

Biopolitical Formations of Disability: A Wartime Genealogy

This paper, titled *Biopolitical Formations of Disability: A Wartime Genealogy*, undertakes a critical and historically grounded examination of disability as a biopolitical construct, tracing its emergence and transformation within the crucible of twentieth-century warfare. Drawing extensively on the foundational theories of biopower articulated by Michel Foucault and Erving Goffman, and enriched by contemporary interventions in critical disability studies, the study interrogates the ways in which disability has been strategically produced, regulated, and contested by state apparatuses during periods of war. It argues that disability cannot be understood merely as a biological impairment or a medical condition; rather, it is a socially constructed and historically contingent category shaped by intersecting political, cultural, and institutional forces. Warfare, in this context, functions as a decisive biopolitical site where bodies are classified, disciplined, and rendered productive or disposable in accordance with nationalist and militaristic imperatives.

A central focus of the paper is the transformative impact of the World Wars on the visibility, representation, and governance of disability. These global conflicts marked a watershed moment in modern history, as the unprecedented number of wounded and disabled soldiers compelled states to renegotiate their responsibilities toward injured bodies. War not only accelerated the medicalization and institutional management of disability through rehabilitation programs, prosthetic technologies, and military hospitals, but also inadvertently fostered new forms of political consciousness and resistance among disabled veterans. The study demonstrates how disabled bodies became symbols of both national sacrifice and social anxiety, revealing tensions between ideals of masculine heroism and the realities of bodily fragility. In this process, disability emerged as a politically charged site through which questions of citizenship, productivity, and belonging were fiercely contested.

Through a nuanced analysis of textual and visual representations—including war poetry, medical discourses, and wartime propaganda—the paper illuminates the complex and often contradictory narratives surrounding disability. Wilfred Owen's poem “Disabled” is examined in particular as a powerful phenomenological account of the physical devastation and psychological alienation experienced by war-injured veterans. Owen's portrayal exposes the social abandonment and invisibilization of disabled soldiers once their usefulness to the nation has expired, thereby critiquing the moral economy of war. The paper further extends Jasbir Puar's concept of debility to explore how modern states deploy war as a mechanism to produce and manage bodily vulnerability, using injury and impairment as tools of biopolitical control. This framework enables an exploration of the intersectionality of disability with militarism, nationalism, class, and gender, foregrounding the uneven experiences of disabled individuals across different geopolitical and cultural contexts.

Moving beyond traditional character-centered literary analysis, the paper also examines how literary forms themselves may function as sites of disablement or resistance. It interrogates narrative strategies, fragmented structures, and representational limits that shape readers' engagement with disabled experiences. By engaging with the phenomenology of intellectual and communicative disability, the study foregrounds barriers to understanding, empathy, and interpretation, emphasizing the ethical necessity of grounding literary criticism in lived realities. Situating these insights within a broader theoretical and historical framework, the paper underscores the importance of dismantling ableist epistemologies embedded within both literature and criticism. Ultimately, by synthesizing biopolitical theory, disability studies, and literary analysis, this research contributes to a deeper understanding of the historical and contemporary formations of disability, particularly within the context of war. It foregrounds the embodied realities of disabled individuals while exposing the structural forces that marginalize them. The paper advocates for a more inclusive and just social order, calling for transformative change that centres the rights, agency, and lived experiences of disabled people, and challenges the enduring legacies of ableism embedded within wartime and postwar societies.