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Exploitation, Regulation, and Elimination: The Writing of the Disabled Body Under Imperial Oppression in *Howards End*

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Abstract: In E. M. Forster's seminal novel *Howards End*, the character of Leonard Bast is universally considered as a tragic representative of the marginalized lower class. However, the intricate relationship between his metaphorically "disabled" body and the overarching forces of imperial hegemony has not been fully explored in contemporary literary criticism. To address this critical gap, this paper draws extensively on postcolonial theory, particularly utilizing Homi Bhabha's foundational concept of mimicry, alongside the social model of disability studies, to comprehensively reinterpret Leonard's portrayal as a multifaceted victim of systemic power dynamics. It argues that Leonard's "disabled" body is systematically shaped and ultimately destroyed by three distinct forms of institutional oppression. First, imperial economic exploitation relentlessly reduces his physical body to mere expendable material, stripping him of fundamental human agency. Second, imperial cultural regulation gradually undermines his psychological subjectivity and authentic selfhood through the enforced mechanisms of cultural mimicry. Finally, as both his economic utility and cultural identity inevitably collapse under these dual pressures, the imperial society ruthlessly eliminates him as a completely superfluous body. By meticulously tracing this trajectory of exploitation, regulation, and elimination, the paper uncovers a profound, implicit anti-imperialist narrative embedded within *Howards End*. Ultimately, this research offers a compelling new perspective on applying postcolonial theory to analyze domestic class structures, demonstrating how imperial ideologies permeate and destructively govern the vulnerable bodies within the imperial metropole itself.

Keywords: howards end; anti-imperialism; postcolonial criticism; disability studies; body writing

1. Introduction

E.M. Forster's *Howards End* is set in the early twentieth century, against the backdrop of the Edwardian British Empire, which appeared prosperous yet was marked by underlying crises. The novel depicts the intertwined destinies of the Wilcox, Schlegel, and Bast families and is widely regarded as a classic portrayal of British class society. However, beneath the imperial capital and cultural hegemony represented by the Wilcox and Schlegel families, the struggle and destruction of the clerk Leonard Bast reveal a more critical truth. Even within the metropole, the empire also produces marginal and disabled bodies.

Previous studies have developed rich interpretive frameworks for *Howards End*. These studies often draw on cultural memory, new materialism, and stylistic analysis to explore the novel's themes and narrative techniques [1, 2]. Most of them focus on human-object relations and the theme of "connection" while emphasizing the mainstream narratives represented by the Wilcox and Schlegel families. The Bast family, however, has been relatively under-explored. Even in the few studies focusing on Leonard Bast, he is predominantly viewed as a mere victim of class conflict. His unhealthy body is rarely taken as a central object of analysis. This paper argues that Leonard's economic vulnerability, physical exhaustion, imitation of elite culture, and eventual death together

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construct a "disabled" body under imperial oppression. This marginalized "disabled" body is shaped not only by class exploitation but also by imperial hegemony.

In this sense, *Howards End* reveals that imperial hegemony is not only overseas expansion. It also shapes domestic hierarchies and harms marginalized groups within the nation. This hidden force is embodied in the tragedy of Leonard, a minor character whose plight remains largely overlooked. From this perspective, *Howards End* is not only a critique of British class society but also a work with an implicit anti-imperialist stance. To address this issue, this paper draws on postcolonial theory, especially the concept of mimicry [3]. Leonard is thus not merely a victim of class conflict, but an allegorical figure of internal colonization. His anxiety, produced by unstable employment, his awkward imitation of elite culture, and his absurd death can be understood as a form of "hidden disability." This perspective reveals how the empire reproduces its global oppression within the metropole through both economic and cultural means, turning lower-class bodies into expendable objects.

At the same time, "the writing of the body" has emerged as a significant approach in contemporary literary studies [4, 5]. In this context, this paper takes Leonard's body as a central object of analysis. It examines how his anxiety, fatigue, and breakdown are repeatedly represented in the narrative, and how they are linked to imperial economic and cultural hierarchies. By tracing the formation and eventual elimination of Leonard's "disabled" body, this paper demonstrates how imperial social structures exhaust and ultimately discard individual bodies in everyday life. Based on this analysis, the paper seeks to reposition *Howards End* within a framework of imperial critique. It also highlights Forster's deep concern about the damaging effects of imperialism beneath his call for social connection.

