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# **RESEARCH ARTICLE**

## LIFTING THE VEIL OF SECRECY IN ALBINISM: QUESTIONING PERSONHOOD AND NORMATIVE DESIRE IN TARA SULLIVAN'S GOLDEN BOY (2013)

\*Enerst Longwe

Nkhoma University, Department of Languages and Literature, Lilongwe, Malawi.

| ARTICLE INFO  | ABSTRACT   |
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| <i>Article History:</i><br>Received 25 <sup>th</sup> March, 2022<br>Received in revised form<br>18 <sup>th</sup> April, 2022<br>Accepted 17 <sup>th</sup> May, 2022<br>Published online 30 <sup>th</sup> June, 2022 | This article questions personhood and normative desire in albinism in African literature in the fictional work of Tara Sullivan's <i>Golden Boy</i> . It draws attention on the representation of disability in albinism and analyse how this shape identity, personhood, and normalcy in characters with albinism. Using Mary Douglas's concept of dirt, the paper argues that the disability associated with albinism body forms a central plot of narrative resulting into negative body imagery which affects the identity and personhood of the persons with albinism. The article agrees with Frederick J. White notion of |
| Keywords:   | personhood as a relational construct in which personhood is a conditional state of value defined by the society. In this article I argue that the accidental quality attached to albinism does not render characters with albinism less human as they forge the identity in a hostile environment.   |

**INTRODUCTION** 

Normalcy, Self.

Albinism in Africa, Personhood, Identity,

This article explores how literary text portrays people with disabilities. It seeks to examine the many stereotypes imbued on disabled characters in fiction that raises the question of personhood and normality. The article argues that Sullivan's Golden Boy seek out literary voice that empower the disabled and question our definition of personhood. Reading Golden Boy helps us explore what our culture decides is "normal" and asks us to consider what makes us human. It is a unique novel in the way it configures a narrative discourse that resonates well with the currentdisability debate of albinism in African literature. Habo, a central character with albinism in the novel, starts off the narrative as a significant othered figure, but is eventually empowered towards the end of the novel.Unlike in literary works where disabled characters have been given a minor role and primarily used to generate fear, pathos and hatred, Sullivan's Golden Boy use albinism for the readers to feel sympathetic pity towards the characters with disabilities and realize they are capable of significant accomplishments. In order to achieve this Sullivan uses the images of ghost, poaching and blindness to question personhood as well as establishing normative desire in albinism. The opening of Tara Sullivan's Golden Boy starts with Habo acknowledging his defect of sight since he is a character born with albinism as he says, "I wish I could see their faces, but my eyes aren't good enough for that this far away" (Sullivan, 2013: 1).

\*Corresponding author: Enerst Longwe

Nkhoma University, Department of Languages and Literature, Lilongwe, Malawi.

This is not the only problem that Habo experiences due to his albinism; his skin burns easily that he cannot be in the midday sun. This article recognises albinism as a disability because bodies of persons with albinism do not meet the pre-requisite set for claiming able-bodiedness. Disabled bodies provide a particularly strong example of embodiment as mimesis because they resist standard ideas about the body and push back when confronted by language that would try to mispresent their realism (Siebers, 2008: 1). One of the critical issues that disabled bodies' raises in literature is the question of personhood. Being unable to fully perform normatively valued activities and roles in the workplace, home and community challenges an individual's core identity as a full adult. Habo is supposed to be out of the sun and out of sight because of his body deficit. His brother Chui torments him by saying that he looks like a ghost and do as little work as the ghost (10). Being different is a self-definition Habo must suffer and struggle with in the novel Golden Boy. The way that people understand and relate to each other contributes towards the acknowledgement or development and maintenance of personhood (Baldwin and Capstick, 2007). What makes human being human? And what define a human being as a person? Are some of the central questions this article asks in relation to personhood in albinism in Golden Boy. The representation of people with albinism and other disabled characters remains on the margins of fiction as uncomplicated figures or exotic aliens whose bodily configurations operate as a spectacle, eliciting responses from other characters or producing rhetorical effects that depend on disability cultural resonance (Garland-Thomson, 1998: 9). This echoes Mary Douglass argument on dirt as "a set of ordered relations and contravention of that order" (1966:44).

