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Amidst Desire and Disability: A Posthumanist Study of Hunchback by Saou Ichikawa

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Abstract
This article investigates the portrayal of disabled character Shaka Isawa in Saou Ichikawa's Hunchback (2025) through posthumanist lens. The content analysis technique of Berelson (1952) has been used to further deconstruct the meaning especially centering on the protagonist, a woman with a congenital disorder, the study explores how technological mediation enables expressions of sexual desire that challenge ableist norms. Shaka's use of assistive devices positions her as a posthuman subject, getting mental and bodily autonomy beyond conventional frameworks. Drawing on posthumanism stances, the paper concludes that the posthuman discourses redefine female body by situating disability and desire not in opposition, but in complex, empowering relation.

Key Words: Posthumanism, Deformity, Disability, Prosthetic, Desire, Ableism, Disablism, Sexuality

Introduction and Review of Literature

The current research paper investigates Hunchback (2025) specifically, the depiction of the protagonist, being positioned amidst desire and disability. Hannah Gibson (2015) asserts "posthumanism has commonalities with disability studies because they both deal with issues of how 'others'/ab-normal in society are constructed and treated." (p.3) In traditional literary and philosophical discourses, the disabled body is often portrayed through discourses of lack and dependance, or have been overlooked. Likewise, traditional depiction has an inclination to mute the erotic sides of disabled bodies, reinforcing reductive binaries between ability/disability, normal/abnormal, and desire/despair. However, recent shifts in critical theory especially through the lens of posthumanism, offer a powerful alternative framework for reimagining the disabled body, not as a site of deficiency but as one of transformation and resistance. Posthumanism, with its focus on the boundaries of fluidity between human and non-human, body and technology, organic and synthetic, opens up new ways for understanding desire, embodiment, and identity in non-normative contexts. The current study takes a posthumanist angle of Saou Ichikawa's Hunchback (2025) that boldly explores the connections of disability, sexual desire, and selfhood. The protagonist, Shaka, is a disabled woman whose experience of the world is deeply shaped by her disability, yet, this difference that becomes the ground for her sexual and emotional depth, and empowerment. In challenging dominant cultural narratives about disabled bodies as nonsexual or

emotionally dependent, Shaka challenges societal perceptions, and redefines the disabled body as human who is having sexual desire like the other instinctual human.

Saou Ichikawa, a Japanese writer born in 1979 in Kanagawa, is herself disabled due to congenital myopathy, a condition that necessitates the use of a ventilator and electric wheelchair. A graduate of Waseda University, where she conducted research on the representation of disabled bodies in literature, Ichikawa draws from her own lived experience to craft narratives that resist ableist discourses and celebrate bodily diversity. Hunchback, originally titled Hanchibakku, won the Bungakukai and Akutagawa Prizes in 2023, and was longlisted for the International Booker Prize in 2025. Through portrayal of Shaka, Ichikawa weaves her personal perspective into a broader philosophical inquiry into the limits of embodiment and the politics of desire.

By engaging with posthumanist thinkers such as Rosi Braidotti and Donna Haraway, this paper explores how Hunchback reconceptualizes disability and desire, not in opposition to normativity, but as sites of potential, affective richness, and relational complexity. In the same context, the paper argues that Shaka as a disable figure who disrupts, resists, and reimagines the myths imposed upon her.

By taking the history of Posthumanism into account Katara Botsa (2021) argues that the notion of Posthumanism started to take place during the Macy conferences which took place in 1942 and 1962 where the prominent and influential figures from different fields of biology, cybernetics and neurology for instance John von Neumann, Norbert Wiener, Gregory Bateson, and Warren McCulloch debated the possibility of transferring and connecting the function of the human brain to machine. They suggested the idea that human consciousness and identity could eventually be understood and replicated as patterns of information, suggesting a future where human subjectivity might be detached from the physical body and reimagined as a purely digital or immaterial construct. Posthumanism as an umbrella term, stressing on a number of theoretical approaches, question and dismantle the chief binaries for instances, normal and abnormal, human and non-human, artificial and organic. Rosi Braidotti (2013) states that, “Not all of us can say, with any degree of certainty, that we have always been human, or that we are only that. Some of us are not even considered fully human now, let alone at previous moments of Western social, political and scientific history” (Braidotti, p. 1). She acknowledges risks but also, crucially, identifies theoretical, political and artistic opportunities. She is clear, humans are not so easily recognizable today; they have to find their selves in the ‘complexity of contemporary science, politics and international relations’ (p.2) Sigmund Freud (2004) states “Man has, as it were, become a kind of prosthetic God. When he puts on all his auxiliary organs, he is truly magnificent; but those organs have not grown on to him and they still give him much trouble at times.” (p.47). According to Harraway (1990) “Modern medicine is also full of cyborgs, of couplings between organism and machine, each conceived as coded devices, in an intimacy and with a power that were not generated in the history of sexuality.” (p. 251).