2. Disabled Body under Imperial Economic Exploitation

Often regarded as the final heyday of the British Empire, the Edwardian period saw Britain maintain its status as a global economic power through imperial trade and overseas investment. While British society appeared prosperous and stable, this outward affluence rested on a highly concentrated pool of imperial capital. The top 1 percent of the population controlled about 69 percent of the nation's wealth, reaching the highest level in modern British history. A small upper class held most of the property, while the majority depended on wages for survival. Beneath the appearance of prosperity, economic inequality was severe.

This period has been described as the "Age of Empire," a time when Western bourgeois liberal society reached its peak, yet was gradually undermined by its internal contradictions. As some economists argue, the fundamental aim of imperial expansion was to address the surplus capital at home. To this end, the capitalist class promoted expansion by exporting excess capital to colonies and overseas markets in search of returns. However, this process simultaneously generated two risks. First, large-scale overseas investment stimulated financial speculation, increasing instability in domestic markets. Second, efforts to secure these investments and compete for colonial control led to frequent colonial wars [6, 7]. These wars consumed public wealth, increased taxation, and intensified diplomatic tensions, damaging the national economy and undermining security, thereby disrupting the so-called prosperity. In other words, the empire generated profits flowed to the upper class, while the risks were brought to the lower classes.

At the social level, these risks manifested in unstable employment. With the expansion of financial enterprises, large numbers of clerks entered commercial firms and insurance companies. This group belonged to the lower-middle class. Although they were free from manual labor and appeared socially respectable, their livelihoods depended on fragile employment structures and were highly vulnerable to economic fluctuations. In this context, chronic anxiety spread throughout society and became a common psychology for this group. Fear of downward mobility and constant concern about unemployment transformed economic instability into everyday pressure [8].

It is within this historical context that *Howards End* was produced. From a postcolonial perspective, Leonard's "disabled" body can be seen as a product of imperial economic power and cultural regulation. To understand this condition, it is necessary to adopt the social model of disability. Within this model, disability is not limited to visible physical deficiency. While the medical model attributes disability to individual deficiency, the social model argues that disability is produced by social and institutional constraints that restrict body function [9]. In this sense, disability is a social product which reflects the effects of power on the body. Leonard does not suffer from a congenital physical defect. However, he lives within an unstable employment system shaped by the imperial economy. His body is therefore placed under constant tension. This condition limits his bodily function and leaves visible traces of imperial power on the body.

At the beginning of Chapter Six, the narrator explicitly describes Leonard's marginal position and vulnerability. "Leonard Bast, stood at the extreme verge of gentility. He was not in the abyss, but he could see it." The "abyss" refers not only to economic poverty, but also to the risk of falling in social status. Leonard's marginality is thus clearly constructed in the novel [10]. He is not fully excluded from the middle class, yet he never achieves real security or recognition. His identity remains unstable, reflecting the risks of the imperial economy within the metropole.

Under the constant threat of falling into the "abyss," chronic anxiety becomes common for clerks like Leonard. As a marginal figure, he lacks the financial resources to withstand unemployment. He therefore displays heightened sensitivity and vigilance. Such condition is clearly shown in the "umbrella incident" at his first appearance. When Helen accidentally takes his umbrella, Leonard does not see it as a simple mistake. Instead, he suspects deliberate deception. He imagines that the Schlegel family may be playing the confidence trick on him. He fears that if he gave his address they would break into his rooms some midnight or other and steal his walking-stick too. As the novel states, "To trust people is a luxury in which only the wealthy can indulge." For Leonard, the loss of property may mean falling into the abyss [11]. When the Schlegel sisters kindly warn him that the Porphyryon Fire Insurance Company may collapse, he becomes immediately tense and hostile. He believes that they are prying into his work and that his brain is picked. This defensive reaction reveals his deep insecurity. Although the information about the company is only casual speculation from upper-class figures such as Henry, Leonard reacts strongly because of his underlying anxiety about unstable employment. In fact, Leonard has little understanding of the company he depends on. He admits that he knows almost nothing about its operations. The company is compared to Zeus. "While the gods are powerful, we learn little about them. It is only in the days of their decadence that a strong light beats into heaven." This metaphor reveals the extreme imbalance of power and information in employment relations. The company holds decisive power, while the employee remains passive and uninformed. Leonard's irritability and anxiety stem from this loss of control. His sensitivity to "brain picked" reflects a defensive response to the constant threat of unemployment.