In this article it is evident that the fictional work of Tara Sullivan serves to recognise albinism not as an independent, object attribute of something, but a residual category of things rejected from our normal schemes of classifications. Golden Boy is a story of Habo, a protagonist with albinism who narrates his story while running away from Alasiri who wants to kill him for his body parts. He must flee his family simply to survive. The novel was set in Tanzania at a critical time when cases of abduction and killing of persons with albinism was rife.Even though the novel is set in East Africa, but it shares common stories of abandonment, identity formation, questioning of personhood and normative desire, especially by the protagonist, in terms of their albinism and its connotations. The author display albinism as a subversive technique to interrogate a new space for the characters to investigate the identity and personhood. Sullivan's novel presents a character who questions his personhood and identity in relation to others, as Habo laments "Chui may not be a man, but I am hardly a person" (2003: 4).

Garland-Thomson argues that "cultural conventions construct people with albinism as burdened by limitations and uncertainties of the individual embodiment, displacing these burdens from the liberal individual into that distant other marked visible bodily difference" (1998: 84). This resonates well with Mary Douglass words that "culture, in the sense of the public, standardised values of a community, provides some basic categories, a positive pattern in which ideas and values are tidily ordered" (40). Anything that deviates from the norm or presented differently is 'out of place'. In other words, cultural factors influence our attitudes towards people with albinism and disability in general. Understanding albinism in a socio-cultural context is a critically an important subject that needs serious consideration in African literature. In Africa killing of people with albinism are common especially in southern and eastern Africa. They are hunted down like elephants and rhino (being denied personhood) for their body which is believed to be used in witchcraft rituals because of superstitions that they can bring riches, success, and power. The fictional display of albinism becomes then a concise trope for a wide of human misery and corruption. Sullivan fictional work is rich in the deep layers of language, characterisation and narrative structure exploring the body of albinism in accordance with the laws of nature, society, and culture.

Fredrick J. White in his article "Personhood: An Essential Characterisation of Human Species" argues personhood in human being is multifaceted as existential and relation constructs (2013: 74). Existential construct holds that personhood is a state of being inherent and essential to human species. This construct of personhood challenges us to reflect on the most basic aspect of our existence. However, it is White's second construct of personhood that this article draws insight from to understand personhood and normative desire in albinism. Relational construct of personhood asserts "personhood as a conditional state of value defined by the society" (White, 2013: 74). The state of value in albinism has been constructed by the society. The essence of albinism is that it is an accidental quality, as such in this article I argue that accidental quality cannot alter the substance but exist as part of the substance.

**Theoretical Framework:** This article uses Douglas's concept of dirt to expound the concept of personhood in albinism. Dirt according to Douglass is "a set of ordered relations and a contravention of that order" (Douglass 1966: 44). In short, it is a "matter out of place" which carries a symbolic load that the article applies to the concept of Albinism.For albinism and disability studies, 'dirt' remains a relevant concept to our understanding and interpretation to everyday materiality to language and cultural symbolism. Dirt is synonymous to the view of albinism in African society since people with albinism are considered "out of place". Albinism is synonymous to Aristotle's accidental qualities in *Metaphysics*. According to St Thomas Aquinas (1995), "accidents cannot exist in themselves but only as part of some substance". As their name suggests, accidents are incidental to the thing, and they can come and go without the thing losing its identity. This connects well to the study that people with albinism are still human beings despite having an incidental quality of albinism.

The idea is that our understanding of dirt as an ordinary part of the material environment is based on misleading judgements on what kind of entity it is. However, Douglas is showing that under certain circumstances dirt might be a good thing, something that has value which one might desire to see and experience.Julia Kristeva further extends this argument in The Powers of Horrors on human perception of dirt and pollution through the notion of the abject. In her discussion of dirt lies the concepts of abjection and disgust. Dirt is defined by our reactions of rejection and disgust, that it is something 'matter out of place' a sore to the eyes. Anything that seems to challenge the physical and moral order, in this study albinism is perceived as impure and abnormal. In other words, dirt in cultural narrative is typically associated with social categories like the forbidden. The abnormal or the forbidden being people with albinism.

