

The Duality of Disability: Environment, Perception, and Identity

Disability, in its broadest sense, operates within a dual framework: it can be perceived as either an asset or a disadvantage, depending on the environment and societal context. The duality exposes the systemic inequalities and prejudices of the societies in which it exists. For individuals with disabilities, it's a dynamic which creates a precarious existence, where their worth is often contingent upon external validation or circumstances. This paper explores the duality of disability through two speculative science fiction novels: Octavia Butler's *Parable of the Sower* and Natasha Pulley's *The Mars House*. By connecting these narratives to scholarly insights on disability, including the social model of disability and systemic oppression, it will be argued that the duality of disability is not inherent to the condition itself but is created and sustained by societal structures. The duality of disability—its perception as both an asset and a liability—yields complex consequences for both the individual and society. These consequences, shaped by context and societal norms, reflect the tensions between inclusion and exclusion, empowerment and marginalization. Understanding this complexity is critical for building inclusive environments that allow disabled individuals to thrive.

In Butler's *Parable of the Sower*, Lauren Olamina's hyperempathy syndrome provides a vivid lens through which to examine the contextual nature of disability. Hyperempathy, which causes Lauren to physically feel the pain and pleasure of others, is perceived as a profound weakness in the violent and resource-scarce environment of Butler's dystopian world. This condition, which makes Lauren vulnerable in confrontational or violent situations, often jeopardizes her ability to protect herself and her community. Here her hyperempathy represents a

debilitating vulnerability in a dystopian society but also a powerful tool for fostering human connection. Lauren herself finds that her hyperempathy can “function both as an asset and as a hindrance to the pursuit of environmental justice” (Evans 118). It is not solely a burden but rather a profound asset in her leadership of Earthseed, a nascent spiritual and philosophical movement. Her ability to connect deeply with others enables her to build trust and unity among her followers. This duality reflects the environmental framing of disability: while hyperempathy hinders Lauren’s survival in hostile settings, it becomes a cornerstone of her strength in building a cooperative and compassionate community, though it should be noted that her leadership is constantly undermined by societal prejudice against her condition, reflecting real-world parallels in which disabled individuals are excluded from positions of power. Furthermore, her condition can create a wedge in her relationships: “A person who knows what I am can hurt me, betray me, disable me with little effort” (Butler 178).

Similarly, in Pulley’s *The Mars House*, January Stirling’s Earth-adapted physiology on Mars positions him as a marginalized immigrant having fled a dying Earth. His physicality is viewed as a liability and a threat to Martian norms. He faces discrimination as an “Earthstronger,” a derogatory label for those whose bodies are adapted to Earth’s gravity but are now living on Mars, where the lower gravity shapes societal norms and expectations because of their seemingly super-human strength. There the Earthstrongers are marginalized for their physical differences, they face social ostracism and systemic prejudice as Martian society views them as physically inferior and a drain on resources due to their inability to conform to norms, particularly the expectation of undergoing “naturalization.” This stigmatization manifests through institutionalized policies, social exclusion, and derogatory labels. They are forced to wear exoskeletal “cages” that serve as both tools of physical adaptation and mechanisms of societal

control. Designed to support their bodies in Mars's low gravity, the cages also visually mark them as outsiders, reinforcing their marginalized status. While ostensibly assisting with mobility and bone density, the cages symbolize systemic ableism, forcing conformity while reducing autonomy. They highlight how difference is treated as a problem to be managed rather than a strength to be valued, encapsulating the novel's critique of dehumanization and forced normalization. These physical advantages are rarely acknowledged by the oppressive Martian society (the native-born of which are referred to as "Naturals"), which seeks to "normalize" Earthstrongers through forced, excruciatingly painful and dangerous, naturalization procedures.

Individuals with disabilities often develop unique problem-solving skills or alternative ways of engaging with the world. For example, Lauren's hyperempathy in *Parable of the Sower* enhances her emotional intelligence, and January's Earthstronger physiology provides physical advantages in certain contexts. These abilities can become assets in leadership, creativity, or innovation, allowing disabled individuals to make significant contributions to their communities. Facing systemic barriers and societal prejudice often fosters resilience and adaptability. Disabled individuals may develop a strong sense of self and the ability to navigate challenges creatively, which can be empowering and fulfilling. The duality of disability often positions individuals as advocates for inclusion and systemic change. By challenging societal norms, disabled individuals can inspire broader cultural shifts and become agents of transformation.