More importantly, this chronic anxiety does not remain at the psychological level. It is transformed into physical exhaustion. Leonard's body becomes the site upon which imperial economic pressure is inscribed. "A sharp pain darted through his head, and he was conscious of the exact form of his eye sockets." The instability of the imperial economy, mediated through employment structures, leaves traces on the individual nervous system. Leonard lives under constant pressure. Risks produced by the upper class are transferred to individuals like him. This imbalance forces the body to remain in a state of tension. Even minor stimuli can trigger intense pain. His capacity for work and social interaction is reduced. Physical contraction further reflects this pressure. Forster suggests that Leonard's spine might have been straight, and the chest might have broadened. Economic pressure reshapes his body, symbolizing social oppression. Over time, anxiety affects his daily behavior. When he cuts his finger while handling broken glass, he reacts with sudden anger and uses coarse language he had learnt from older men. His clumsiness and irritability reflect ongoing nervous exhaustion. Chronic anxiety weakens both body and

mind. It limits physical ability and reduces social participation. The shrinking body, abnormal behavior, and declining social capacity together show a gradual loss of function. This process reflects how social conditions constrain the body and produce disability in the sense defined by the social model.

In sum, Leonard's "disability" is not a personal tragedy but the result of the imperial economic structures. The instability produced by imperial expansion is transmitted through insecure employment, producing chronic anxiety that manifests as physical and nervous exhaustion. His body thus reflects the unequal distribution of risk within imperialist capitalism [8].

3. Disabled Body under Imperial Cultural Regulation

While Leonard's body is first exhausted by imperial economic exploitation, its formation is rooted in imperial cultural hegemony [12]. During the Edwardian period, the British Empire not only constructed an imperial economic system but also established a strict cultural hierarchy within the metropole. In this hierarchy, culture functioned as a tool to distinguish "civilized" from "barbaric" and to mark class belonging.

As Pierre Bourdieu's theory of cultural capital suggests, culture serves to maintain class structure. It represents legitimate taste and social status and functions as a form of capital that supports class reproduction. Those who lack it are often seen as deficient in ability or taste. Culture thus becomes a channel through which marginal people like Leonard attempt to connect with dominant imperial culture. It also serves as a means to cross class boundaries and seek social recognition.

However, this channel is not designed for real class mobility. Homi K. Bhabha's concept of mimicry reveals the essence of this mechanism. Bhabha argues that power does not simply exclude difference. Instead, it produces similarity that is "almost the same, but not quite" to stabilize hierarchy. The subject is required to approximate dominant culture while remaining different, driven by a longing for acceptance that is never fully realized. As a result, the identity of the subject remains unstable. Although Bhabha's theory develops in a colonial context, its core lies in how power produces hierarchical differences through cultural standards, which equally applies to class structures within the imperial metropole. Through cultural capital, the lower classes are shaped into "internal others" who require guidance and correction [13]. Leonard's pursuit of culture is a clear example of mimicry. He attempts to approach middle-class culture but cannot escape his class origin. In this condition of "almost the same, but not quite," mimicry produces anxiety rather than stable subjectivity. It produces self-doubt and further intensifies his mental and physical exhaustion, resulting in a body that is gradually weakened and functionally limited.

The novel repeatedly shows Leonard's efforts to approach elite culture. He reads Ruskin, attends Queen's Hall Concerts, visits exhibitions of Watts, and references writers such as Jefferies and Stevensons. These activities form his main way of imitating upper-class culture [14]. However, his reading is highly instrumental. When reading Ruskin, he focuses not on ideas or aesthetic value but on their applicability to daily life, asking, "Could he adapt it to the needs of daily life?" This instrumental mode of reading precisely illustrates mimicry. The subject does not internalize dominant culture, reproducing only its external forms. As a result, mimicry fails to stabilize identity and gradually exposes difference. Leonard realizes that these refined expressions "somehow eluding all that was actual and insistent in Leonard's life. For it was the voice of one who had never been dirty or hungry, and had not guessed successfully what dirt and hunger are." The culture he admires does not respond to his condition, meaning that his mimicry remains "almost the same, but not quite," and can never succeed. Yet he continues to "believe in sudden conversion" and "hope to come to culture suddenly." This desire becomes more visible in his interaction with the Schlegel sisters. During his visits to their home, he speaks in an anxious and urgent manner. Trying to prove his cultural competence, Leonard mentions books such as *The Ordeal of Richard Feverel* and *Prince Otto*, as well as authors like Jefferies, Borrow, and Thoreau, listing nearly all of his limited reading. In this scene,

