



Character of Cerezita in Cherri Moraga’s “Heroes and Saints”: Facing Some Disability Models

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Abstract

This essay investigates how Cherri Moraga’s “Heroes and Saints” depicts Cerezita character as a very ambitious and brave one. The essay analyzes how Cerezita with her disability faces and challenges all models of disabilities to reclaim her stolen body in order to live like other people in her society. She faces the medical, charity, superscript and moral models to not be under control of them. Furthermore, the essay explicates how these models can be dangerous and destructive for all people with disabilities if they give up on them.

Key words: Medical or individual model; Charity model; Superscript model; Moral model; Disability; Reclamation of body; Social injustice

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INTRODUCTION

I am writing about Cerezita who is a fascinating, wonderful, beautiful, and wise character. Eli Clare’s article *Stolen Bodies, Reclaimed Bodies: Disability and Queerness* concentrates on

locating the problems of social injustice in the world, rather than in our bodies, has been key to name oppression.... Leave our bodies alone. Stop justifying and explaining your oppressive crap by measuring, comparing, judging, blaming, creating theories about our bodies. (Clare, 2016, pp.360-61).

One of the problems mentioned in the article is the social injustice of the dominant models of disabilities, including the medical, charity, supercrip, and moral models that “turn disability into problems faced by individual people, locat[ing] those problems in our bodies, and defin[ing] those bodies as wrong” (Ibid., p.360). In Cherri Moraga’s “Heroes and Saints”, Cerezita, though her disability, faces those models of disability to represent and reclaim her stolen body after falling under control of them.

1. CEREZITA AND THE MEDICAL MODEL OF DISABILITY

Cerezita was born with disability; she cannot walk, move, or even touch others. In this case, she is under control of the medical model which sees disability as “a disease” (Ibid.), with all of its hindrances carried and borne by the disabled person. When Cerezita reads medical books about leukemia and neuroblastoma, she uses her teeth, her tongue, and her chin to do the job of her hands because she is handless. This explains how the medical model approaches that disabled people like Cerezita who should bear and depend upon themselves to overcome and find solutions for their disability. The medical model of disability puts the responsibility of care on the disabled expecting them to serve themselves alone. Though she is disabled, Cerezita faces this medical model concept with bravery and durability, never asking for assistance to turn the pages of the books she reads. Therefore, the medical model, also known as the individual model, contains all the adverse and negative attitudes towards disabled people in general.

According to Kathryn Sullivan’s article *The Prevalence of the Medical Model of Disability in Society*, “people with disabilities are seen as sick, as in the medical model, [and] they may tend to be excused from normal obligations in society and are isolated from the rest of population” (p.3). This refers back to Clare’s article about how this model

creates injustice and inequality in societies. The model is also expressed in the excerpt from "Heroes and Saints". In the scene, Dolores, Cerezita's mother, is describing her feelings about the birth of Cerezita:

I know what you are feeling. I know what it feels like to have a sick baby. When Cerezita come out of me, I dint even wannu look at her, I tole the doctors to put a blanket over her head to suffocate her, but she screams and screams so loud, the doctors couldn't do it. They tole me... the baby wants to live with all its heart and soul. (Moraga, 1994, p.131)

In other words, Dolores isolates Cerezita because of her body. From the time of her birth, Cerezita endures this isolation in addition to her encounter of the medical model's negative attitudes towards people with disabilities in general.

One of the negative attitudes of the medical model of disability is that it depicts people with disabilities as "abnormal, dependent, and inferior, as less-valued members of society" (Sullivan, 2011, p.15). Clare (2016, p.364) mentions that one "should pay attention to our bodies—our stolen bodies and our reclaimed bodies. To the wisdom that tells us the causes of the injustice we face lie outside our bodies". This negative attitude is illustrated by Moraga's "Saints and Heroes." When Cerezita's mother prevents Cerezita from going out or being seen. Dolores is affected by this negative attitude, and she does not want anyone to see her child's abnormality and disability. Contrary to this negative attitude, Cerezita refuses to stay at home and after, she insisted on her mother to accompany her to the church, her mother finally agreed and took her to the church. Cerezita's body is not considered abnormal and disabled, but those who created the medical model marginalized the disabled peoples' bodies.

The medical model can have its dominance on each society and culture. In Cherri Moraga's "Heroes and Saints", the dominance of the model influences Cerezita's mother to mistreat her daughter from being part or a member of Chicano's Society. Her mother is used as a symbol of the negative dominance of the medical model in Moraga's novel to stop Cerezita from communicating and participating with other people in her community. Consequently, Moraga illustrates how dominant the medical model of disability is there in most societies even in small ones that affect lives of people with disabilities. Hence, Moraga wants to express through use of Cerezita's mother character how the "world treats disabled people... by the material and social conditions of ableism. Not by the need to use a wheelchair, but rather by the stairs that have no accompanying ramp or elevator" (Clare, 2016, p.360).

