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# Beyond Diagnosis: Rethinking Benjy Compson Through the Lens of Disability Studies

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**ABSTRACT**

William Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury* (1929) since its publication has claimed sustained critical attention not only for its narrative complexity, but also for the fundamental challenge it poses to conventional modes of representing human consciousness. The opening section of the novel, narrated by a thirty-three year old man, Benjy Comson, invites critical intervention from multiple theoretical stances. Benjy's cognitive and intellectual difference situates him at the intersection of modernist aesthetics, Southern gothic convention, and over the recent decades- a disability studies premises. The emergence of disability studies as a scholarly field, has helped reorient the conversations around characters like Benjy Compson. Disability studies scholars introduce new frameworks for understanding cognitive difference, and demand for a more ethical and nuanced critical engagement with disability representation in literary and cultural productions.

Nevertheless, scrutinising a text published in 1929 from a disability studies perspective has its own methodological complexities, that this paper seeks to explore. One of the central concerns in this paper is to examine the historicization of Faulkner's linguistic and representational choices, and simultaneously avoiding the anachronistic imposition of diagnostic categories, whether from the early twentieth century or from the present times. While on one hand, the paper acknowledges the inherent fluidity of the disability terminology across time, it also investigates Faulkner's conscious use of certain vocabulary to depict cognitive difference. Finally, this paper seeks to give the much awaited critical attention that the character of Benjy Compson deserves, not only by questioning the critical inclination that diminishes Benjy Compson's distinct subjectivity, but also by validating Benjy Compson as a character with a profound and deeply human interiority of his own.

**Key words:** Disability studies cognitive difference intersection historicization diagnostics subjectivity terminology

## Introduction

William Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury* (1929) is one of the most daring and experimental novel in American literary history. Since its publication, the novel has claimed sustained critical attention not only for its narrative complexity, but also for the fundamental challenge it poses to conventional modes of representing human consciousness. Critics have approached the novel from various perspectives ranging from early formalist analysis of its modernist structure, to explorations of its engagement with history, race, and psychology. Further, the opening section of the novel, narrated by a thirty-three year old man, Benjy Comson, obliquely referred as an "idiot" in the text, invites critical intervention from multiple theoretical stances. Benjy's cognitive and intellectual difference situates him at the intersection of modernist aesthetics, Southern gothic convention, and over the recent decades- a disability studies premises. The spectrum of critical responses that Benjy has been receiving since the novel's publication, underline not only the shifting focus of literary and theoretical methodologies to analyse the text, but also introduce us to the broader social and cultural trends in exploration of the notions of cognitive difference, personhood, subjectivity and narrative agency. Early criticism treats Benjy's cognitive difference merely as a 'literary device' That Faulkner uses consciously to project the complex and tragic history of Compson family; Benjy is read symbolically; his subjectivity gets

undermined, ableist vocabulary – 'idiot,' 'moron' and 'animalistic imagery' is used to describe his character; and clinical diagnostic assumptions are applied without critical reflection. However, the emergence of disability studies as a scholarly field, has helped reorient the conversations around characters like Benjy Compson. Disability studies scholars introduce new frameworks for understanding cognitive difference, uphold concept of social construction over medical pathology, prioritise the lived reality of people with disabilities, reject the metaphorical appropriation of disability, and demand for a more ethical and nuanced critical engagement with disability representation in literary and cultural productions. Nevertheless, scrutinising a text published in 1929 from a disability studies perspective has its own methodological complexities, that this paper seeks to explore. One of the central concerns in this paper is to examine the historicization of Faulkner's linguistic and representational choices, and simultaneously avoiding the anachronistic imposition of diagnostic categories, whether from the early twentieth century or from the present times. Further, analysing Benjy's disability as Autism Spectrum Disorder (A.S.D) using retrospective diagnostics from contemporary medical premises, may prove speculative and counterproductive, as it overlooks the impact of historical context of eugenicist discourse and cultural intelligibility of cognitive difference prevalent in the early twentieth century, on Faulkner's perception of the world around him and finally on his art. While on one hand, the paper acknowledges the inherent fluidity of the disability terminology across time, it also investigates Faulkner's conscious use of certain vocabulary to depict cognitive difference. Finally, this paper seeks to give the much awaited critical attention that the character of Benjy Compson deserves, not only by questioning the critical inclination that diminishes Benjy Compson's distinct subjectivity, but also by validating Benjy Compson not as a mere reflection of Compson family, but as a character with a profound and deeply human interiority of his own.

