Tsunami and the Construction of Disabled Southern Body

History of Medicine in the Global South

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This paper explores a Southern disabled standpoint as a theoretical and strategic approach to examine disability. In situating disabled people in the South within dominant Northern notions of development and medicine, this paper focuses on the 2004 December Tsunami. Our aim is to highlight how the separation of an episodic natural disaster from the ongoing social disaster of war and poverty, is based on a specific approach to understanding the Southern body within Northern medicine. By explaining how able-bodied masculine notions of the body are constructed within imperialist and ethno-nationalist projects, this paper suggests a deeper understanding of disability in the South for informed social transformation.

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Introduction

> *I do agree that the Tsunami was a wonderful opportunity to show not just the US government, but the heart of the American people, and I think it has paid great dividends for us.* (sic.)
>
> Condoleezza Rice, Senate Confirmation Hearing, January 2005.

This paper explores a Southern disabled standpoint as a theoretical and strategic approach to examine disability. Positioned in a specific subordinated space within the global capitalist economy under the hegemony of the U.S., this Southern standpoint is a critical materialist one. In order for Southern disabled people to transform their subordination and exploitation, this paper argues for a politics of impairment that combines economic redistribution with cultural elaboration of solidarity, justice and care. By situating the analysis of 'disability' in terms of disabled people in the South, the aim is to encourage a deeper understanding of disability, particularly in terms of social policy and social mobilisation.

To undertake this task, we will use the 2004 December Tsunami to illustrate not only a particular disability discourse, but also the location of the Southern disabled body within North-South power relations. While some may argue, such a construction confuses ecology with typology, we will demonstrate that the Tsunami is a metaphor for Southern bodies and ecologies that are typologised within a specific power hierarchy. In brief, the representations of both the Tsunami and the disabled body are considered 'freaks of nature',[1] which coincides with the spread of global markets and imperial violence, reconfiguring the human body.

In terms of theory, this paper elaborates the materialist social model proposed by C. Barnes and G. Mercer, which merges disability with radically transforming capitalism[2]. In highlighting how disability in the South and the Southern body are represented in times of 'natural' disasters, we argue that the Eurocentric masculine imperialist project situates Southern disabled people as a sub-species of nature. The complicity of ethno-nationalist strategies within the South with able-bodied masculinity has particular implications for Southern women and girls with disabilities. By juxtaposing the Tsunami with the disabled body, the aim is to further extend the politics of impairment.

Northern depictions of the Tsunami and its aftermath reproduced a popular Northern imagining– that disasters live in the South. From mudslides in Central America, earthquakes in Pakistan to famine (along with violence) in Dafur, disasters seem to lurk in the South. For the dominant Northern imaginings, the 'disastrous South' exists as a permanent condition. Even the devastation of hurricane Katrina in New Orleans illustrated the media and state responses to marginalised southern black bodies in the U.S. During the Tsunami the Northern bodies of tourists were more important than local Southern bodies. This representation of the Southern black body is firmly anchored in flattening their histories and their culturally textured daily lives.
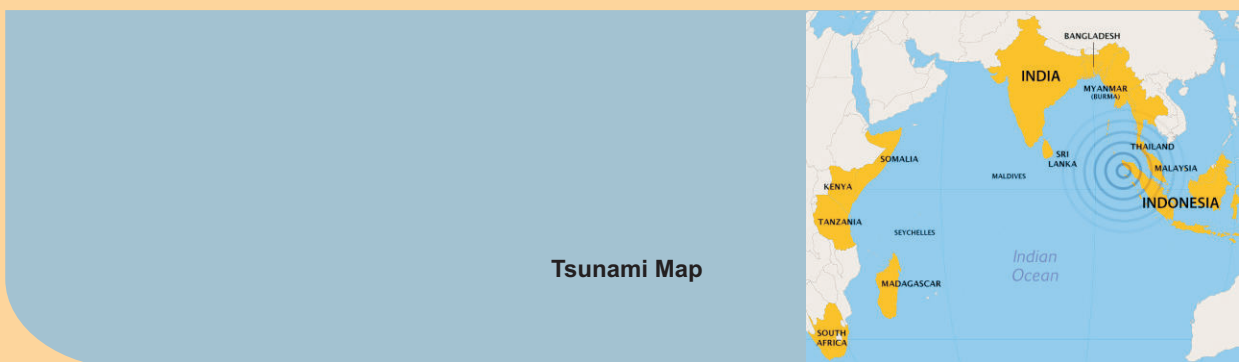
The 2004 December Tsunami