2. CEREZITA AND THE CHARITY MODEL OF DISABILITY

The charity or tragedy model describes people with disabilities as "a tragedy, a misfortune, that must be

tempered or erased by generous giving" (Ibid.). In other words, portrayal of people with disabilities as victims of circumstances and are worthy of pity may lead people with disabilities to have a tragic and harsh life. But this model is challenged by Cerezita in Moraga's "Heroes and Saints." She was born with a disability due to her mother's drinking from a polluted water source. She is protected and sheltered in her family. She enjoys very nice life with her family. Her disability forces her to stay at home and even her mother, Dolores, does not agree with her appearing in the Chicano society. Cerezita was prevented from participating in the protest with her community members. Additionally, she was isolated from seeing other people. When looking out of the window, her mother said, "get your face out of the window" (Moraga, 1994, p.111). Dolores also isolated Cerezita when she said, "see how feel the first time some stranger looks at you with cruel eyes" (Ibid., p.113). Her mother's justification for isolating her daughter is to protect her from strangers. But Cerezita's disability pride makes her deny her mother's advice as she looks many times from the window challenging the influence of her mother. In this way, Cerezita reclaims her body's freedom that is stolen by her mother's strong words.

Cerezita's disability does not make her a tragic character or a tragic victim as the charity model of disability says. Though she is disabled, she did participate with her community to stop the tragedy in the small valley town where she lives. She does not a victim of her disability; she was a victim of racism. Instead of being piteous and tragic, Cerezita's words at the end of the short story make her mother proud of her:

Put your hand inside my wound. Inside the valley of my wound, there is a people. A miracle people. In this pueblito where the valley people live the river runs red with blood; but they aren't afraid because they are used to the color red. It is the same color as the sun sitting into the sierras, the same color of the pool of liquid they were born into. (Ibid., p.148)

The words of Cerezita illustrate how wise and intelligent she is. Though she is disabled, she leads her society by her mind and her intelligence. Consequently, she is considered a fascinating example for all other people with disabilities encouraging them to not give in to any kind of disability. Instead, they should be proud of their disability, like Cerezita, and overcome the concept of the charity model of disability that classifies them as victims of circumstance.

3. CEREZITA AND THE SUPERCRIP MODEL OF DISABILITY

In Claire's (2016, p.360) article, the supercrip model of disability views disability as "a challenge to overcome and disabled people as superheroes just for living [their] daily lives". Additionally, according to Amit Kama's article

“Supercrrips Versus the pitiful Handicapped: Reception of Disabling Images by Disabled Audience Members,” “one of the durable and prevalent images is that of the supercrip who embodies the popular image of disability as ‘something’ that one must successfully overcome, rather than learn to adjust to” (p.3). In Moraga’s “Heroes and Saints”, Cerezita doesn’t see her disability as a challenge to overcome, but rather she sees it as pride that gives her power to have a fascinating life. Moreover, she learns to adapt and adjust to her disability. Finally, she is considered “a cultural idol” (Kama, 2004, p.9) without overcoming her disability and without becoming a supercrip or a hero.

4. CEREZITA AND THE MORAL MODEL OF DISABILITY

Clare (2016, p.360) views the moral model of disability as “a sign of moral weakness”. It is described disability as a result of ignominy, sin, or disgrace. For example, if a one has a disabled child, this means he/she is sinful and this child is a sign and a symbol of their punishment from god. In Moraga’s “Heroes and Saints”, this model is used to express Cerezita’s disability as a result of her father’s sin. When Amparo, the comadre, talks to Juan about Cerezita’s mother relation to her husband who left her mother, he says that “she [Dolores] believe[s] Cere[zita] was a sign from God to make her husband change his ways. But he dint[s] change, he left” (Moraga, 1994, p.136). But Cerezita doesn’t believe that her disability is a sign from God because of her father’s sins. So, Cerezita says to Juan that she doesn’t have to use for God and even doesn’t care about that. If she doesn’t have to use for God, how can she acknowledge that her disability is due to her father’s sins. This gives a sign that Cerezita doesn’t blame her father for her disability, but instead, she accepts her life as it is without blaming any one for her disability.

CONCLUSION

These models of disability just situate the problems in peoples’ bodies and define them as wrong. But, Cheri

Moraga’s “Heroes and Saints” explain how these models can be faced and encountered by people with disabilities. Cerezita character with her disability faces these models that stole her body, and finally she did reclaim her body and how influential her visibility in the society makes her meet and speak to the other people in her community. Though her disability and weakness of her body, she is mentally powerful and intelligent. She a) does not give up for her mother’s isolation to her, b) does not see her disability as a challenge to live as others but rather she sees it as pride that nurtures her body with strength and wisdom, c) does not blame her father pertaining her disability unlike her mother that does put blame on her husband regarding it, d) does not agree with her mother on staying at home but rather she participated with her community to put an end to her society’s sufferings to have freedom and equality, far from oppression and racism. Cerezita’s future, which can be seen in her resolve, determined, and bright eyes, makes people in her community search and fights for future that is full of free, happiness, and equality. Finally, Cerezita “does not have to change, [but] society does [and needs to change its negative attitudes and views regarding people with disabilities]” (Shakespeare, 2006, p.200).

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