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Rethinking Blindness and Femininity Through Feminist Disability in All The Light We Can Not See by Anthony Doerr

Agry Pramita
Universitas Islam Negeri Sunan Gunung Djati
Pos-el: agrypramita@uinsgd.ac.id

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Abstract
This study examines Anthony Doerr's All the Light We Cannot See through the lens of feminist disability theory, particularly the works of Rosemarie Garland- Thomson. It aims to explore how blindness and femininity are portrayed not as deficits, but as alternative forms of knowledge, agency, and resistance. The analysis centers on the character of Marie-Laure LeBlanc, a blind young girl whose heightened sensory perception, emotional strength, and quiet resilience defy traditional stereotypes of disability and female passivity. Employing a qualitative research method based on library research and textual analysis, the study investigates how Doerr's narrative construction of Marie-Laure challenges dominant visual norms, narrative, and patriarchal representations. Key findings highlight blindness as a valid and complex way of knowing, the politics of visibility and invisibility, and the role of social context and support systems in shaping disabled subjectivity. The study concludes that All the Light We Cannot See contributes to a broader literary and cultural recognition of disability and femininity as meaningful, dignified, and agentive states of being.

Keywords
Feminist disability, feminine narrative, gender stereotypes

Abstrak
Penelitian ini mengkaji novel All the Light We Cannot See karya Anthony Doerr melalui perspektif teori disabilitas feminis, khususnya gagasan Rosemarie Garland-Thomson. Tujuan penelitian ini adalah untuk mengeksplorasi bagaimana kebutaan dan feminitas digambarkan bukan sebagai kekurangan, melainkan sebagai bentuk alternatif dari pengetahuan, agensi, dan perlawanan. Analisis difokuskan pada tokoh Marie-Laure LeBlanc, seorang gadis tunanetra yang persepsi sensoriknya yang tajam, kekuatan emosional, dan keteguhan hatinya menentang stereotip tradisional mengenai disabilitas dan kepasifan perempuan. Dengan menggunakan metode penelitian kualitatif berbasis studi pustaka dan analisis tekstual, penelitian ini menelaah bagaimana konstruksi naratif Doerr terhadap tokoh Marie-Laure menantang norma visual dominan, narasi konvensional, dan representasi patriarkal. Temuan utama menunjukkan bahwa kebutaan diposisikan sebagai cara mengetahui yang sah dan kompleks, menyoroti politik visibilitas dan invisibilitas, serta peran konteks sosial dan sistem dukungan dalam membentuk subjektivitas penyandang disabilitas. Penelitian ini menyimpulkan bahwa All the Light We Cannot See berkontribusi terhadap pengakuan sastra dan budaya yang lebih luas atas disabilitas dan feminitas sebagai kondisi eksistensial yang bermakna, bermartabat, dan berdaya.

Kata Kunci
Feminis disabilitas, narasi feminisme, stereotype gender

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Introduction

In recent years, literary studies have become more interdisciplinary, especially when it comes to exploring how people are represented in stories. This shift shows a growing interest in examining how literature shapes the way we see certain kinds of human representation. Especially those identified as female, disabled, or racialized and how it affects their visibility, agency, and meaning. Feminist literary criticism has long called attention to the ways in which women characters are positioned within patriarchal structures of representation where women are being placed as passive objects of desire, cautionary figures whose stories end in silencing, sacrifice, or redemption through others (Young, 2005). At the same time, disability studies have challenged literature's habit of using physical difference as a symbol for weakness, failure, or exclusion. This kind of storytelling often flattens disabled characters, stripping them of complexity and casting them either as inspiring exceptions or tragic burdens (Mitchell & Snyder, 2000).

As Rosemarie Garland Thomson (1997) argues in her foundational work, the disabled body in literature often functions less as a character in its own right and more as a rhetorical device. The character is being treated as something to be overcome, cured, feared, or gazed upon. This "normate" gaze reduces disability to spectacle, flattening the richness of experience into symbolic function. Feminist disability theorists such as Iris Marion Young (2005) extend this critique by exploring how gender further complicates cultural ideals of autonomy, physical competence, and self-determination. She argues that dominant discourses often associate human value with productivity, independence, and physical wholeness. Such ideals systematically marginalize both disabled individuals and women, whose bodies have historically been portrayed as excessive and in need of control. Through this perspective, the intersection of gender and disability reveals the ideological foundations that shape definitions of bodily normalcy and determine whose experiences are recognized as meaningful within narrative and political contexts.