The Potential Capacity of Personhood in Albinism: One of the cultural consequences of having disabilities is that an individual's identity as a complete person comes into question rather than remaining taken for granted (Luborsky, 1994: 2). Garland Thomson dictum asserts "people who are visually different have always provoked the imaginations of their fellow human beings" (1996: 1). As Douglass calls it "matter out of place" (44) and things may come to be "out of place" by being anomalous, in this instance albinism as an anomaly. By its very presence, the exceptional body seems to compel explanation, inspire representation, and incite regulation (Garland Thomson, 1996: 1). Sullivan starts the narrative by recognising the capacity that Habo has as a young African boy. Despite his albinism Habo is able to do all chores a boy of his age is supposed to carry such as tending goats. This article assumes that beings of any species can be persons. Having enough of the relevant capacities and other necessary features is sufficient to make one a person. The category of the "person" is found in all societies, but the identities and capacities that make it up are culture specific (Luborsky, 1994: 2).Personhood is bestowed by society and is earned by achieving and maintaining expected social roles and ideals. The erosion of personhood that is associated with disability is a cultural level adversity that is not well understood. For Immanuel Kant, to qualify as a person it was necessary to possess rationality (the ability to think and reason logically) and to be able to communicate this to other people (Hoffman, 1986:76). As a young boy Habo possess cognitive attributes to satisfy Kantian demarcation of personhood but the society fails to recognise this because of his skin colour. The body is creating a powerful image to determine Habo's recognition as a person. Habo's body has the potential capacity to ascertain personhood through his mental faculty, but the skin colour fails to achieve

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personhood and is seen as a "traitor, an enemy and a prison" (Hoffman). Garland Thomson adds that such representation thus strengthens an embodied version of normative identity and shapes a narrative of corporeal difference that excludes those whose bodies or behaviour does not conform(1997: 7). In traditional culture, social systems and structures often evolve alongside fear of contagion from the impure. In Golden Boy, Habo laments that his father left right after he was born, "when whispers started that Raziva (his mother) gave birth to a white son-not a good brown child...but white" (2013: 14). This makes him to question about his father's belief in superstition and his true biological father. This questioning is coming in because of his dialogical self. The fault for the birth of a baby with albinism is often deemed to lie with the mother and an assumption of infidelity is a common belief related to albinism (Baker et al, 2010: 3). Asu in Golden Boy says, "I think Father figured out you were the son of one of the white men who come to climb Mount Kilimanjaro or take a safari" (Sullivan, 2013: 29). This is a direct suggestion that Habo's mother was promiscuous and being blamed for giving birth to a child with albinism. Habo feels out of place living with his family because his physical appearance is not like the rest of the family members.

Apart from birth, people with albinism also face challenges of coping living with albinism. The very visible difference of a person with albinism has a profound effect on the personal identity of that individual (Baker, et al, 2010: 173). Habo is a victim of culture which teaches him that he has no worth—a zeru zeru (nothingness). The neo-colonial culture causes him to be alienated as he is convinced that his appearance is the source of his wretchedness. Characters with albinism are perceived as abject by other characters in the novel. Habo narrates, "That's when I know that I'm the freak, I've always been called. Even to strangers, I am strange" (Sullivan, 2013: 30). This is indirect reference that Habo is abnormal.

Tara Sullivan accounts an enduring problem encountered by people with albinism is the stigmatisation and ostracism they face because of the web of myths surrounding the condition. At the centre of contemporary cultural practices towards people with albinism, is the belief that the body parts of people with albinism will bring wealth, win political elections (like Governor Msembo in Golden Boy), and bring success at mining and fishing (as the lake region of Mwanza in Golden Boy). This belief has directly led to the murder of people with albinism by people desperate for success in the form of good luck and money, just as how Charlie Ngeleja, an albino man was brutally murdered like an animal in Golden Boy. In Golden Boy, and prevalent in most African societies is the belief that "people consider albino medicine to be lucky" (67). At the core of this practice are witch doctors. Habo's auntie explains in Golden Boy that "the waganga (witchdoctors) here in Mwanza kill people like your son (Habo) and use the parts from their dead bodies to make luck charm" (67). This was a warning about the safety of Habo in Mwanza because it is a district that has cases of such killings. The people that orchestrate such killings are witch doctors; ironically, they are supposed to be protecting the people.

Sullivan's novel therefore is an attempt to question the subjective well being of people with albinism in literary works. Killing of people with albinism in the novel has been alluded to as poaching. Poaching possesses a serious threat to preservation and conversation of wildlife.

Enforcing Personhood through Naming: The novel has been imbued with names of people and places that convey specific images and messages for the representation of albinism in literary works. Gabriel Vom Bruck and Barbara Bodenhorn in The Anthropology of Names and Naming (2009), argues that names are "potentially powerful things in themselves as signifiers of the social person" (10). This suggests names as sites for identity formation and an indicator of social position from which the person being signified come from. Habo, the name of the protagonist in Golden Boy, is a name that comes from Swahili word "Dhahabo" (29) to mean gold after Asu (his sister) observed his "white skin, yellow hair and light eyes" (29) and concluded "Yeye ni motto dhahabo" translated as "this is a golden child" which Sullivan has used as the title of the novel. The identity of Habo is conveyed in the title of the novel.