Shifts/ trends in Faulkner's criticism

Awarded with the Nobel Prize for Literature (1949) and Pulitzer Prize for Fiction (1962) for his contribution to American Literature, William Faulkner has left a great legacy of literature behind him. Tracing the trajectory of myriad critical works and shifts/ trends in Faulkner's criticism over the last nine decades is a daunting task. The earliest critical works by authors like G. T. Buckley, Robert W. Kirk, Elmo Howell and others, engage with *The Sound and the Fury* by critically scrutinising the representation of the characters, places (including discussion of the connection between real-life Oxford, Mississippi, and fictional Jefferson), and the use of often obscure and colloquial sayings, mannerisms, and language in the novel. Critics like Bruce F. Kawin in the 1970s analyse Faulkner's own screenwriting along with adaptations of his works in films. Next three decades witness not only individual researches on Faulkner, but also projects wherein authors like Robert W. Hamblin, Charles A. Peek, Noel Polk and several others bring forth volumes of research on Faulkner and his works. Apart from Neo Criticism and Structuralism, theoretical and cultural frameworks of race, gender, ideology, psychoanalysis, material culture, language and identity, are applied to challenge the traditional approaches in critically engaging with *The Sound and the Fury* over these decades. The turn of the century sees the opening up of the spectrum of Faulkner criticism. The new research seeks "either to understand something about society through Faulkner's writing or to hold his writing up against society" (Hagood 61). The 21st century scholarly examination of Faulkner contextualises him in relation to literature and culture across the globe. Critics now start illustrating Faulkner's comparison with his contemporaries, and his influence on other writers, such as Toni Morrison, Larry McMurtry, Lee Smith, Pat Conroy, and several others from diverse locations. For example, Joseph Fruscione's Faulkner and Hemingway: Biography of a Literary Rivalry (2012) scrutinises the actual and intertextual relationship of the two famous contemporaries. Tara Tuttle in Biting Temptation: An Examination of the Eden Myth in the Southern Fiction of William Faulkner, Alice Walker, and Tony Morrison (2008) examines the intertextuality between Faulkner, Walker and Morrison. Examining Faulkner from the global south and postcolonial perspective is yet another important shift in the critical engagement with his works. Hosam Aboul-Ela's Other South: Faulkner, Coloniality, and the Mariátegui Tradition (2007), Christopher Breu's "in Privilege's Mausoleum: The Ruination of White Southern Manhood in the Sound and the Fury" published in Southern Masculinity: Perspectives on Manhood in the South since Reconstruction (2009), Richard Godden's "A Difficult Economy: Faulkner and the Poetics of Plantation Labor" published in Blackwell Companions to Literature and Culture (2007), and Valérie Loichot's Orphan Narratives: The Postplantation Literature of Faulkner, Glissant, Morrison, and Saint-John Perse (2007)are few examples of the critical readings of *The Sound and the Fury* in particular and Faulkner in general in relation to the various ideas germinating from the global south. Nevertheless, critics also continue to engage with the earlier concerns in Faulkner criticism, however, with the advantage of an awareness of contemporary theory-based criticism. Themes such as, the narrative technique and use of stream of consciousness; fragmented time; language, self and identity; depiction of trauma and use of psychoanalysis; race, gender and sexuality; keep recurring during the last fifteen years of research scholarships on *The Sound and the Fury*. Analysing *The Sound and the Fury* through the lens of disability studies and subaltern studies, by forging intersectionalities with other disciplines is another important major trend in literary criticism in the last two decades.

A disability studies analysis of *The Sound and the Fury*

Disability is pervasive and has always been around. Just like race, gender, ethnicity, and sexuality, it is yet another form of human diversity. Disability studies perspective calls for a revisit to William Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury*, particularly to the representation of Benjy Compson, whose intellectual disability has been structured around the dynamics of normativity and stereotypes of disability identity. Conventional literary criticism has primarily analysed Benjy's character functioning symbolically and therefore standing for

innocence, moral purity, and the collapse of Southern aristocratic values. This research uses disability studies perspective to problematise Benjy's symbolic flattening in *The Sound and the Fury*, and explore how Faulkner through his narrative technique negotiates with the ableist notions about cognitive difference.