These scholarly contributions invite a reconsideration of how literature can represent disability and womanhood not as shortcomings to be corrected, but as alternative ways of knowing, relating, and resisting. Such perspectives challenge dominant assumptions about perception, agency, and identity. Embodied difference is no longer treated as the conclusion of a narrative, but rather as a productive space for imagining new forms of subjectivity and alternative ways of seeing the world.

Talking about the facts in literary works from time to time, it tends to simplify disabled characters or reduce the complexity of disabled subjectivities. Often, such characters are positioned as objects of pity, symbolic representations of moral or spiritual deficiency, or narrative devices whose primary function is to evoke emotional responses from the reader or to advance the development of other, more "able" characters. In Charles Dickens's *A Christmas Carol*, for instance, the character of Tiny Tim has frequently been cited as a classic example of the "sweet cripple" stereotype. He is depicted as physically fragile, emotionally pure, and wholly dependent on his family, serving less as an autonomous figure and more as a moral compass designed to inspire compassion in others, particularly in Scrooge. In a different yet related vein, William Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury* presents the character of Benjy

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Compson, whose cognitive impairment shapes the novel's structure but who remains largely voiceless and detached from narrative agency. His presence contributes to the novel's experimental form, but his interiority is difficult to access, and his role as a subject in his own right is limited.

Those examples reveal the persistence of what Rosemarie Garland-Thomson identifies as "visual normativity," a cultural assumption that privileges sight as the dominant mode of perception and associates normative embodiment with full personhood. Within such frameworks, characters who deviate from these norms are often denied narrative authority or are framed primarily in terms of lack, dependence, or passivity. However, not all literary works adhere to these patterns. The contributions of feminist and disability scholarship underscore the need to reconsider how literature can portray difference not as deficiency, but as a site of alternative perspective. Literature should become a space where embodied difference may serve not only as a thematic concern but also as a formal and ethical challenge to dominant modes of representation. This research engages with these critical concerns through an analysis of *All the Light We Cannot See* by Anthony Doerr. The novel's narrative choices and character construction invite a continuous exploration into how blindness and femininity are positioned within a story shaped by violence, survival, and moral ambiguity. Although the novel has been widely recognized for its thematic and aesthetic qualities, it also offers a rich site for interrogating how a blind female character complicates traditional frameworks of agency and perception. This research approaches the novel not as a case study in overcoming disability, but as a cultural artifact that can be read through the lens of feminist disability theory. It assumes that the text's representation of blindness carries conceptual force and that its portrayal of female subjectivity resists dominant cultural scripts that associate disability with fragility.

In this way, the study hopes to take part in ongoing discussions within literary analysis that explore how gender and disability are understood in narrative texts. It aims to support efforts that bring greater attention to characters who have often been positioned at the margins, by considering how their experiences might be recognized as thoughtful, emotionally complex, and socially significant.

Method

This study adopts a qualitative research design using library research and textual analysis to explore how *All the Light We Cannot See* by Anthony Doerr portrays blindness and femininity through the lens of feminist disability theory, especially drawing from the ideas of Rosemarie Garland Thomson. These methods are chosen for their capacity to support a close and context-aware reading of literary texts, while remaining rooted in critical and theoretical scholarship. Library research plays an essential role in establishing the theoretical foundation for this study. As George (2008) notes, "library research provides a systematic approach to gathering and synthesizing information from scholarly sources, enabling researchers to position their work within ongoing academic conversations" (p. 6). In this study, such materials include journal articles, monographs, and theoretical texts in the fields of feminist literary criticism, disability studies, and narrative theory.

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The research engages with the writings of several key scholars, particularly Rosemarie Garland Thomson, whose work has been instrumental in shaping the field of feminist disability studies. As she writes, *"The disabled body, like the female body, has been commonly cast in literature as an object to be looked at, pitied, or overcome, rather than as a fully formed subject with agency"* (Garland Thomson, 1997, p. 10). This insight becomes a central theoretical lens in the study, guiding the interpretation of Marie- Laure's characterization in Doerr's novel.

In addition to Garland-Thomson, the study draws from Susan Wendell, who offers a socio-cultural critique of disability. Wendell (1996) observes that *"our culture teaches us to interpret disability as a personal tragedy, thereby diverting attention from the social conditions that cause and compound that tragedy"* (p. 63). This critical reflection invites a more nuanced reading of disabled characters, encouraging the researcher to consider not only how Marie-Laure's blindness is represented, but also what cultural ideologies shape that representation. Similarly, Iris Marion Young offers insight into how female bodies are viewed and regulated within patriarchal structures. In her reflections on embodiment, she writes: *"women's bodies have historically been marked as excessive, unruly, and in need of regulation"* (Young, 2005, p. 43). Her discussion helps the study investigate how femininity intersects with disability in the novel, and whether Marie-Laure is framed through such norms or positioned otherwise.

