

■ Neuronarratives of Affliction: Revisiting Embodied Cognition and Corporeality in Lisa Genova's *Left Neglected**

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Abstract

In analyzing Lisa Genova's novel *Left Neglected* as an epitome of neuronarratives, this paper explores the intersections of literary studies and cognitive neuroscience. As both a novelist and neuroscientist, Lisa Genova adeptly amalgamates her comprehension of the human brain's functionality with her ability to render individual experiences and subjective perceptions of brain injury or malady. In *Left Neglected*, the main character Sarah Nickerson experiences an unanticipated accident and subsequently grapples with "hemispatial neglect" or "left neglect," engendered by injury to the right hemisphere of her brain. Sarah endures the ramifications of attention deficit and labors to acknowledge the left sides of her body, her space, and her encompassing environment, thereby radically altering her perceptions of reality in quotidian life. This article scrutinizes the novel through the lens of the phenomenology of illness, accentuating the notions of spatial bodily awareness, absence in presence, and corporeality. By probing into Sarah's endeavors to acclimate to her constraints and reconfigure her relationship with her body and surroundings, the novel offers a glimpse into the experiences of

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women afflicted with illnesses and disabilities within the context of gender norms in the mainstream society. Furthermore, this article investigates individuals' potential for cultivating a reconstituted subjectivity with limited capacity. Drawing upon insights from cognitive neuroscience and literary studies, this research aspires to furnish an intricate analysis of how the novel delineates the complexities of the human mind and body when confronted with adversity.

Keywords: Lisa Genova, *Left Neglected*, neuronarratives, phenomenology of illness, corporeality

Introduction

In light of the burgeoning methodologies and concepts conducive to interdisciplinary research in recent years, the realms of humanities and social sciences have assimilated professional discourses from disparate disciplines into their scholarly inquiries. Pertaining to humanities research, apart from the enduring interdisciplinary explorations encompassing medicine and literature, certain literary investigations have adopted a cognitive neuroscience-oriented perspective. Mark Turner states in his book *Reading Minds*, “The coming age will be known and remembered . . . as the age in which the human mind was discovered. I can think of no equal intellectual achievement,” and proposes “a reframing of the study of English so that it comes to be seen as inseparable from the discovery of mind, participating and even leading the way in that discovery” (vii). The pursuit of the discovery of mind as delineated by Turner bears direct relevance to cognitive science. Up to the present, “the culture of scientific investigation into the artful mind is established and by now indomitable” (Epilogue 306). Building upon this development, this research intends to probe the interdisciplinary examination of neurology and literary study by analyzing Lisa Genova’s novel, *Left Neglected* (2011), scrutinizing the potential for incisively nuanced literary interpretation at the crossroads of neurology and literary investigation.

Left Neglected narrates the tale of Sarah Nickerson, a high-powered executive at a Boston-based consulting firm. Sarah’s existence revolves around her career, her family, and her incessant need to multitask. Nevertheless, her life veers off course when she endures a car accident en route to work. The accident results in Sarah suffering a traumatic brain injury known as left neglect, a condition where the brain is incapable of recognizing the left side of the body and the external environment. Consequently, Sarah’s life is upended as she grapples with her disability and the loss of her capacity to execute even the most rudimentary tasks. Forced to relearn everything from the ground up, including walking, talking, and feeding herself, Sarah’s path to recovery is replete with challenges as she learns to accept her limitations while simultaneously striving to regain her autonomy. Throughout the novel, Genova delves into themes of resilience, acceptance, and the significance of familial relationships. *Left Neglected* is a poignant and thought-provoking work that offers profound insight into the experience of living with a traumatic brain injury and cognitive malfunction. Genova’s portrayal of Sarah’s struggles is both empathetic and perceptive, emphasizing the importance of embodied awareness, self-other relationships, and the pursuit of meaning and purpose in the face of an irrecoverable illness.