Interpretation and Analysis of Hunchback

Summary of Hunchback

The protagonist of select novel is Shaka Isawa, a wealthy woman born with a congenital spinal disorder that confines her to an electric wheelchair in an apartment. Despite her physical limitations, Shaka leads a discreet online life as an erotic fiction writer for adult websites, crafting stories centered around able-bodied individuals and their sexual experiences. She hides her own disability from her readers and donates all the money she earns from her writing, as she is financially secure due to a large inheritance from her parents. Shaka is cared for by a team of servants, yet beneath her affluent and controlled existence lies an intense longing, she harbors a deep sexual desire and a wish to experience pregnancy and abortion, akin to able-bodied women.

In pursuit of this desire, she approaches Tanaka, "Jun Tanaka: 34 years of age; 155 cm in height" (p.30) who has already come to know about her erotic stories, a male servant described as a 'beta male,' whose height (155 cm) symbolically reflects his perceived masculinity. Although Tanaka identifies as straight and does not express sexual attraction toward disable Shaka, he consents to a sexual act with her in exchange for money. The encounter, however, remains incomplete, Tanaka ejaculates during oral sex and does not proceed further. The aftermath of this event leaves Shaka ill; she is diagnosed with aspiration pneumonia. In conclusion, it is narrated that, she cannot fulfill her sexual desire owing to her disability. No one gets ready to be in sexual relationship with her because of her deformed body, therefore, she finds technology as her part of her life, and modern gadgets like iPad, iPhone remain supportive tools to express her voice in the virtual world.

Shaka Isawa and Post-Humanist Sexuality: Reclaiming the Disabled Female Body

"I was, after all, a hunchback monster." (Ichikawa: p. 43)

The aforesaid line uttered by Shaka Isawa, the protagonist of the Hunchback, portrays the idea of monstrosity pertaining to disability, where she has been placed as an outsider, and beyond the normative expectations of what it means to be human. Shaka's self-proclamation as a hunchback monster suggests societal stigmatization and rejection of her disabled body. Yet, posthumanism gives a critical interpretation of this self-description, by challenging the association of monstrosity with deformity or disability. Braidotti's notion of 'posthuman subject' critically concentrates upon the fluidity of identity, which rejects the idea of static body, "Hunchback monster" could be considered as a recognition of embodiment as a dynamic process. The "monster" is not a fixed, negative category, but a transformative subjectivity, one that resists conventional labels. The term 'monster' in the context of disability is often used to marginalize or stigmatize those who deviate from idealized human bodies, but in posthumanism, it can represent the possibility of becoming beyond the boundaries of socially imposed limitations. Shaka's embrace of the monstrous body is the representation of liberation from normative constraints, a rejection of fixed identity, and a shift toward posthuman fluidity. Haraway's notion of cyborg compels us to think of Shaka's body neither wholly human nor wholly non-human. Similarly, Shaka becomes as hybrid entity, that transgresses traditional boundaries between non-human/human, inorganic/organic and in her case as able/disabled. Her body has been reconstructed both, culturally and biologically through the combination of technological aids, social interactions and social narratives. Braidotti (2013) states that "The posthuman subject is a convergence zone for the material, the discursive, the psychic, and the technological." (p. 89)

Disability and Desire

Crow (1996) states that 'impairment is the functional limitation(s)which affect a person's body or mind, disability is the loss or limitation of opportunities resulting from direct and indirect discrimination' Shaka's acknowledgment like "My ultimate dream is to get pregnant and have an abortion, just like a normal woman" (p.14), plays role as both a personal confession and a philosophical rupture. "There's no issue with my reproductive functions" (p.14) It suggests the way in which disability has excluded her from the symbolic order of normative femininity. Her dream is not necessarily about motherhood but about accessing the embodied experience of female reproductive autonomy. Abortion, often seen as a symbol of sovereignty over one's body, becomes in Shaka's imagination a marker of presence into the category of 'normal womanhood' Shaka Isawa represents a bold confrontation with ableist norms that desexualize and marginalize disabled women. Posthumanism, particularly through the lens of disability studies, as articulated by theorists such as Rosi Braidotti and Alison Kafer, enables a rethinking of bodily norms and desires. These theorists argue for a decentering of the idealized, self-contained, able-bodied subject. Shaka,

in contrast, represents a posthuman body, dependent on technological apparatuses, yet richly expressive, desiring, and affective. Braidotti (2013) states that disability is but one cultural artifact that signifies the 'demise of humanism' (p.151) precisely because disability demands non-normative and antiestablishment ways of living life.