In addition to the theoretical grounding, this study employs textual analysis to examine *All the Light We Cannot See* as a primary literary text. Textual analysis is a common and valuable method in literary research, allowing for a close reading of the text in its formal, narrative, and symbolic dimensions. As Eagleton (1996) explains, textual analysis involves *"interpreting not just what a text says, but how it says it, and what assumptions about the world are built into its language and structure" (p. 4).* In this context, the analysis focuses on how Marie-Laure, the blind female protagonist, is constructed in terms of agency, perception, and identity. Attention is paid to the ways in which blindness is portrayed: whether it is used symbolically, narratively instrumentalized, or approached as a meaningful mode of being. This is especially important in light of David T. Mitchell and Sharon L. Snyder's concept of narrative prosthesis, which they describe as *"the dependency of literary narratives upon disability as a device of characterization, plot development, and symbolic meaning" (Mitchell & Snyder, 2000, p. 47)*. Their work cautions against interpretations that reduce disabled characters to mere metaphors or functions within the plot, rather than viewing them as complex individuals with subjectivity and depth.

Through this technique, the study closely examines narrative voice, character development, symbolism, and the structure of the novel. Marie-Laure's sensory experiences, her relationship with space, sound, and memory, and the way other characters perceive and treat her are considered carefully. The analysis also compares her representation with broader narrative conventions, asking whether Doerr's treatment of disability subverts, challenges, or reproduces dominant cultural narratives.

This kind of reading is conducted with a recognizing the limits of interpretation and acknowledging that meaning in literature is often layered and open to debate. As Belsey (2005) reminds us, *"Texts are not containers of meaning but sites of meaning- making" (p. 13)*. Therefore, the analysis does not seek to impose a fixed interpretation, but rather to open a

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conversation about how gender and disability are made visible or invisible in the novel, and what that visibility reveals about cultural assumptions.

In conclusion, this research is conducted through a careful combination of library research and textual analysis, both of which are central to the field of literary studies. Library research provides the theoretical limits necessary to engage with current academic debates, particularly those related to feminist disability studies. Textual analysis, on the other hand, offers a grounded approach to interpreting the novel's narrative strategies and character constructions. By drawing from the works of GarlandThomson and others, the study aims to critically examine how *All the Light We Cannot See* participates in the narrative norms that have traditionally shaped representations of disabled and female characters. In doing so, the researcher hopes to contribute to broader scholarly efforts that seek to understand literature not only as artistic expression but also as a cultural site where norms, values, and identities are constructed and contested.

Result and Discussion

Blindness as a Way of Knowing and a Source of Feminine Strength

In *All the Light We Cannot See*, Anthony Doerr portrays blindness not as a mere physical impairment but as a distinctive way of experiencing the world that deeply influences Marie-Laure's identity and actions. Through detailed narrative techniques, Doerr allows readers to perceive blindness as a form of knowledge that is rich, sensory, and multifaceted.

Early in the novel, Doerr introduces Marie-Laure's adaptation to blindness by describing how her father creates a miniature wooden model of their hometown, Saint- Malo. The model is described as "a world she can hold, a world she can understand on her own terms" (Doerr, 2014, p. 49). This tangible representation allows Marie-Laure to explore the city through touch, effectively constructing a mental map that substitutes visual input with tactile and spatial memory. Such description encourages readers to appreciate blindness as a different, but equally valid, mode of engagement with the environment.

This alternative way of knowing is further illustrated as Marie-Laure uses her other senses with great sensitivity. For instance, the narrative explains, "She feels the salt in the air and the roughness of the cobblestones under her fingers" (p. 287), emphasizing how blindness leads to heightened sensory awareness beyond sight. These passages reject the idea of blindness as a total loss; instead, they highlight the ways in which Marie-Laure gains insight through her remaining senses.