culture functions as a form of capital that must be displayed. Leonard imitates the upper-class style of literary conversation in a strained and excessive manner, believing that this performance might earn him recognition.

However, for the Schlegel sisters, culture is not about listing names. They value intellectual connection, lived experience, and emotional understanding. Their conversation appears relaxed and confident. In contrast, Leonard's speech is forced and mechanical. Forster uses a metaphor to show this gap. "Her speeches fluttered away from the young man like birds. If only he could talk like this, he would have caught the world." Leonard notices the flow of speech and its role in signaling cultural status but fails to grasp its underlying thought. A comment by the narrator makes this clearer. "The great man mean us to use them for sign-posts we mistake the sign-post for the destination. And Leonard had reached the destination." This ironic statement reveals that Leonard mistakes culture itself for the goal. He treats knowledge of famous names as proof of cultural identity but ignores that culture should lead to deeper aesthetic and intellectual dimensions. In this confusion, his mimicry becomes excessive and ineffective and exposes his inability to enter dominant culture.

Critics often label Leonard a "culture abuser" and representative of "culture-snobbery," or as "mistaking means for end." Such interpretations attribute Leonard's failure to individual defect. However, Forster's deeper point may be different. If other members of lower and middle classes are to pursue culture in the same way as Leonard and view culture as the only means of elevating their social status, they may face the same outcome. The label "culture abuser" precisely reflects imperial cultural discourse. It shifts responsibility to the individual and ignores imperial cultural hegemony. In fact, Leonard does not misuse culture. He is excluded by the system of cultural capital and is in turn shaped and consumed by it. Caught between classes, Leonard can neither fully enter the Schlegels' cultural world nor return to an unregulated state. This suspended condition, produced by imperial cultural hegemony, renders him highly vulnerable. Within the social model of disability studies, Leonard's "disability" means a limitation of cultural function and exclusion of the cultural power, which also foreshadows his final elimination.

4. Disabled Body under Imperial Social Elimination

Leonard's death serves as a dramatic critique of imperial hegemony. It shows that imperial oppression goes beyond economic exploitation and cultural regulation. When a body loses economic value and fails to secure recognition within the cultural hierarchy, it becomes "superfluous" to imperial society. At this point, the "disabled" body, already exploited and regulated, is pushed toward elimination. Leonard is a clear victim of this process. The constant risk of unemployment weakens his livelihood. His failure in cultural imitation further erodes his subjectivity. When these two conditions converge, he loses his functional value within the imperial society. His death should therefore not be read as an accidental conflict or a personal misfortune, but the inevitable result of sustained imperial pressure.

From the perspective of plot development, Leonard's death has long been foreshadowed. After losing his job twice, failing to secure help from Henry, and facing social pressure caused by his relationship with Helen, he collapses both economically and morally. His body shows clear signs of breakdown. Chapter Forty-One provides a detailed description of this condition and anticipates his final removal. For example, he loses control for no reason in daily tasks, and is repeatedly overcome by guilt and humiliation; he wakes in the middle of the night and cannot find mental rest; rational thought is gradually replaced by overwhelming pressure. His body feels as if it is constantly scorched and torn apart. The narrative even states that "Leonard had been ruined absolutely." These details show how long-term pressure is inscribed on the body. He gradually loses the ability to sustain daily life and social participation.