Names are crucial, forming the basis of language itself and helping shape how we perceive the world. As Sullivan, Gappah and Robson show, I argue that naming is an integral part of identity, disconnecting albinos from and connecting albinism to their heritage, families, and community. On another level, the author uses the process of naming to show how albinos are oppressed in a predominantly hegemonic society. Naming, the natural extension of language, is also used by normal bodied people to denigrate and belittle persons with albinism. Selepe (2007), in her study of teenagers with albinism notes that one of the challenges of learners with albinism in schools is name-calling. Names carry meanings that influence the themes and narrative discourse of this novel. Coleman posits that derogatory and demeaning terminology for persons with albinism has led to prejudice and stereotypes (Coleman 1997). This constitutes emotional abuse which negatively affects the self-worth and dignity of persons with albinism (Coleman 1997). The undignified names that the persons with albinism are given are meant to break their wills; their names have all the panache and zest of animals. Habo recounts how he hates people to call him zeruzeru. He says "I hate it when people call me zeruzeru. The name means "zerozero," "nothing". A zeruzeru is unnatural thing, like a zombie. It is like calling me an animal (Sullivan, 34). Another name that Habo was called by the children was ghost. A zeru zeru is a Swahili lexicon from English zero. Zero means nothing which is what people with albinism signify in Tanzania as nothing (ghost). The white skin in the local populace is associated with bad spirits. Using this word is very impolite and singles out albinos in a negative and unjustified manner. From various African countries the word albinism is imbued in local terminologies that depict an albino as less human or nonbeing. In Setswana there is the leswafe that Robson has used in

local terminologies that depict an albino as less human or nonbeing. In Setswana there is the *leswafe* that Robson has used in her narrative, in Shona they are called *murungudunhu* which Gappah uses in her narrative and finally in Swahili albinos are called *zeruzeru* which Sullivan uses in *Golden Boy*. These writers use local languages terms for albinism to bring the African culture to life, to bring realism to their novels by illustrating the way of life of people with albinism. The novels challenge western mainstream disability studies. Charlotte Baker et al, highlight that "the very visible difference of a person with albinism has a profound effect on the personal identity of that individual" (173) as is the case with Habo. In the view of name calling and derogatory remarks towards people with albinism, it can be argued that "nowhere can an albino be his real self—socially, at work, at school, at home" (Baker et al, 173). Von Bruck and Bodenhorn claim that:

Names are always implicated in social relations. These entanglements may be negative as well as positive and clearly are important factor in the ways that names may define or cross boundaries. Names are ubiquitous as kinship. They are as caught up in histories as they are in daily social life and serve as a means of structuring social relations as well as powerful medium in which to talk about those relations (25-26). The question to ask at this point is why names are important. Ngubane explains that in Africa, "an individual is not considered a human being until a name is bestowed, for giving a name is the acknowledgement of the existence of that particular human being" (68). This implies that there exist a close relationship between being (identity) and the act of naming or being named. As Asu tells Habo in Golden Boy that "Yeye ni mtoto dhahabo" meaning "he was a golden child" so he was named Dhahabo which is shortened Habo after Asu had made an observation on her brother's white skin, yellow hair and pale eyes (29). Hughes argues that naming transcends this (1). In Hughes reasoning, names cannot be viewed simply as abbreviations or disguises of character and identity. Notwithstanding this perspective, it is undeniable that names are important in characterising people. In relation to accidental being in albinism, Herrscher explains that:

A person or a phenomenon enters being and into existence through referential designation because 'without a name, a person or a thing barely exists, it becomes part of our consciousness only when it has a name (126).

Herrscher implies that a person or thing ceases to be or disappears once they are not named or fail to name themselves. This could be the reason why Habo, Memory and Emmanuel were angry when they were called derogatory names because they make them look like ghost, animals, freaks, alien, and strangers in their own community. The emphasis is that the terms that we use to name people with albinism carry strings of echoes and inscriptions. Sullivan is examining the power of a name and its value in fiction and in the society. The argument that is being advanced is that names themselves do not hold worth or meaning, and they simply act as labels to distinguish one thing or person from another. And this correlates well with William Shakespeare's Romeo and Juliet quote "what's in name" (II.ii.). What is his name but, simply, a label? It does not define him as a man. The same applies to name calling in albinism. The issue of name and name calling has lead characters with albinism to question their being and personhood.