Conventionally and predominantly, Benjy is interpreted as either an 'idiot', or an 'animal' or an 'autistic character'. However, critical intervention from disability studies perspective has helped in challenging a simplistic reading of Benjy Compson's character, thereby tracing the complexity of Faulkner's textual construction to delve into broader cultural anxieties about cognitive difference. The novel has four chapters. Benjy, the youngest of Compson children, is the narrator of the first chapter entitled 'April 7, 1928'. As Benjy's narrative drifts between past and present, Faulkner introduces a consciousness unbound by linear time, and forces his readers to adjust to an unconventional mode of observation and narration by a cognitively disabled character. By undermining the neurotypical expectations of linear narrative assumptions, Faulkner in fact challenges what Lennard Davis describes as the socially constructed ideology of "normalcy," making his readers experience cognitive difference itself (Davis, Enforcing Normalcy 3). However, Benjy's inability to speak for himself and the narrative voice finally lying with Faulkner, raises the questions of agency and control over the story. Jason too asserts that his brother is "not anything" (Faulkner 267) and stresses on the lack of agency and identity of Benjy Compson in the narrative of the novel. Though Faulkner positions Benjy's perspective at the centre of the novel, he is hardly given any agency to speak for himself. Since, Benjy cannot speak and communicates through sounds which the family interprets as bellowing or moaning, Faulkner – an able-bodied author- takes up the agency to imagine and narrate the interiority of his disabled character using modern literary techniques. This arbitration makes disability representation problematic. As Davis argues, disability representation often reveals more about non-disabled anxieties than disabled experience: "The problem is not the person with disabilities; the problem is the way that normalcy is constructed to create the 'problem' of the disabled person" (Davis, Enforcing Normalcy 24). The fact that Benjy is a fictional creation coming from Faulkner's imagination and does not represent the lived experiences of disabled individuals cannot be ignored. Benjy's characterisation in the novel, radical temporal non-linearity, sensory intensity, and absence of abstract reasoning— might reveal more about Faulkner's writing style than about real cognitive disability. Faulkner does grant a narrative voice to Benjy to explore his subjectivity, but denies him any agency to speak on his own terms for himself.

Although, Faulkner experiments with the use of stream of consciousness, temporal fragmentation and unreliable narration in the narrative technique of the novel with an intent to challenge the normative structures from a disability stance, he may be held responsible for aestheticization of disability and treating cognitive difference as metaphor for modernist alienation rather than as lived material reality. Furthermore, questions on language, intelligence and communication get problematised with Benjy's characterisation as someone not able to speak. Faulkner seems to validate linguistic ableism and the notion that verbal communication is the only legitimate and appropriate way of communication.

Taking the argument further, Brent Walter Cline in Tongueless: Representation of the Mentally Disabled and the Novel, interrogates the historical patterns of cultural values ascribed to the construction of mental disability along with the unique and complex dynamics of the narrative discourse depicting an ideology which uses disability only as an opportunistic metaphorical device" (Mitchell and Snyder 47) which differentiates characters from normative categories. Cline employs Mitchell and Snyder's concept of "narrative prosthesis" to unravel the politics of representation of disabled characters; how disability is used to achieve thematic, symbolic, or formal purposes relegating the materiality of disability experience to margins; and to categorise the mentally disabled person's identity as nothing. While the focus has been primarily on deciphering the symbolic meanings of disability representation in the text, the complexity in Benjy's characterisation goes compromised. Consequently, Benjy's subjectivity is erased and interiority diminished, and he is read allegorically for Southern decline, modernist fragmentation, or prelapsarian innocence. Drawing on what Tobin Siebers writes, "Disability has provided the public imagination with one of its most powerful symbols…but it always symbolizes something other than itself" (48), Cline interrogates the archetypal representation of Benjy and how the language deficit in a mentally disabled character, "reflects the emptiness that is the mentally disabled person's identity" (Cline 17). Cline validates how Benjy's inability to speak has deprived him of an identity in conventional readings of the novel, and how his communicative difference due to his language deficit has been conflated with cognitive emptiness. As stated earlier, such a conflation implies "linguistic ableism," that reinforces the assumption that verbal language marks the boundary between meaningful consciousness and vacancy. Cline further illustrates that Benjy's interpretation is incomplete without taking into consideration his interaction with the other characters, that gets defined by Benjy's lack of access to systems of language and communication. This takes the focus away from individual pathology to relational dynamics, from "medical model" (Linton 22) to "social model" (Davis, Introduction 8) of disability, thereby attributing disability to social barriers rather than bodily or cognitive impairment. Benjy's supposed 'deficit' appears not due to his cognitive difference, but because the ableist world prioritises certain ways of communication over the others. Moreover, the way his family members interact with him - Caddy with love, Dilsey with care, Jason with cruelty, Luster with frustration, and Mrs. Compson with cold distance- reveals how each one of them grant / deny him dignity, subjectivity and agency, that too as per their convenience, need and prejudice.