During his search for Margaret, his bodily instability becomes more severe. A sense of estrangement over his own body reveals that he is on the verge of collapse. "He felt in curious health; doors seemed to be opening and shutting inside his body, and he had been

obliged to sleep sitting up in bed, with his back propped against the wall." Irregular breathing, rapid heartbeat, and nervous tension prevent him from maintaining basic daily functions. When a person cannot sleep properly, he can no longer fulfill social roles as a clerk, a husband, or a cultural follower. At this stage, Leonard is described as "...too much anxiety had shattered him, he was joining the unemployable." This means he has lost value in the labor market. His previous sources of dignity such as reading, music, and cultural discussion, can no longer be sustained under constant anxiety and fatigue. The repeated opening and shutting of "doors" signals a breakdown in both labor capacity and social interaction. As these functions fail, Leonard's body finally loses social utility and is gradually abandoned.

This dual collapse of bodily and social value leads to his tragic end. Some critics describe his death as a "sacrificial death," arguing that it contributes to an anti-imperial mythology in the novel. Through this sacrifice, the novel exposes the hidden violence within imperial society. This violence is embedded in the behavior of Charles Wilcox. As a defender of imperial capital, Charles strikes Leonard with a sword, which is a symbol of imperial authority [15]. He later dismisses the act, claiming that "he's shamming. Of course I only used the blade." This response reveals a clear disregard for lower-class life. Leonard's body has already been weakened by long-term economic and cultural pressure. The seemingly minor strike becomes the final force that leads to his death.

The scene in which Leonard is crushed by the bookshelf carries further symbolic meaning. The bookshelf, filled with literary classics, is a visible representative of middle-class culture. Books represent education, taste, and class identity functioning as a standard that separates the "civilized" from the "barbaric." Those who own and understand these books have the ability to gain access to the cultural center. In this sense, books embody imperial cultural capital. Leonard spends his life trying to approach this world. He reads classical works, refines his language when discussing literature and music, and imitates the reading taste of the upper class in order to maintain dignity. However, these books do not protect him but instead fall onto his body. "A stick, very bright, descended. It hurt him, not where it descended, but in the heart. Books fell over him in a shower. Nothing had sense." The bookshelf thus becomes a symbol of cultural oppression. Leonard once relied on reading to change his condition, yet he is ultimately crushed by the very objects that represent culture. In this sense, the falling bookshelf marks the final stage in the elimination of the "disabled" body.

The plot after his death further reinforces this meaning [6, 16]. The central question of the novel is "Who shall inherit England." At the end of the novel, the child of Leonard and Helen becomes the future heir of *Howards End*. A descendant from the lower class enters a space that symbolizes English land and tradition. This suggests the possibility of British society beyond rigid class divisions. Meanwhile, the Wilcox family, representing capital, is ultimately punished both morally and legally. This outcome disrupts the imperial order, while reflecting Forster's critical vision of the ultimate decline of imperialism.

Leonard's death cannot be explained solely by immediate causes such as Charles's violence, the falling bookshelf or the heart disease. The decisive factor lies in the imperial rule. Economic exploitation weakens his livelihood. Cultural regulation erodes his dignity and subjectivity. Under this double pressure, his body becomes "disabled" and is eventually eliminated, revealing a broader logic of imperial power. The empire not only produces visible violence in the colonies, but also hidden elimination within the metropole. Leonard is not the only victim [12]. He represents a group of individuals shaped and marginalized by imperial power. In this sense, his death marks not merely a personal tragedy but the completion of a structural process that moves from exhaustion to elimination.

5. Conclusion

In *Howards End*, E. M. Forster uses Leonard's tragic fate to reveal the internal damage of imperialism. At the economic level, constant risk of unemployment and

sustained pressure gradually erode his body. He falls into anxiety and exhaustion, losing both labor capacity and social value. At the cultural level, his imitation of elite culture fails to bring upward mobility. Instead, it weakens his subjectivity and subjects him to cultural regulation. Under the combined force of economic and cultural pressure, his body moves from exhaustion to eventual elimination.

By introducing mimicry from postcolonial theory into the imperial metropole, and combining it with the social model of disability, this paper redefines Leonard's "disability" and reveals an implicit anti-imperial narrative in the novel. It should be noted that this study focuses mainly on Leonard. The imperial implications of other marginal figures, such as maids and workers, still require further exploration. Deeper analysis of these figures would contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of how imperialism shapes class division and reinforces social hierarchy within the metropole. Such analysis would also enrich the interpretation of the novel's critique of empire.

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