The majority of bodies affected by the December 2004 Tsunami belonged to women and children. According to the World Bank, the tsunami killed 129,775 people in Indonesia with 39,786 missing and 192,055 displaced.[3] In Sri Lanka, 35,322 people were killed, over 5,000 went missing, and 516,150 were internally displaced. In Aceh, the World Bank estimated that total funds needed were 5.8 billion USD, where 8.9 billion USD has been pledged.[4] In Sri Lanka, the need was 2.2 billion USD with 2.8 billion USD in pledges.[5] By late 2005, almost twelve months after the disaster, the conditions of poverty and war have remained mostly unchanged. While the Tsunami's human toll was overwhelming, the lagged and inadequate

their geo-political landscapes and redescribed in a Eurocentric masculine worldview. In the case of the Tsunami, this reinforced dominant notions of the Tropics.

These Northern representations of the 2004 Tsunami illustrate the ways in which western medicine draws specific geographic boundaries around 'warm climates', pathologising the tropics. Referred to as 'Tropicality', this discourse creates a sense of otherness to "the tropical environment, the difference of plant and animal life, and the climate and topography, the indigenous societies and their cultures and the distinctive nature of disease".[13] In re-enacting 'Tropicality', the Northern Tsunami discourse rationalises the hegemony of western medicine by re-affirming the inherent dangers to life and health in the equatorial regions and the need for western medical intervention. The Tsunami, in this Eurocentric hierarchy of being, was something that only lives in Southern geographical spaces, away from the safe and controllable ecologies of the North. Just like the Southern disabled and impaired body, the Tsunami is a part of nature that cannot be stopped, but something that can be prepared for, so that it can be controlled and managed by superior Northern technocratic expertise.

With ecological events and Southern bodies located close to nature, this representation of black bodies as a 'vulnerable' sub-species form the basis for legitimising imperialist projects under U.S. hegemony. The Tsunami was a "wonderful opportunity" for the North, according to Condoleezza Rice (as quoted above), to re-establish its superiority and enlightened imperial benevolence. The response of Northern governments masked the more brutal coercive dimensions of political and military coordination of the global spread of markets. As Jeremy Seabrook so eloquently elucdated, "Western governments, which can disburse so lavishly in the art of war, offer a few million as it were exceptional largesse".[14] In effect, the incapacities of local state forms to provide social protection expose the contradictions of neo-liberal strategies promoting 'self-regulating free markets' as 'development'. Not only does this cater to Northern Transnational Corporations (TNCs), but it also fosters ethno-nationalist militarised counter-movements based on able-bodied patriarchy. In turn, a key 'blind-spot' of the Northern imaginings in representing the black Southern body, battered by disaster was the 'nature' of the North-South relationship.

Tsunami Map

Disability in the South

Although most of the world's disabled population lives in the South, there is higher "incidence of reported impairment" in the North.[15] According to the World Bank, there are 600 million disabled people globally, of whom 400 million live in the South.[16] As opposed to the North, life expectancies are shorter in the South, there are limited health and support services, and some conditions (such as dyslexia) are not considered as impairments.[17] There are a range of preventable impairments that are caused by lack of access to basic amenities such as safe water, sanitation, electricity, and health services. The limits of state capacities to regulate and extend

response of the rich Northern nation-sates and international development agencies also reveal the ongoing human costs of market-driven 'development'.

Tsunami Death

Disaster, Disability and Southern Bodies in Northern Discourse

Northern depictions of the Tsunami and its aftermath reproduced a popular Northern imagining– that disasters live in the South. From mudslides in Central America, earthquakes in Pakistan to famine (along with violence) in Dafur, disasters seem to lurk in the South. For the dominant Northern imaginings, the 'disastrous South' exists as a permanent condition. Even the devastation of hurricane Katrina in New Orleans illustrated the media and state responses to marginalised southern black bodies in the U.S. During the Tsunami the Northern bodies of tourists were more important than local Southern bodies. This representation of the Southern black body is firmly anchored in flattening their histories and their culturally textured daily lives. Thus, socially entrenched dominant power relations of class, gender, ethnicity and disability are made invisible, along with a multitude of contentious collective struggles for recognition, representation and redistribution.

