

Navigating New Narrative Spaces: Georgina Kleege's *Sight Unseen*

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ABSTRACT

Autobiography projects life in a pure, lucid and simplistic manner. However, in her autobiography *Sight Unseen* (1999), Georgina Kleege contests this idea, urging readers to reassess the ultimate nature of life writing. Her autobiographical text on sightlessness becomes a fundamental location to contest conventional notions of awareness, individuality and the boundaries of language. This research article attempts to study Georgina Kleege's *Sight Unseen* as an autobiography infused with the promising inclusive realm of disability life writing. Her dynamic life writing integrates feminist and disability theories to realize connections with different aspects of identity, gender and sexuality. Kleege, in her autobiography, offers readers a looking glass to see beyond the set conventions of autobiographical account. Her work becomes an exquisite model of Blind Disability Studies.

Keywords: Autobiography, Disability life writing, Identity, Gender, Sexuality.

Throughout the eons and since epochs, immemorial human beings have had the psychological need and urge to reveal their life story. This idea of self-revelation shaped up the conceptual fundamental

archetype of human beings in consonance and combination with their innate nature of storytelling. Through human psychological disclosure, core relation and correlation, the epistemic advantage and emphatic imagination could be propelled from the state of inertia, with which existing universal citizen has been preoccupied. Autobiography projects life in a pure, lucid and simplistic manner. However, in her autobiography *Sight Unseen* (1999), Georgina Kleege contests this idea, urging readers to reassess the ultimate nature of life writing. Her autobiographical text on sightlessness becomes a fundamental location to contest conventional notions of awareness, individuality and the boundaries of language. This research paper attempts to study Georgina Kleege's *Sight Unseen* (1999) as an autobiography infused with the promising inclusive realm of disability life writing. Her dynamic life writing integrates feminist and disability theories to realize connections with different aspects of identity, gender and sexuality. Kleege offers readers a looking glass to see beyond the set conventions of autobiographical account. Her work becomes an exquisite model of Blind Disability Studies. Bearing in mind the horde of human lives and stories, it is expected that an autobiography remains diverse and expansive. Therefore, Kleege's autobiography *Sight Unseen* becomes a crucial paradigm, a testimony of human strength in navigating new narrative spaces.

Georgina Kleege's autobiography *Sight Unseen* turns out to be a crucial example and testament of human strength in navigating new narrative spaces. It is a perfect example of Disability Life Writing. As a young girl diagnosed with macular degeneration at the age of eleven, she felt quite self-conscious about appearing blind. She reveals in her autobiography what actually the word blind denoted to her at that age. "Blind meant the man in the subway station, standing for hours near the token booth, tin cup in hand, a mangy German shepherd lying on a bit of blanket at his feet. That was not how I saw myself" (*Sight Unseen* 15-16).

The categorisation of blindness which associates it with hardship, dependency and dehumanisation, haunted Kleege as a child. It was through a precise, methodical and logical analysis of her

life while writing *Sight Unseen* that she came to terms with herself. Therefore, at the very outset of the autobiography, she confesses: "Writing this book made me blind... Since I began this book, I have learned to use braille and started to carry a white cane" (*Sight Unseen* 3).

Georgina Kleege's *Sight Unseen* remains a milestone in disability life writing as it merges personal account with social and edifying, cultural critique to contest stereotypes of blindness. She calls herself 'legally blind' author and retrieves the narrative of disability, moving beyond tragic tropes to redefine blindness as a unique way of being in the world.

As a skillful, challenging venture into the politics of seeing, the limits of vision and the ways disability reframes what counts as knowledge, evidence and narrative authority *Sight Unseen* delves into a myriad of thought-provoking issues. Across its pages, there is keen dissection not only of the physiological condition of blindness, but also the cultural and textual frameworks that privilege sight as the ultimate arbiter of reality. In doing so, she calls readers to reconsider the ethics of representation, the modalities of perception, and the richness that non visual ways of knowing, contribute to literature, art, and critical interpretation.