Imane Bouchakour problematises and questions the construction of Benjy's idiosyncratic mind, and calls for the scrutiny of Benjy's language, narrative voice and themes in the novel from the perspective of literary disability studies. He says, "Despite the fact that the animal imagery is present in the novel, these critics have overstated it, and by doing so, have neglected all the other ways in which Benjy is represented" (Bouchakour 2) . Bouchakour not only underlines the critical bias on 'animal imagery' and 'negligence towards all the other ways in which Benjy is represented', he also calls it a critical flaw in the conventional reading of the novel that have shaped a monolithic disabled identity for Benjy, that too purely for interpretive convenience. He probes the role of literary criticism in administering normative frameworks and prioritising certain aspects of disabled characters that merit engagement while several others remain unscrutinised. While on one hand Bouchakour does acknowledge the presence of 'animal imagery' in the text, he also questions its over emphasis and attributes it to the readers' discomfort with cognitive difference rather than Benjy's disability itself. Evan Chaloupka in her study takes up the question of Benjy's identity and begins by briefly scrutinising the history of critical perception of Benjy as an idiot or an animal. Such a narrow perspective on Benjy is a social construct. Constant comparison between people with intellectual disabilities and animalistic imagery, endorses what Licia Carlson calls a detrimental way of thinking. Such comparisons create discriminating notions that deny complexity and full humanity to the disabled individuals (Carlson 145). Carlson writes: "To continue to draw connections between non-human animals and persons with intellectual disabilities not only is conceptually unnecessary, but is harmful insofar as it perpetuates certain forms of conceptual oppression while ignoring other concrete forms, and obscures the distinctly human face of persons with intellectual disabilities" (145). The need is to abandon the distorted conception of an idiot and view Benjy as yet another human being with intellectual and developmental impairments. Patrick Samway and Silver Gentry further extend this proposition by suggesting that Faulkner uses the label 'idiot', maybe because of the limitations of the available vocabulary to describe someone like Benjy during his times. But in the 21st century, we are aware of the broad spectrum of intellectual and developmental disabilities and Benjy could be called a person with A.S.D. or intellectual and developmental impairment. The space can be further explored as such nomenclatures are in constant flux and subject to redefinitions with more research and thinking going into the matters pertaining to disability. However, the fundamental question on how and if the historical texts like Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury* can be subjected to scrutiny and literary reinterpretation along with retrospective diagnosis is indeed complex and demands critical engagement. Samway and Gentry's reflection cited above unlocks critical questions about linguistic historicity, diagnostic evolution, and whether contemporary theoretical frameworks and terminologies can or should be applied to early twentieth-century literature. Though The proposition that twenty-first-century readers might recognize Benjy as having Autism Spectrum Disorder or intellectual and developmental impairment sounds rational, still it may cause the blurring of important distinctions between medical labels, lived experience, and literary creation that disability studies emphasises to maintain.

Bouchakour further questions the use of the medical model, wherein, Benjy's behaviour is attributed to 'autism'. Such studies "refuse to distinguish between the actual experience of 'autism' and Faulkner's literary construction of mental disability" (Bouchakour 2). He therefore highlights a fundamental methodological problem in such a reading of the novel. It is crucial to understand that literary characters are aesthetic creations emerging from specific historical, cultural, and narrative contexts. They are not meant to be scrutinised retrospectively as clinical case studies. Retrospective diagnosis of fictional characters not only undermines the creative essence but also collapses the distance between literary representation and lived disability experience. Further, imposition of contemporary diagnostic categories onto fiction written in 1920s is not grounded in the historical, cultural and social context. Moreover, such readings unconsciously strengthen pre-existing dominant stereotypes on disability rather than exploring the possibilities of alternative epistemologies of cognitive difference through literature. Having said this, the historical context for the medical and social terminology that Faulkner uses in *The Sound and the Fury* published in 1929 demands critical attention. Under the influence of eugenics movement, terms like 'idiot, imbecile, moron' were used commonly to exercise social control, institutionalise, sterilise and exclude people with intellectual disabilities from community participation. Alexandra Stern notes that such groupings caused systematic violence against disabled people (Stern 89). As Samway and Gentry suggest, Faulkner's vocabulary for Benjy's characterisation and representation comes from the vocabulary available to him then, and thus he should not be judged on the contemporary linguistic perimeters, rather should be accommodated on account of inadequate linguistic resources available to him in 1920s. Nevertheless, it cannot be denied that Faulkner could have chosen an alternative mode of depicting Benjy even while working from within the 1920s linguistic discourse. He could have probably focused on Benjy's humanity and emotional intelligence, rather than dehumanising him, using animalistic imagery, giving diagnostic labels, and reinforcing disability stereotypes and stigma. If Faulkner can be exonerated for making certain representational choices purely because of the historical context or times he was writing in – is worth exploring. Conversely, applying contemporary diagnostic terminologies to Faulkner's fictional creation Benjy in 1920s is not free from its complexities. Although, retrospective use of twenty-first century diagnostic categories and nomenclature acknowledges autism as a wide spectrum of intellectual and developmental disability rather than a monolithic disability category, and helps situate Benjy within recognised frameworks that entitle disabled individuals to accommodations, services and civil rights protection; it leads to what Davis terms " medicalization of the disability" which endorses the medical lens to view bodily variation and human diversity (Davis, Enforcing Normalcy 53). Further, the diagnostic category of Autism Spectrum