Representations of natural disaster and Southern bodies are intertwined with Western anthropocentric perspectives of science, which deploy a 'natural' hierarchy of species and the notion of a sub-species.[6] In this hierarchy of species, humans are situated as superior to nature but certain human beings are closer to nature than others. The idea of the sub-species conveys how human biology can be measured and layered into a 'hierarchy of being'.[7] At the pinnacle of this hierarchy are white western men whereas women, black and impaired bodies are located closer to nature. The superiority of whiteness is in both physicality and intelligence, where knowledge about self and others is reduced to a value-neutral positivist discourse of 'science' and 'rationality'.[8]

The proximity to nature of the colonised and the disabled represents a specific sub-species, along with others. Distinguished by the lack of rational and reasoned thought, and the propensity to indulge in the moment of being "resulting in self-loss", these lesser beings are never capable of fully realising oneself.[9] Living within a world of unconscious acts driven by irrationality, emotion and non-intelligence, the "unreason" of the sub-species "prevents us from determining or understanding nature itself".[10] Nature and those parts of the sub-species are thus overwhelmed by irrational acts, with great desires to nurture or destroy everything in its path, without thought or understanding. The impaired and disabled represent this 'sub-status of irrationality', which reproduce those 'sub-human freaks' of nature.[11]

This notion of the sub-species was illustrated by the separation of the Tsunami and nature from the human. This accompanies the positioning of whiteness, the 'human', as disconnected from, and superior to brownness, the 'natural'.[12] By separating nature from humanity and represented as 'otherness', cultural and social histories are also disconnected from

social provisions depict how the promotion of international competitiveness has enhanced the power of private insurance and drug (pharmaceutical) companies in driving disability policy.[18]

Disability in the South is situated in a subordinated status within the global disability marketplace. The market for rehabilitation goods and services related to disability is dominated by the interests of TNCs, particularly insurance and drug (pharmaceutical) companies. Major drug and medical supply companies are expanding into the South promoting deregulation and privatisation of the health sectors. The current North-South tensions over intellectual property issues and prices of essential medicines, particularly HIV/AIDS drugs, highlight the role of TNCs as well as the WTO in shaping the global disability marketplace. While subordinating the needs of disabled people, cultural practices and the national sovereignty of the South, the profit driven disability market is also influenced by the recurrent crises of capitalist economies. Not only is the South particularly effected by the changes in the global marketplace, there is a generalised amplification of risk through food sources, genetic modification and accumulated drug resistance as well as from the environment, climate change, unknown hazards in the workplace and unregulated proliferation of biological, chemical and nuclear weapons.[19] This relationship between the global disability market and the militarisation of the globe is of particular interest for disability in the South.

The outbreak and maintenance of civil wars in the South relate to nation-state strategies which are interdependent with imperialist efforts to expand and protect markets. The post-second world war global system under U.S. hegemony has promoted an international system of "imperialism by invitation".[20] While inviting 'self-governing' states to participate in the international trading regime, the new hegemony is sustained by "political and military coordination with other independent governments".[21] The global trade in military weapons plays a key role in maintaining market-friendly governments while militarising conflicts in the South.

Disability in the South is intertwined with civil wars, where both state and insurrectionary groups use maiming rather than killing to undermine resistance and socialise fear.[22] The global military industrial networks, including international arms trade, dominated by Northern countries and often invisible in World Bank 'development' discourse, illustrates the coercive dimension of market-led 'development'. Northern countries accounted for about 75 per cent of world military spending in 2004 but contained only sixteen per cent of the world population. The U.S. accounts for nearly half of world military spending. In 2004, the military spending of the U.S. amounted to nearly 400 billion USD, compared with 6.4 billion USD in Indonesia and 19.1 billion USD in India.[23] The GDP of Sri Lanka in 2004 was around 21 billion USD, while military spending was nearly 560 million USD. The role of the Indonesian military in protecting the interests of Exxon Mobil, one of the major U.S. petroleum TNCs, illustrates how national politics of resource-rich Southern countries are interconnected with geopolitics of imperialism. Moreover, the productive, docile, bodies that the World Bank and nation-state strategies promote for 'development' are also Southern bodies faced with human right abuses.[24]

Global market forces shape and are reshaped by underlying social structures and cultures of disability, primarily in the terrain of national politics. Disability in the South is positioned within a neo-liberal 'development' discourse, which prioritises international competitiveness through trade liberalisation where under market-driven politics the state promotes the interests of capital through privatisation and deregulation.[25] Consequently, government regulation or social provisioning is seen not only favouring sectional interests and encouraging inefficiencies, but also state bureaucracies are seen as inherently acting to maximise their own interests. Thus, privatisation under public-private partnerships is promoted, blurring the public-private

distinction. As for disability policy, the retraction of state social provisioning and the privatisation of health services have amplified household care labour, particularly women's care work.

Under market-driven politics, disabled people are located in the periphery of labour markets, where able-bodied labour constitutes the valourised core. In order to attract international investors, the active promotion of a skilled and docile labour force also means creating a labour market which restricts basic worker rights, such as freedom of association and collective bargaining. In effect, more people are disabled by the lack of decent work, safety and health regulations and poverty-level wages. However, there are other recruits from a pool of underemployed and unemployed workers, in urban slums and impoverished rural communities. This marginalisation also feeds into the proliferation of ethno-nationalist counter-movements, in hope of gaining recognition and redistribution.