One of the important lines in the novella sum up the interiorization of cultural prejudice: "Disabled people were not sexual beings; I had assented to the definition that society had created." (p.30) This moment reveals the psychological violence of ableism; how it not only ignores disabled people from sexual discourse but also convinces them to exclude themselves. Shaka's acknowledgment of this internalized belief marks the beginning of her posthuman reawakening. She no longer accepts the medicalized, infantilized, or asexual identity imposed upon her. Instead, she attempts to reclaim her body, her desire, and her right to define what sexuality can mean for a body like hers. In conclusion, it could be induced that disabled women, too, possess not only functional bodies but the emotional and psychological depth that makes those functions meaningful. Alison Kafer (2013) has rightly said "Rather than imagining disabled bodies as broken and in need of cure, we might understand them as valuable, political, and knowledge-producing." (p. 2). Shaka states, "In another life, I'd like to work as a high-class prostitute." (Ichikawa: p.10). This becomes even more challenging with her admission that this imagined profession disrupts patriarchal assumptions. On one level, prostitution, especially at the 'high-class' level, represents autonomy, control over one's body, and the power to assign value to pleasure. For Shaka, this fantasy is not rooted in victimhood, but in a desire to own her sexuality publicly. In a world where disabled women are reduced to disposability, especially in the realm of erotic labor, this statement is an act of reclamation. It aligns with posthumanist feminism's challenge to binaries such as purity/impurity, virtue/vice, and normal/deviant. For Shaka, imagining herself in such a role is an act of narrative rebellion, a re-entry into a world that views disabled women as non-sexual or unworthy of desire. From a posthumanist feminist standpoint, this statement reflects a rejection of both bodily shame and social pity. 'Can I ask you something?' Tanaka said, out of the blue. I couldn't turn my head, so I flicked my eyes in his direction instead. 'How was the therapy?' he said without looking at me, still facing the bed. The therapy …? The word 'therapy', as it existed in the predictive text of my iPhone, denoted sexual therapy for women. I remembered tweeting something about it three months or so ago: Now my parents are gone, I might as well start investigating sexual services for women. Call it therapy … (p.31) This moment, the body, the machine, and the social all converge. Her desire isn't separate from her disability, it is shaped through the same systems: assistive tech (iPhone), linguistic codes (therapy), and digital platforms (Twitter). This fusion is emblematic of posthuman embodiment, where subjectivity emerges not from normate physicality, but from hybrid networks of flesh, machine, and discourse. Thus, "therapy" becomes a radical term, not to treat dysfunction, but to affirm erotic life in a body that society insists should not desire at all. Jasbir Puar (2017) "Debility and capacity are not binary opposites but are entwined in biopolitical calculations of value and productivity." (p. 18) "He had agreed to bathe a woman with a severe disability for money, and while washing that deformed physique – a body he would rather not even have set eyes on he must have felt as though he were polishing a pile of gold coins… living….as a pile of money that I hadn't rightfully earned." In this moment, Shaka connects herself in the very capitalist system that dehumanizes her. Despite her inherited wealth, she is aware of how that money does not buy her dignity or desire. Her body is coded as undesirable, but also economically valuable, not for its inherent worth, but as a symbol of unearned privilege and passive consumption. In Tanaka's eyes, she imagines herself not as a woman, not even as a sexual being, a financial resource he is willing to interact with only because it brings him money. "One million yen for every centimeter. That's the price I'm willing to pay for your able body." (p.33) By turning Tanaka's body into a purchasable commodity, Shaka

disrupts the conventional power structure where disabled individuals are seen as dependent and non-desiring. Her declaration is laced with irony. She uses monetary capital to invert erotic capital, performing a posthumanist resistance to ableist norms. By stating, "That's the price I'm willing to pay for your able body," (p.33) Shaka deconstructs the myth of the self-contained, autonomous subject. Her voice embodies what posthumanism insists: we are interdependent, hybrid, mediated subjects, and our bodies are always enmeshed in networks of economy, power, care, and desire. She doesn't deny her dependency, she weaponizes it.

She acknowledges she cannot "win over a real-life man" with dialogue borrowed from novella that were never meant for bodies like hers. This is a profound insight: even language itself is gendered and able-bodied. Shaka's longing is framed in words that were not made for her, that actively exclude her by presuming a different kind of subject, a subject with a 'real-life body' that society deems lovable, touchable, and sexually worthy. Her act of tossing the iPhone, a digital device often associated with her erotic storytelling and virtual presence, signals frustration at the posthuman condition itself. Technology has enabled her to express her sexuality anonymously, yet it cannot substitute for embodied connection. The iPhone becomes both a tool of liberation and a symbol of alienation: she uses it to write, to publish, to tweet, but it cannot mediate or fulfill her craving for physical touch, bodily acknowledgment, or reciprocal desire. From a posthuman feminist disability lens, this scene exemplifies what theorist Nirmala Erevelles calls the 'corporeal difference', the reality that some bodies cannot be included in mainstream fantasies because those fantasies were never built for them. Rosi Braidotti might suggest that Shaka's body, mediated through screens and narratives, is a posthuman subjectivity caught between virtual empowerment and affective dispossession.