When disabilities are perceived as liabilities, individuals often face stigma, exclusion, and discrimination. Lauren's hyperempathy subjects her to isolation, while January's Earthstronger identity makes them the target of systemic prejudice in *The Mars House*. This leads to emotional and psychological burdens, such as anxiety, self-doubt, or a reduced sense of belonging. Discrimination often translates into reduced access to education, employment, and social

participation. The societal devaluation of disabled individuals' abilities limits their potential to succeed and thrive. The expectation to "normalize" or "fix" disabilities, such as the coercion January faces with naturalization, imposes unnecessary physical and emotional stress. This pressure can result in a loss of autonomy and identity.

Compulsory able-bodiedness, a concept from disability studies introduced by Robert McRuer, describes societal norms that privilege able-bodiedness as the default, pressuring individuals to conform to physical and cognitive "normalcy." McRuer writes: "We can begin to understand the compulsory nature of able-bodiedness: in the emergent industrial capitalist system, free to sell one's labor but not free to do anything else electively meant free to have an able body but not particularly free to have anything else" (McRuer 303). While McRuer says that such compulsory states likely arose with industrial capitalism, it is not unlikely to find them in dystopian hell of Butler's climate-ravaged Earth or Pulley's vision of a colonized Mars.

This concept aligns with the social model of disability, which emphasizes how societal structures and attitudes, rather than impairments, create barriers for disabled people. In *Parable of the Sower*, Lauren's hyperempathy is stigmatized in a society that equates survival with physical toughness and emotional detachment. Her condition, deemed a liability, illustrates how societal norms marginalize those who deviate from able-bodied ideals. Lauren's leadership, rooted in her empathy, critiques these norms and reframes disability as a source of strength. Similarly, in *The Mars House*, Martian society enforces able-bodiedness through coercive "naturalization" procedures, forcing Earthstrongers like January Stirling to align with Martian physical norms. Of the surgery itself, January argues: "forcing people to change because of how they're born, and maybe die in the process, because it's more convenient for someone else—it's genocide, isn't it?" (47). The cages Earthstrongers are required to wear further symbolize societal

imposition of able-bodied ideals. Both novels reflect the social model of disability by exposing how societal expectations, rather than impairments themselves, disable individuals. Lauren and January's resistance to these norms underscores the need to challenge compulsory able-bodiedness and embrace diverse forms of ability as integral to human experience.

Like Lauren in *Parable of the Sower*, January's disability is both a source of strength and a target of prejudice, highlighting how societal structures shape the experience of disability. Both characters grapple with societal discrimination and systemic inequality while navigating the advantages their unique conditions afford them. In a joint paper Tom Shakespeare and Nicolas Watson argued that disabled people are an oppressed social group and that it's critical to distinguish "between the impairments that people have, and the oppression which they experience" (Shakespeare and Watson 4). They offer a framework for understanding how societal barriers, rather than impairments, create disability. Lauren's and January's experiences illustrate this concept: their environments dictate whether their conditions are seen as assets or liabilities. This shifts the focus from "fixing" the individual to dismantling systemic barriers, such as discriminatory policies or ableist cultural norms, that exacerbate disadvantage.

In Butler's dystopian world, disabilities like Lauren's hyperempathy are stigmatized as liabilities. This stigma mirrors real-world attitudes that frame disabled individuals as burdens, particularly in environments where resources are scarce. Lauren faces systemic discrimination, including social ostracism and the constant threat of exploitation. Despite her leadership abilities, her hyperempathy is often viewed as a weakness that undermines her credibility. Likewise, in *The Mars House*, January is subjected to systemic discrimination through the institution of "naturalization," a procedure designed to align Earthstrongers' bodies with Martian norms. This coerced conformity represents the extreme end of ableist policies, where difference is erased

rather than accommodated. January's alliance with Aubrey Gale, a political figure advocating for mandatory naturalization, underscores the tension between public policy and personal morality. Gale's support for these laws, despite their devastating impact on Earthstrongers, reveals the pervasive stigma that frames disability as a condition requiring correction.

Erving Goffman's theory of stigma, as outlined in *Stigma: Notes on the Management of a Spoiled Identity*, famously wrote: "Stigma is a process by which the reaction of others spoils normal identity" (Goffman 3). He goes on to say that "an attribute that stigmatizes one type of possessor can confirm the usualness of another" (3). He provides a useful lens for analyzing Lauren's and January's experiences. Stigma isolates individuals by framing their differences as moral or social failings. This dynamic is evident in the treatment of hyperempathy in *Parable of the Sower* and Earthstronger physiology in *The Mars House*, where societal norms create barriers to inclusion. Both Lauren and January demonstrate how disabilities can simultaneously serve as sources of strength and vulnerability. Lauren's hyperempathy fosters deep connections but also endangers her in violent encounters. Similarly, January's Earthstronger physiology provides physical advantages on Mars but subjects them to systemic discrimination. These examples illustrate the duality of disability: its impact depends on whether society chooses to embrace or reject difference.

