). The greatest impediment to take full part in society is not Kuusisto’s physical flaws, but rather the tissue of myths, fears, and misunderstandings that society attaches to his life. To understand why this is so, it is necessary to consider the central theme of, for example, American culture, especially our attitude toward the body. The body is so important in American symbolism. Today’s bodies must be lean and muscular, an injunction that is almost as binding for females as it is for males. The feminine ideal has shifted from soft curves to hard bodies. The pursuit of slim, well-muscled body is not only an aesthetic matter but also a moral imperative. The morality of the good body is pounded out daily in the television and mass media as self-improvement, meaning youthful appearance.

America has a society whose culture glorifies the body beautiful and youthfulness. But the kind of culture the handicapped American must face is that the disabled are subverters of the American Ideal, just as the poor betray the American Dream. Since the blind, deaf, and other impaired beings depart from ideal, they become ugly and repulsive to the able-bodied. People recoil from them when they find some facial damage or physical distortion. There is deep and uneasy ambivalence in relations between the able-bodied and the disabled. The disabled who are viewed as an alien species, falls outside the ken of normal expectations and suffer a contamination of identity and hence Kuusisto keeps his “blindness as a private puzzle” (41) like John Metcalf, the nineteenth-century British architect and road builder. His vigorous daily walks never guessed his blindness to the strangers.





To make matters worse, the disabled particularly the deformed are sometimes seen as evil, as Richard in Shakespeare's *Richard III* or Quasimodo in Victor Hugo's *Hunchback of the Norte Dame*, who are referred in the memoir too. The chapter four in the memoir narrates the world of supernatural. Kuusisto's mother's beliefs and her interest in occultism try to affirm that disability has something to do with occultism, in effect eyeing at evil. This may be a projection of the inner hostility of the able-bodied toward the handicapped. And so it is that physical impairment is generalized to include fictional characters, a process called "spread" by social psychologist Beatrice Wright in her *Physical Disability—A Psychological Approach* (1960). Generally people, including medical community, carry around their head a set of about the social positions of the handicapped. Whatever may be their attitude, they place the disabled not in the mainstream but on the periphery, pensioned off and largely out of sight. For instance, Robert E. Murphy, author of *The Body Silent* began to suffer muscle spasms and deteriorating physical coordination at the height of his career as the Professor of University of Columbia. During the period of his hospitalization, even the hospital personnel found him anomalous. One social worker asked him, 'What was your occupation?' He was not only a fully employed man, but also a researcher who expertise in the field of disability. Consider Franklin D. Roosevelt's triumph over such total categorization. He muted his disability by always standing to deliver speeches and never allowing himself to be photographed in his wheelchair.

The disabled person makes an extra effort to establish status as an autonomous, worthy individual. Kuusisto possess tremendous hand-to-eye coordination, the practical skill that he has formulated, helps him to locate and identify the exact placement of smallest objects. It is with the support of this acquired skill he comments in the memoir: "if I know that a football is being thrown my way, I can often catch it" (41). The disability- paraplegia, blindness, or whatever it may be-is to be accepted that they are neither sick nor well, neither dead nor fully alive, neither out of society nor wholly in it. They are human beings, but their bodies are warped or malfunctioning, leaving their full humanity in doubt. Here, Kuusisto is not ill, but his illness is transitional to either death or recovery. Indeed, Kuusisto's illness is a fine example of a nonreligious, nonceremonial liminal condition. The sick person lives in a state of social suspension until he or she gets better. The disabled spend a lifetime in departure from normality.

To understand the disabled body and its experience, one must return to the concept of norm, normal body. So much of writing about disability has focused on the disabled person as the object of study, just as the study of race has focused on the person of colour. The study on Kuusisto's *Planet of the Blind*, I would like to focus not so much on the construction of disability as on the construction of normalcy. I do this because the problem is not the person with





disabilities (Kuusisto); the problem is the way that normalcy is constructed to create the problem of the disabled person. In the essay, "The Rule of Normalcy," Lennard J. Devis differentiates the terms normality and normalcy after a thorough discussion which will help us in analyzing the memoir. He calls :

"normality" as the alleged physical state of being normal, but "normalcy" the political-juridical-institutional state that relies on the control and normalization of bodies, or what Foucault calls "biopower." Thus, like democracy, normalcy is a descriptor of a certain form of governmental rule, the former by the people, the latter over bodies. (107)

College is brutally difficult for Kuusisto where he is forced to read. Though the required passage to be read may be a poem, but he thinks it for a bulky novel. This bodily limitation is tackled by him to adjust and acquire normalcy in the society. He tends to lead a life like any other 'normal' human being by visiting museums. Museum is a place where the relics, articles and other relevant things are exhibited. It naturally requires sight. Though it is impossible, he pretends so and also buys articles among the exhibits. Similarly he hates in wearing his spectacles with peculiar cylindrical glasses. Referring to his spectacles that, "Ashamed of my telescopes, I hide them in drawers and walk about with my head tipped slightly to the left to gain more refraction from my prismatic glasses" (23). Eschewing his disability he is well versed in literature and scholarly in poetry. He often quotes with ease and enjoys 'talking of poets, Leopardi, Rumi, Eliot' (74). Like any other American youngster he goes to a pub in the dark cellar. He falls in love with Bettina who is an executive at a television channel though jilted later.