Lisa Genova, the author of *Left Neglected*, is a distinguished American

neuroscientist and writer whose fictional works have gained considerable recognition for their examination of neurological disorders and the effects they have on individuals and their families. Holding a PhD in neuroscience from Harvard University, Genova has penned multiple best-selling novels, including *Still Alice*, *Inside the O'Briens*, *Every Note Played*, *Love Anthony*, and *Left Neglected*. Genova's work is praised for its scientific precision and its capacity to provide insight into the frequently obscure realm of neurodivergent individuals. Her books are celebrated for their ability to raise awareness about neurological disorders, while simultaneously resonating on an emotional level and providing a deeply human perspective on constructing revised subjectivity and senses of selfhood through the lens of illness. This paper aims to position narrative fiction within the evolving theories of embodied cognition, which view the mind as intricately connected to the biological brain. Through an investigation of the ways in which individuals are compelled to modify their perspectives and perceptions of the world surrounding them, the article scrutinizes the organic and systemic limitations and potentials of the brain and mind, utilizing phenomenology of illness as an approach. More specifically, the article delves into the protagonist's navigation of hemispatial neglect and traumatic experiences related to the left side of the world, and contemplates the ways in which her experiences contribute to the development of a revised subjectivity and agency.

Convergence of Literature, Cognitive Science, and Neuronarratives

In recent years, the intersection of literature, cognitive science, and neuronarratives has become a burgeoning area of research, attracting scholars from diverse fields to explore the complex cognitive processing involved in reading literature and the ways in which literature shapes our understanding of ourselves and the world. The marriage of literature and cognitive science dwells in the fact that writing in itself is the ultimate representation of the intellectual operation of the mind. In *The Elusive Brain*, Jason Tougaw uses the genre of neuronovels or brain narratives to categorize works that deal with issues such as the world of the brain, character conflict, or neurobiology (3-4). This literary trend aims to delineate a brand new subgenre of narrative fiction, which can be defined as literary works that incorporate advancements in cognitive studies as a prominent thematic element. This inclusion of neurological and cognitive sciences prompts novelists to explore consciousness as a central subject matter and consequently compels a reassessment of the value and significance of narrative fiction.

This nuanced subgenre has incited novelists to rethink the ontological and epistemological aspects of their literary works. Impressive literary novels addressing related subjects include *Enduring Love* (1997) by Ian McEwan, *Motherless Brooklyn* (1999) by Jonathan Lethem, *Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time* (2003) by Mark Haddon, *Atmospheric Disturbances* (2008) by Rivka Galchen, and *Ratner's Star* (1976) by Don DeLillo. In response to the rise of this narrative phenomenon, scholars examined the emerging subgenre of literature in 2008 and termed it “neuronarrative,” which presents “a glimpse of how authors are responding to scientific advances concerning the nature of human consciousness” (Johnson 171). In 2009, Marco Roth described the phenomenon of this emerging genre as “the rise of the neuronovel,” echoing Ian Watt’s seminal work to signify a critical moment for the birth of a key subgenre. A crucial aspect of this genre involves positioning neuroscientific discourse in a fundamental role and employing the discourse as an expression of narrative structure rather than an element of the narrative itself. Since the 1990s, several disciplines, including neuroanthropology and neurotheology, have emerged at the intersection of neuroscience and humanities-social sciences (Ortega and Vidal 327-29).

These so-called “neurodisciplines” scrutinize the intricate interrelationship between brain and mind, while their concomitant theories and methodologies have left indelible imprints on literary research. Through neuroimaging and other sophisticated approaches, neurodisciplines meticulously dissect the complexities of how the brain and nervous system synergize to engender the mind and behavior, as well as how human emotions and affective feelings transmute neural circuitry. Certain neuroscience research findings have endowed writers with the capacity to delineate psychological states of characters with unprecedented profundity, while concurrently inspiring avant-garde methods for literary interpretations and introducing perspectives that diverge markedly from those previously embraced in traditional literary creations. On the one hand, this context has given rise to the burgeoning of neuronovels/brain novels and provoked inquiries regarding the incorporation of neuroscience knowledge within literary analysis. On the other hand, it has elicited questions pertaining to the underpinnings of cognitive behavior in the epistemology of subjects.

Incorporating the novel findings of neuroscience, humanities scholars have also interposed themselves in cognitive science-oriented discourses by employing literary research. Certain literary creations and writings commence to manifest the tangible operations and presentations of mental functionality. Advancements in disciplines such as the philosophy of mind, anthropology, neuroscience, and cognitive evolutionary psychology throughout the past two decades have fostered

the amalgamation of literary research and the cognitive science perspective, thus giving rise to dialogue and reciprocal influence across disciplines. Cognitive literary theorist F. Elizabeth Hart observes that a position of inclusiveness toward a full array of contemporary literary approaches is productive (329). In a crucial way, the evolution of cognitive science and neuroscience offers an alternative perspective for comprehending literature, art, and even popular culture.