Importantly, Doerr does not present Marie-Laure as passive or helpless. Instead, she is portrayed as brave and capable in the face of wartime danger. When trapped in Saint-Malo, she "listens intently to the distant hum of planes, to the footsteps echoing against the stone, learning to map the world through sound" (p. 404). This careful attunement to sound reveals how blindness shapes her approach to survival and resistance. Rather than being a barrier, her condition becomes a tool for resilience, illustrating her active role in navigating and influencing her surroundings. Marie-Laure's blindness also complicates normative ideas of femininity. While female characters in war narratives often embody vulnerability, Marie-Laure asserts her agency with determination. Her declaration, "She will not be a victim. She will live" (p. 197),

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encapsulates this defiance and strength. This statement challenges common perceptions that associate disability with weakness or dependence, showing instead a powerful assertion of selfhood and will. By portraying blindness as a way of knowing and a source of inner strength, Doerr's novel aligns closely with Rosemarie Garland-Thomson's feminist disability theory, which calls for recognition of disability as a form of difference that disrupts normative understandings of ability and gender (Garland-Thomson, 1997).

The Politics of Visibility and Invisibility

The novel also explores the complex dynamics surrounding visibility and invisibility, a crucial theme in feminist disability theory. Disabled bodies often navigate a paradox where visibility can mean both recognition and exposure to harm, while invisibility might offer safety but also neglect and erasure. Marie-Laure's blindness frequently renders her invisible to the occupying Nazi soldiers, a factor that aids her survival. Doerr writes, "They do not suspect a blind girl hiding in the rubble, no threat in her silence" (p. 398). Here, blindness functions as a form of invisibility that protects Marie-Laure, yet it also reflects social attitudes that underestimate disabled individuals, particularly women, as non-threatening or insignificant.

This invisibility, however, does not translate to absence within the narrative. Readers are granted intimate access to Marie-Laure's thoughts and perceptions, giving her a vivid inner life. She confesses, "Sometimes the silence is so complete I feel like I am sinking, alone in the dark" (p. 150). This moment captures the emotional reality of isolation but also serves to humanize her beyond any simplistic act of inspirati The tension between being unseen and asserting presence also intersects with gender. Disabled women often confront societal expectations that render them invisible or dismiss their agency. The soldiers' failure to perceive Marie-Laure as a threat echoes these sexist assumptions. Yet, through her survival and participation in resistance, she contests such limiting views, embodying a form of feminist defiance on or pity.

Contrasting Experiences of Normativity and Difference in War

In *All the Light We Cannot See*, Anthony Doerr presents two characters, Marie- Laure LeBlanc and Werner Pfennig, who experience life in very different ways. Marie- Laure lives with blindness, while Werner is a physically able young German boy. However, both of them must face pressures from a world that values strict ideas about ability, masculinity, and control. By presenting their stories side by side, the novel shows how both physical disability and emotional struggle can reveal the limits of what society often calls normal.

Werner's life begins in an orphanage where he shows talent in building and repairing radios. His technical skill leads him to a Nazi military school that promises him a better future. At first, Werner believes he is escaping hardship. Yet once he enters the school, he faces cruel discipline and rigid expectations. He is told to be strong, silent, and obedient. There is no space for kindness or hesitation. Werner becomes unsure of himself. He observes violence toward weaker students and does not know how to respond. Although he is not disabled in a physical sense, he experiences deep emotional conflict. He begins to see that the ideals around him are not only harsh but also harmful. Doerr writes, "He listens for the smallest sound, the hint of truth beneath propaganda" (Doerr, 2014, p. 120). This shows Werner's need to search for meaning and truth beyond what is expected of him.

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From the perspective of feminist disability theory, particularly the work of Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, Werner's struggles can be seen as a response to social forces that treat difference as a weakness. While he is expected to become a strong and unquestioning soldier, his sensitivity and self-doubt make him feel out of place. These qualities, which could be seen as signs of emotional depth and ethical awareness, are instead treated as flaws in the world he lives in. Garland-Thomson reminds us that difference is often punished in systems that value control, sameness, and physical power. In this light, Werner's emotional discomfort reveals how certain social norms can act as a kind of invisible restriction, limiting the expression of a more complete and diverse humanity.

Werner's moral tension becomes even stronger when he witnesses his friend Frederick being abused for refusing to follow violent orders. Frederick is gentle and imaginative. He loves birds and refuses to hurt others. His refusal to join in cruelty leads to severe punishment. Doerr writes that after Frederick is beaten, "his thoughts float like pollen" (p. 204), a line that suggests both fragility and continued presence. This moment affects Werner deeply. He begins to understand that remaining silent in the face of injustice also causes harm. Frederick tells him, "Your problem, Werner, is that you still believe you own your life" (p. 184), a sentence that stays with him and reminds him of how deeply he is caught in a system he does not fully believe in.