Kuusisto loves to travel which he does to mould himself for certain academic purposes. For instance, after completing the graduation from Iowa, he moves to Helsinki, southern capital of Finland as he is awarded Fulbright grant. Though he is blind, he travels alone to 'one of the world's darkest cities' (118). Though he is hurt by the fragile masculinity he possess due to his blindness, it is with his immense will power that he progresses ahead. Kuusisto's penchant for travel brings to fore the emergence of dis/abling spatialities. The temporal construction of everyday spaces like the above instance makes up the societal relevance of in/dependences and dis/abilities. Martin Heidegger's notion of 'time-space', with special reference to 'visual disability' will explore how ordinary acts of 'dealing with money' and 'going shopping' configure multiple 'blind' temporalities and spatialities of in/dependence and dis/ability.

Blindness throughout history is inspiring and very much linked to visual cultures and is understood with wide range of knowledge. Unsurprisingly, it is precisely in cultures of light and vision such as ancient Greek and modern societies where blindness is considered as an





awkward, troublesome, and ambiguous phenomenon. As a consequence, ancient and modern cultures of vision have invoked different strategies of the 'either/or' in order to deal with the unsettling of blindness. This statement resonates the opening lines of Kuusisto that, "Blindness is often perceived by the sighted as an either/or condition" (1). In Greek philosophy, blindness is deeply equated with non-knowledge, ignorance, and ambiguity since blindness disrupts the idealized and hegemonic relation between light, sight, and insight. Moreover, blind people escape the practices of face-to-face relations so important for cultures of light and vision. The radical ambiguity of blindness is very much the theme of ancient Greek art, literature, and mythology. In visual cultures we have no proper idea about blindness except that it remains real in its multiplicity and possibility of what this reality is. Thus, within visual culture blindness is utterly detached and at the same time closely attached. Blindness reminds us of the very limits of visual cultures to be able to address and see/know its reality. Blindness is not a mere lack of vision, as much as dis/ability is not a mere composite of disabilities. Blindness questions the practices of seeing, it blurs clear vision and, accordingly, puzzles visual relations and the visibility of things; it blends clear and distinct di/visions. Blindness enacts troubled visual knowledge, because it cannot be apprehended by the clear cut categories of sight and insight, which are most powerful in performing the either/or, i.e. in differentiating what is from what is not. Blindness overflows distinct di/visions, remaining an ambivalent, ambiguous, and vague object that refers to more than what one is able to see.

In ancient Greece, we meet the self-blinded and former king Oedipus, who unbearably suffers and is pitied for his defaced appearance, wrecked condition, and misfortunes. At the same the blind figure becomes visible as the noble blind seer Tiresias, who sees more than any other mortal can see and has supra-human power of doing and knowing things. If among the Greeks blindness remains ambiguous and was induced by mortals and immortals, in the Christian world it was only Jesus who was able to heal the blind from their personal and social sufferings induced by blindness. By curing the blind into light, God relieves the blind figure from darkness and ignorance. What has changed with Christian thought is the focus of the temporary character of the merely negative condition of blindness.

The modern understanding of blindness as a dysfunction of vision is powerfully made present in the medical discourse. Blindness understood as a medical condition is equated with an individual visual impairment or disability. However, the medical understanding of blindness has gained importance since the 17th century when curing the blind by restoring their sight through cataract surgery was thought to become reality. The prospect of curing blindness not only extended the power over understanding and treating blindness as a mere medical and





individual condition, it also changed the social understanding of blindness. With the possible cure of the blind the mysteries surrounding the blind transformed the sphere of non-knowledge, ambiguity, and supra-humanity of blindness into the possibilities of a comprehensive understanding of vision and human knowledge. Hence, my argument is that the very history of blindness is very much the history of how visual cultures try to deal with blindness. Moreover, the very strategies of ancient and modern forms of the 'either/or' are inextricably intertwined with the history of blindness in visual cultures.

Kuusisto loves to travel which he does to mould himself for certain academic purposes. For instance, after completing the graduation from Iowa, he moves to Helsinki, southern capital of Finland as he is awarded Fulbright grant. Though he is blind, he travels alone to 'one of the world's darkest cities' (118). Though he is hurt by the fragile masculinity he possess due to his blindness, it is with his immense will power that he progresses ahead. Kuusisto's penchant for travel brings to fore the emergence of dis/abling spatialities.

Stephen Kuusisto landscapes a terrifying experience of blindness that stands not of defeat and ache but of lyrical innocence and disgusting awe. It dwells through hurdles and major challenges he encounters by eschewing the socially constructed hindrances. The memoir lens novel vistas for the disability studies and health studies paving culturally gifted discourses in our academia.

Work cited

Connors, Jimmy. *The Outsider: A Memoir*. New York: Barnes and Nobles, 2013. Print.

Davis, Lennard J. *Bending Over Backwards: Disability, Dismodernism and Other*. New York: New York University Press, 2002. Print.

Goffman, Erving. *Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity*. New Jersey: Prentice Hall Inc., 1963. Print.

Murphy, Robert E. *The Body Silent*. New York: Norton, 1990. Print.

Kuusisto, Stephen. *Planet of the Blind*. New York: Delta, 1998. Print.

Wright, Beatrice. *Physical Disability—A Psychological Approach*. New York: Harper&Row, 1960. Print