Everyday Lookism: A Subversion of Biopower

A prominent scholar and author of Sketches from the Life of Ishaq, Raja Riaz-ur-Rehman from Pakistan reviewed Hunchback with the perspective of Everyday Lookism (A Sub-version of Biopower). He stressed that Shaka, the protagonist in Hunchback, is complacent by the very fact that she has been spared by the ogle people cast on the disabled persons in Japan, owing to the well-equipped apartment and money provided by her parents. She informs but doesn't seem to complain that: 'Japan, on the other hand, works on the understanding that disabled people don't exist within society, so there are no such (as in America) proactive considerations made' Deformity has been the subject of literature since very long time. Its prime example is Hunchback of Notre Dame by Victor Hugo, published in 1831. Quasimodo (protagonist in this novel) is a beta male and Shaka a beta female (borrowing the term coined by Ishikawa), both are S-Shaped. The former is a bell-ringer in an elegant cathedral while the later lives in a homely apartment. By ringing the bell Quasimodo earns bread for the day and Shaka earns a good amount of money by writing pornographic pieces on the adult sites but not for her livelihood but only to give away. Another dubious activity, at least in the eye of Tanaka. Money, for her, is like promiscuity, it changes hands. She writes in her tweeter: 'In another life, I'd like to work as a high-class prostitute.' She offers Tanaka 155 million yen to have sex with her because her ultimate dream is: 'to get pregnant and have an abortion, just like a normal woman'. Although she has millions in her account, she is not an existence, and still least a sexual body in the gaze of Japanese alpha male able bodied. The Hunchback by Saou Ichikawa is thus a macabre contrast between ableism and deformity. Sustaining a deformed body is like a tug-of-war with the earth. To speak to the able-bodied, Shaka has no means other than internet, iPhone, iPad mini and MacBook. For communication, she depends on tweeter and retains her memory in the Evernote app. Hardwares and softwares of digital machines are extension of her hands and brains respectively. She writes erotic stories for her readers who do not know that the source of this pleasure is a deformed body whose existence

as a human being they will otherwise deny. Here the breaking and ultimately death of this deformed body is inflicted by the society itself rather than from any centralized body such as a necro-government. Gifted with a cozy apartment and bequeathed money Shaka is lucky to avoid friction with society since: 'the criminalization of the gaze that took hold around the dawn of the twentieth century had led to the decline of freak show, which was subsequently replaced in popularity by the Monsters of Hollywood. Now, with the costumes serving as an ethical cushion, people could enjoy ogling deformity without guilt or reserve.' Hunchback is a bold exposition of the obscene gaze of the society and of cruelty of Eugenic Laws in Japan that forced 16,500 involuntary sterilizations of disabled between 1950 to 1990. There are number of biographical elements in the novella, that is why it appears to be a reportage but despite this, it is a work of fiction. Derrida rightly observes that: "Literature is the right to say everything possible, or keep it secret, if only in the form of fiction".

Conclusion

Shaka Isawa's narrative in Hunchback challenges dominant cultural expectations that disabled bodies as asexual passive, or undesirable. Through the lens of posthumanism, her technologically mediated desires and actions expose the limitations of normative discourses surrounding gender, sexuality, and embodiment. Shaka's yearning for intimacy, pregnancy, and bodily autonomy, expressed through digital tools and economic agency reclaims sexual subjectivity on her own terms. Rather than being defined by lack or deficit, her body becomes a site of resistance, and expression. This study affirms that desire and disability are not mutually exclusive; instead, their intersection can open powerful spaces for reimagining agency, identity, and the body in the posthuman era. Shaka Isawa's struggle is not only with her disabled body but with the insidious gaze of society a gaze shaped by what Raja Riaz-ur-Rehman terms 'everyday lookism,' a subtle form of biopower that excludes without confrontation. Though financially secure and technologically empowered, Shaka remains unseen as a desiring subject in the eyes of able-bodied society. Her use of digital tools to express erotic fantasies and her bold engagement with sexuality challenge the quiet violence of social invisibility. Ultimately, Hunchback exposes how deformity is not just a physical condition but a social construction sustained by everyday acts of looking away, and Shaka's voice stands as a powerful defiance of that erasure.

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