Later in the novel, Werner meets Marie-Laure, who has been hiding in Saint- Malo. She is blind, but she does not allow her condition to limit her actions. She uses her other senses to move through the world, listens carefully, and finds ways to survive despite the dangers around her. Her courage and quiet strength inspire Werner. When he hears her voice through the radio, he begins to change. He no longer wants to follow orders without thinking. He wants to protect her. In the end, he chooses to save her life, even though this means putting his own safety at risk. This act shows that Werner has not lost his sense of what is right. It also shows that human connection can offer a way out of destructive systems.

Marie-Laure and Werner may seem very different at first. One lives with blindness, and the other struggles with inner conflict. But their stories both show how difficult it can be to live with difference in a world that demands sameness. Marie-Laure resists the idea that blindness makes her weak. Werner resists the idea that obedience means strength. Their courage comes from their ability to see the world differently, to trust their own sense of truth even when others try to silence it. This contrast also supports the idea, central to feminist disability theory, that disability and difference are shaped by social context. Garland-Thomson argues that the way people are treated often matters more than the conditions they live with. Marie-Laure is able to grow and become independent because her father treats her with respect and provides her with tools to explore her surroundings. Werner, on the other hand, is pushed into a system that punishes him for asking questions. The suffering he experiences is not caused by his body but by the rules that tell him to ignore his feelings.

Through these characters, Doerr encourages readers to question simple ideas about who is strong and who is weak. He shows that war does not only hurt the body but also the mind and spirit. Some people are hurt because their bodies do not meet expectations. Others are hurt because their values and emotions do not fit the systems around them. In both cases, the pain

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comes not only from the individuals themselves but from the world they are forced to live in. In conclusion, Marie-Laure and Werner show that difference is not something to be fixed or erased. It can be a source of wisdom, strength, and resistance. Marie-Laure's blindness does not stop her from surviving. Werner's moral doubts do not make him weak. Together, they help readers understand that being different is not a failure. It is a part of what makes us human. This message is at the heart of feminist disability theory, which asks us to look closely at the ways that bodies, minds, and relationships are shaped by the world and to imagine a future where all forms of life are treated with care and dignity.

Social Context, Support Networks, and the Experience of Disability

Another key theme of the novel is the role of social context and relationships in shaping the experience of disability. Doerr emphasizes that disability is not solely a matter of physical condition but is deeply affected by the environment and the people around the disabled individual. Marie-Laure's relationship with her father, Daniel LeBlanc, is central to this idea. His patient support and practical help empower her to live independently. The model city he builds is not a simple aid but a symbol of trust and respect: "He builds a world she can hold, a world that she can understand on her own terms" (p. 51). This gesture reflects the social model of disability, which suggests that societal attitudes and accommodations are crucial to reducing disabling barriers (Garland-Thomson, 1997).

Conversely, the novel also acknowledges moments of exclusion and misunderstanding that Marie-Laure faces due to her blindness. These moments serve as reminders of the persistent social challenges that disabled individuals encounter, such as prejudice or underestimation. Nevertheless, Doerr's portrayal is balanced, showing both the difficulties and Marie-Laure's refusal to be defined or limited by them.

The author can provide the discussion by summarizing the results, interpreting the results by discussing whether the results support the hypothesis or not, connecting the results with previous studies and theory, discussing the implications in the broadest context possible, and giving a new understanding based on the research results. The limitations and direction for future researchers may also be provided.

Conclusions

This study has explored how *All the Light We Cannot See* represents blindness and femininity through the lens of feminist disability theory. Rather than portraying Marie- Laure's blindness as a weakness, the novel presents it as a different way of knowing that allows her to adapt, survive, and resist during wartime. Her heightened attention to sound, texture, and memory challenges traditional ideas about ability and shows that knowledge and strength can take many forms. Doerr gives Marie-Laure an active role, portraying her as thoughtful, capable, and resilient. Her story confronts stereotypes of disabled women as dependent or passive and instead affirms her agency. The novel also reflects on the role of invisibility, showing how her blindness sometimes protects her, yet never erases her presence or value.

Through these portrayals, the novel supports the aims of feminist disability theory, as proposed by Garland-Thomson, by offering a representation that respects difference and challenges normative assumptions. *All the Light We Cannot See* ultimately reminds readers that

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disability is not a limitation of character, but a part of human variation that deserves recognition and dignity.

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