Authoritarian ethno-nationalism, nature and able-bodied patriarchy
While strengthening conditions for global capital to invest and operate, the state's attempts to gain legitimacy is increasingly based on patriarchal ethno-nationalist strategies. In contrast to earlier closed economy projects, this nationalist development discourse is committed to market-driven politics. While there are different versions of this nationalist project, they are grounded in able-bodied patriarchal constructions of nationhood where the nation is represented as masculine reason. This depiction of the nation-state as masculine reason excludes women from the 'social' and ascribes them to 'nature'. In effect, women are engaged in reproducing the nation, biologically, culturally as well as symbolically.[26] By casting the Tsunami as an irrational act of nature, humanity is masculinised while nature is feminised.

> The Southern disabled standpoint suggested in this paper emerges from a cultural critique within the South itself. The dominant representation of nations in terms of able-bodied ethno-nationalist patriarchy is at the heart of this critique. The feminisation of both nation and nature by able-bodied ethno-nationalist patriarchy deploys notions of 'tradition' and 'motherland' with strategic intent. With women narrowed to their maternal and nurturing function, this representation of women as biological reproducers of the nation is central for the domestication of women while restricting their status as citizens.

The masculinity implied in patriarchal ethno-nationalist strategies is an able-bodied masculinity. The emphasis on ability relates to how culturally mediated economic activities, discipline, control, subjugate and reproduce bodies as well as embodiment. The body is central to the self as a project as well as social status.[27] In effect, the body is shaped by both cultural and material practices. The dominant forms of masculinity articulated in nationalist projects are an able-bodied masculinity, which is based on evading the shared frailty of human beings and the vulnerability as social beings.[28] While the body is "inescapable in the construction of masculinity", the bodily performance that valourises ability is also related to the de-valuation of the disabled body.[29] The able-bodied masculinity of ethno-nationalist projects overlap with fascist tendencies which Connell describes as a "naked assertion of male supremacy".[30] The fascist image of masculinity combines disparate dispositions of "unrestrained violence of frontline soldiers", rationality (bureaucratic institutionalisation of violence) and ironically, irrationality too (thinking with 'the blood', the triumph of the 'will' etc.).[31] In turn, elements of dominance as well as technical expertise are core features of able-bodied masculinity that subordinate disabled bodies and women.

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nature by able-bodied ethno-nationalist patriarchy deploys notions of 'tradition' and 'motherland' with strategic intent. With women narrowed to their maternal and nurturing function, this representation of women as biological reproducers of the nation is central for the domestication of women while restricting their status as citizens. While relegating women and disabled bodies into the private sphere of the household,[32] the patriarchal ethno-nationalist projects maintain a masculinised public sphere. Just as a woman's status as citizen within the public domain is conditioned by the active role of the state constructing relations in the private domain, of marriage and the family,[33] the citizenship status of disabled bodies are also shaped by similar interventions.[34] This is even more so for women with disabilities, who are regarded as unfit to reproduce the nation.[35] In responding to the Tsunami, the 'humanity' of the imperial state(s) merged with able-bodied patriarchal state strategies to separate and evade the inhumanity of poverty and war that continue to reproduce disabling structures and cultures in the South. By contesting the privileged/hegemonic position of the Northern notions of development, disability, and disasters, the Southern disabled standpoint is aimed at deepening politics of impairment.

Conclusion

The delineation of disability as 'natural' and disability caused by war and poverty as 'cultural' is a specific value-laden framework. The separation of natural and human disasters obscures their shared properties and how culture and history mediates in defining them. While the tsunami had a natural dimension as an ecological event, the consequences of that event were shaped by pre-existing culturally mediated material practices. By the time the Tsunami arrived in Sri Lanka and Aceh, the Southern body had already endured extensive destruction and violence under ethno-nationalist state strategies and Northern notions of 'development'. Despite the billion-dollar pledges the response of rich Northern nation states, impairments caused by war and poverty endure. Thus, the Tsunami can be deployed as a material metaphor to examine the Southern disabled body, where those 'freaks of nature' provide 'opportunities' for Northern scientific technocratic expertise and imperial benevolence.

For politics of impairment, disabling barriers generated by war and poverty in the South, are inseparable from market-driven 'development' and global military networks. With the majority of people with disabilities located in the South or the 'majority world', the ongoing articulation of North-South relations is significant for elaborating a critical Southern standpoint on able-bodied masculinity.

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