In general, labels for people with albinism testify that individuals with albinism are perceived as different by other community members, but they also reveal the assignment of social importance to that difference (Green et al. 2005 quoted in Brocco, 2015: 1149). In other words, through the examination of the language and terminology of albinism, it is possible to understand how notions of normalcy and difference are produced and reproduced (McPherson and Ramanathan 2011 quoted in Brocco, 1149). Lenard Davis argues that 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" (2006: 3). As such, characters with albinism found themselves outside the norm which makes the to strive for normalcy like everyone else. One of the ways in which they do that is to turn to religion.

Body Subject: Normative Desire in Albinism: Albinism is a accompanied typically distressing experience. bv stigmatization that often leads to social exclusion. Habo thinks that if he was born without albinism, he could not suffer negative stereotypes as he is enduring now. There is an element of normative desire in Habo to be normal as any other boy of his age. Sullivan uses desire as an integral part of understand what it is to be different. Basingon disability studies, normal has traditionally been defined in terms of the abnormal. According to the situated embodied agent view, personhood is maintained or bestowed on a particular person whose human existence is linked to a physical body in a particular familial, cultural, and historical context (Hoffman, 1986: 90). Merleau-Ponty (2002) developed a concept which is often referred to as body subject implying that every human has a body and is capable of thought, reflection, and communication. When the body starts to let the person down and the unified form fails to function the body might start to be seen as a traitor, an enemy, or a prison. Drawing analogies between the bodies and elements of everyday life may conjure powerful images which may in turn influence and even to justify certain negative modes of relating which are detrimental to the recognition and maintenance of personhood (Hoffman, 1986: 92).

The worldSullivan creates can only be known through the consciousness of their protagonist. Golden Boydoes present alternative world views, but all are imbued with meanings that centre on the portrayal of albinism. Albinism is colour coded. The world is colour coded—black, brown, and white carry marked valences. Meanings are slippery in these novels' sign system. The author, in herwriter style, conspicuously assigns meaning to every moving thing, piling on images and freighting their stories. In western literature, the black and white colour is coded with several symbols. White is the colour of everything good and pure, and black is the colour of everything bad and evil. However, in albinism these colours signify contrary to the norm. Albinism manifests in white skin, white or straw-coloured hair and lighter, even blue, eyes. Habo as a character with albinism wonders why his body is white unlike his family members who are either dark or brown. Habo retorts that "I look down at my white and red hands nested in her even brown ones. I wonder again, for the thousandth time, why I'm so different" (Sullivan, 2013: 29).

The albino body is the other in fiction with reference to postcolonial discourse. However, it is the extreme negativity with which the albino is portrayed that is of interest here, for albinism is constantly distorted to become something else, to signify. It is significant that such negativity persists across all writing about albinos, as well as in other forms of representation. The body of the other had been stripped to its most physical form and had been transformed into the mere signifier of the difference, the explanation of the savagery, wildness, and intense sexuality of the colonized (Boehmer, 1995: 270). This othering is what we encounter in albino characters in the works of Tara Sullivan. Habo feel an empty space around him. He feels being betrayed by his body which trap (prisoner) him from attaining normality. In this article, black is associated with power, strength, authority, aggression, sophistication just to mention a few. Didier Anzieu considers the skin as "both system for protecting our individuality and first instrument and site of interaction with others" (1989: 3). The black or brown skin colour is used interchangeably throughout these novels to symbolise the norm, or normal people as opposed to the white skin of the albino which symbolise lack, absence, and abnormality. In a conclusion, any label that is used to describe a person's skin colour carries some connotation. It may point to discrimination, stereotyping and stigmatisation. This is especially true for characters with albinism as they have been presented in Golden Boy. It is the skin colour of characters with albinism that is imbued with negative social constructions. The skin is the way we communicate with the outside world through touch and through and through the way our skin appears to others.

#### Conclusion

The article has also demonstrated that skin is inherently linked to personhood and the presentation of identity to the outside world. Being human is a necessary condition but not sufficient one to set us apart. Substance is what makes a human to be human (the study of being). It is the accidental qualities like height, skin color that makes us different. The skin of people with albinism is an accidental quality. Skin colorin albinism is the critical cause of normative desire in characters with the condition. However, these myths and stereotypes in themselves are typical of a more general tendency. That is to say, the need to emphasise he real or assumed deficiencies that mark the albino apart, reinforcing his difference and ultimately serving to confirm the normality of those who designate his body as defective. The need to categorise, to define and to 'know' the other is continually frustrated by the albino body and it has become evident that this is particularly problematic for the writer attempting to represent the albino. Nonetheless persons with albinism are accorded personhood as well because they are part of humanity.

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