Disorder (A.S.D) did not exist in 1920s. Infect, "autistic" (Kanner 242) was first coined by Leo Kanner in 1943, decades after Faulkner had written *The Sound and the Fury* and it took another couple of decades of clinical research, disability rights advocacy and diagnostic modification to arrive at the concept of 'spectrum'. Further there is no fixed vocabulary for disability as it undergoes change with every passing decade: 'Mental retardation' first got replaced with 'intellectual disability' and now is called 'intellectual and developmental disability' which may undergo yet another change in years to come. The space can be further explored as such nomenclatures are in constant flux and subject to redefinitions with more research and thinking going into the matters pertaining to disability. Benjy should therefore be viewed as an infinitely complex human character, rather than alienating him to the margins of stereotypical perceptions. Maria Truchan-Tataryn asserts that, "Benjy, however, more accurately illuminates not the (lack of) subjectivity of a cognitively impaired individual in lived experience but rather imaginings projected upon a population denied agency and voice by authors of public policy as well as narrative texts" (163). She therefore shifts the focus from Benjy as a 'literary character' to Benjy as a 'cultural construction' to emphasise the gaps in the cultural imagination of disability from a non-disabled perspective. Truchan-Tataryn further questions the authenticity and accuracy of such disability representation mediated through non-disabled ventriloquism. However, Marie Elizabeth Lawson cautions the readers from passively accepting either traditional opinion on Benjy or even Truchan-Tataryn's concern, as both the stances endorse that Benjy is, in fact, characterized as empty. She argues that rather than looking at the depiction of Benjy in the novel, one should engage with the "body of criticism that has unquestionably accepted the interpretation of Benjy as mindless" (Lawson 57). Lawson rejects both – traditional criticism as well as critical disability studies intervention – as both approaches despite their distinct political inclinations, deny the complex interiority to Benjy, that the text on its close reading can be found to construct. In her metacritical move she problematises the way traditional humanist, psychoanalytic, new critical, or some aspects of disability studies frameworks have been used to analyse Benjy's subjectivity in the novel. She asserts that critical methodologies (coming from whichever interpretative framework) have systematically either overlooked or dismissed, Benjy's subjectivity and complex consciousness ostensibly distinct from neurotypical norms.

## Conclusion

Disability Studies framework unlocks newer avenues for reassessing depiction of intellectual disability in *The Sound and the Fury*. It helps to push back against, as well as, redefine social and literary categorisations of 'idiot' or ' mentally disabled'. This helps to investigate the decades long uncritical acceptance of a reductive reading of Benjy's character in Faulkner's The *Sound and the Fury*. While on one hand, it facilitates questioning of the subtle ableism and critical bias embedded in a century old literary criticism, it also raises complex questions with no easy answers: how to historicise Faulkner's linguistic choices without imposing modern diagnosis, how to acknowledge the fluidity of disability terminology and how to challenge the critical inclinations that diminish Benjy's distinct subjectivity. To put it concisely, an ethical engagement with disability depiction in literature demands a delicate balance between multiple concurrent responsibilities. While the character can be situated in his historical context, the same historical context should not be used to justify harm under the pretence of critical intervention. Similarly, diagnostic classifications should not be used to reduce a character's entire 'being' to only a medical category. Further, the disabled character's subjectivity should not be compromised by naively accepting literary representation as transparent and unbiased. Simultaneously, we should exercise caution to analyse how our own interpretative practices participate in constructing the disability we claim to examine. Finally, these critical conversations disclose disability representation as a complex undertaking where ethical, artistic, historical, medical and ideological concerns intersect and conflict with each other. Benjy Compson eludes any singular interpretative framework; whether it is medical diagnosis, historical contextualisation, symbolic analysis, or even application of disability studies critique lacking nuance. Benjy demands for a flexible critical approach that may acknowledge multiple and often conflicting forms of intelligence, consciousness and subjectivity, without boxing them in normative frameworks that have denied both subjectivity and humanity to the disabled individuals for centuries.

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