In "The Disability Paradox: High Quality of Life Against All Odds" Gary L. Albrecht and Patrick J. Devlieger, explore the seeming contradiction that many disabled individuals report high levels of life satisfaction despite living with significant impairments or societal barriers. This "paradox" challenges conventional assumptions that disability necessarily leads to diminished quality of life. They write: "The disability paradox highlights the importance of personal experience with disability in defining the self, one's view of the world, social context

and social relationships” (978). This is in contrast to those who have not had such experiences, but Lauren and January exemplify this paradox, finding purpose and resilience even as they navigate oppressive environments. Their stories challenge simplistic narratives that frame disability as either entirely tragic or wholly inspiring. There is no single “disabled voice” or “crip narrative.”

Simplistic depictions of disability, often found in media, perpetuate harmful stereotypes. Lauren and January’s nuanced portrayals contrast with these reductive narratives, emphasizing the importance of representing disabled individuals as complex, multifaceted people. In recent years, disabled voices have increasingly gained prominence across various fields, shedding light on the diversity of experiences within the disabled community and challenging societal misconceptions. Each voice brings a unique perspective shaped by individual circumstances, impairments, and cultural contexts. For example, Alice Wong, founder of the Disability Visibility Project, amplifies the narratives of disabled individuals through storytelling, emphasizing the importance of representation in media and literature. Similarly, Haben Girma, a deafblind advocate and lawyer, shares her experiences to push for accessibility and equity in education and technology, demonstrating that disability is not a limitation but a variation of human experience. In literature, authors like Riva Lehrer, in *Golem Girl: A Memoir*, share personal stories that highlight the intersection of disability with art, identity, and resilience. Likewise, poets like Ilya Kaminsky explore how disability intersects with political and social issues, showcasing the nuanced ways disabled individuals navigate the world. These voices not only dispel myths but also enrich public discourse by providing insights into the complexity of disability and its interactions with society, reminding us that each disabled person’s story is uniquely valuable and indispensable.

Creating equitable environments requires systemic change. Universal design principles, which prioritize accessibility in architecture, technology, and education, can mitigate the environmental disadvantages faced by disabled individuals. In *The Mars House*, for example, the absence of inclusive policies exacerbates the discrimination against Earthstrongers, demonstrating the need for proactive measures, and in *Parable of the Sower*, the world is in an apocalyptic chaos, and the experiences of disabled individuals is the last thing on anyone's mind. Yet cultural attitudes must also shift to embrace diversity. Representation of disabled individuals in media, politics, and leadership roles is critical for challenging ableist norms. Both Lauren and January serve as examples of disabled leaders who redefine strength and resilience, providing models for real-world inclusion.

It's necessary to emphasize the importance of addressing systemic barriers rather than focusing solely on curing impairments. This approach aligns with the social model, advocating for societal adaptation to accommodate all individuals. The duality of disability, as explored in *Parable of the Sower* and *The Mars House*, reflects the interplay between individual conditions and societal structures. Lauren's hyperempathy and January's Earthstronger physiology reveal how environmental and systemic factors shape whether disability is seen as an asset or a liability. When disability is embraced as a form of diversity, society benefits from the innovative and varied contributions of disabled individuals. For instance, Lauren's leadership in Earthseed introduces a compassionate approach to community building, and January's adaptability could enhance Martian society's resilience if recognized as a strength.

These narratives, supported by academic insights, underscore the need for a paradigm shift in how society approaches disability. Rather than framing disability as a condition to be corrected, society must embrace a model of inclusion that dismantles systemic barriers and

values diverse abilities. By fostering equitable environments and challenging harmful stereotypes, we can create a world where disability is no longer a source of stigma or disadvantage but a recognized and celebrated aspect of human diversity. The duality of disability demonstrates the need for systemic and cultural change. By dismantling ableist norms and emphasizing inclusion, societies can mitigate the negative consequences of this duality while amplifying its positive aspects. For individuals, reducing stigma and providing equitable opportunities can foster empowerment, enabling them to thrive as integral members of their communities.

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