At the heart of it, *Sight Unseen* is a critique of sight as an unassailable standard. Kleege argues that vision is not a neutral faculty, but a historically contingent and culturally mediated mode of understanding. This declarative reorientation matters because much of Western prose, criticism and aesthetic theory has implicitly valorised visual clarity as the gold standard of understanding. Kleege's writing foregrounds blindness, coaxes readers to imagine modes of perception that operate through touch, sound, memory, and imagination. Blindness, therefore, is not a lack, but a different constitution of attention, one that keeps the door open to other senses, other forms of evidence, and other narrative strategies.

Kleege's predecessor, like G. Thomas Couser in his book *Recovering Bodies: Illness, Disability and Life Writing* (1997) takes a daring stand conditioning debility by stating about illness, disability and life writing: "For various reasons, even though illness and disability represent forms of marginalization to which we are all vulnerable, they remain truly marginalized topics within the academy" (Couser 4).

Lennard J. Davis in his seminal work *The Disability Studies Reader* (1997) takes the debate further by covering topics such as history of disability, cultural representation, sexuality, technology and activism. The core concept is enforcing normalcy and critiquing the binary of the sound versus diseased mind and body.

In *The Limits of Autobiography: Trauma and Testimony* (2001) Leigh Gilmore states clearly that every woman narrates her personal story in her peculiar way; yet each tells of both (inevitable) pain and personal development. Kleege foregrounds her autobiography with discourses on blindness associated with culture, blind phenomenology, and ocularcentricism. She provides detailed account of her visual experience as to what she can and cannot see, offering a nuanced understanding of sight loss as a spectrum rather than a binary: "As I wrote this book...I was shocked, for instance, to discover that a sighted person sitting in a lawn chair can look down and see individual blades of grass, weeds, and other plants, perhaps even crawling and hovering insects, while all I would see is an expanse of green" (*Sight Unseen* 3).

G. Thomas Couser in the section "Epilogue: The New Disability Memoir" of *Signifying Bodies: Disability in Contemporary Life Writing* compares Kleege's autobiography with Stephen Kuusisto's memoir emphasising that in both texts emphasis was not merely on the loss of vision- though that was a grave issue and undeniable fact of their lives but both insisted on a shifting sense of identity: "For both, the

meaning of blindness changes with its progression, and both come around to the position that blindness is less a matter of the function of their eyes than of the constitution of their I's" (Couser 11).

In her essay "Invisible Disability: Georgina Kleege's *Sight Unseen*", Susannah B. Mintz also points out an inevitable comparison of Kleege's *Sight Unseen* with Nancy Mairs, Lucy Greely, Cheryl Marie Wade, and Anne Finger works. Mintz is of the view that unlike her coevals: "Kleege authorizes her blind gaze to wrench apart the equation of seeing with knowing, exploding conventional binaries of male and female, subject and object, seer and seen" (Mintz 58).

The intersection of blindness, gender and sexuality as portrayed in Kleege's autobiography invites reader for critical appraisal added with close and deep study which are fundamental in contextualising the countless questions *Sight Unseen* poses to further the discourse on disability.

Conclusion:

In her subsequent writing *Blind Rage: Letters to Helen Keller* (2006) and *More than Meets the Eye: What Blindness Brings to Art* (2018), she further theorises the concepts of Blind Disability Studies and reasserts her views about 'gaining blindness'. However, it is in *Sight Unseen*, her autobiography, where Kleege challenges fallacies, misconceptions and she provides detailed account of her visual experience- what she can and cannot see- offering a nuanced understanding of sight loss as a spectrum rather than a binary. She revisits misapprehensions about blind people which permeated throughout history. She studies how literature and film portray the blind as either tragic figures or objects of pity, arguing that these depictions are constructed by the sighted world. Through her narrative life writing, she re-instates the concept of blindness as an exceptional way of thriving in the world. Writing about the 'Phenomenology of Blindness', she pens down her account of 'the invisible disability' and explores the social implications of appearing "normal" while being blind, highlighting the discomfort and misconceptions she faces when she

doesn't conform to stereotypical behaviour. She tries to project her identity and agency as she documents her shift from trying to conceal her impairment to embracing a "blind identity," acquiring braille skills and challenging the societal obsession with eye contact. As a seminal work in disability studies, *Sight Unseen* serves as a counter-narrative, asserting that disabled people are the best authorities on their own experiences, and it rethinks the genre by merging personal stories with critical theories.

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