In sum, the amalgamation of literature, cognitive science, and neuronarratives constitutes a swiftly burgeoning domain, which possesses immense potential for augmenting comprehension of the processing and experience of literature by readers, as well as enhancing literature's impact on individuals' cognitive activities and perceptions towards the world. The discipline of neuro-literature thus presents a propitious pathway for additional inquiry and investigation, assimilating diverse perspectives to enhance understanding of the human experience. Neuro-literature accentuates the associations between mental operations and biological neurons, contesting traditional philosophical examinations of consciousness, self-identity, and subjective outlooks towards the world (Malabou, "What Is Neuro-Literature" 78-79). It proffers novel insights into the interplay among biology, culture, and ideology, facilitating a profound understanding of the fissures, imperfections, conflicts, and symptoms that manifest in language. Lisa Genova's novel *Left Neglected* epitomizes the manner in which neuro-literature can scrutinize the entwinement of brain illness with culture and ideology, tendering an innovative interpretation of the confluence between cognitive neuroscience and literature. *Left Neglected* delivers an insightful dissection of the estrangement engendered by brain/neurological disorders within the context of neuro-literature. The novel underscores the potential of this interdisciplinary sphere to challenge conventional philosophical explorations of consciousness, self-identity, and subjective perceptions towards the world, while offering fresh insights into the interplay between biology, culture, and ideology.

Phenomenology of Illness: Spatiality of Bodily Awareness, Absence in Presence and Corporeality

Illness necessitates a comprehensive metamorphosis of one's existence, which, unlike in the context of psychiatric disorders, cannot be explicated merely as physical or mental dysfunction. Rather, it demands a perspective of personhood as embodied, situated, and enactive to comprehend how alterations to the afflicted individuals' bodies and capacities impact their life extensively. Although not explicitly addressing illness, phenomenologists such as Edmund

Husserl, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Martin Heidegger, and Jean-Paul Sartre proffer a framework for apprehending human experience in general, which can be adapted to cultivate a philosophical account of illness (Carel 14). Given an emphasis on individuals' first-person perspectives and their experiential encounters with illness in everyday life, this approach engenders a profound understanding of the intricate interrelationship among ailment, corporeality, and the self.

The movement inaugurated by Husserl and the contributions of Merleau-Ponty have played a pivotal role in constructing a theoretical development of bodily discourse. Merleau-Ponty proposes a monistic view of mind and body, positing that the two influence and complement each other. Merleau-Ponty's early philosophical ruminations primarily aim to take one's corporeal perception (the sensible and visible) as the inception point of perception ("Visible" 130). His concept of body ultimately embraces the intentional structure formed by the subject-object integration of consciousness and body as the "phenomenology of the body" in perceiving the world and constructing individual subjectivity, with the two functioning as the anchor and coordinate for one's existence in, engagement with, and perception of the world. The phenomenology of the body unveils the inter-subjectivity of body and mind, dichotomizing body and mind as two inter-dependently operating conduits.

Pursuing this line of reasoning, the phenomenology of illness accentuates the experience of illness, characterized by a sense of bodily estrangement, a forfeiture of autonomy, and an alteration in one's sense of identity. Correspondingly, as a subsidiary of philosophy and medicine, the phenomenology of illness esteems patients' first-person narrative perspectives to expound upon their lived experience of illness (Toombs 229). It acknowledges the subjective and personal facets or projections towards illness, such as somatic sensations, emotions, and significances that individuals ascribe to their symptoms and conditions. In *Left Neglected*, protagonist Sarah Nickerson undergoes an affliction called "left neglect," which impacts her capacity to perceive and attend to the left side of her body following a vehicular collision. By examining Sarah's experience through the lens of phenomenology of illness, readers can glean insight into the ways in which illness shapes the protagonist's identity, relationships, and sense of agency, challenging the fundamental suppositions about self-identity.

A pivotal theme within the phenomenology of illness encompasses the correlation between the body and self. Sarah's symptom of left neglect challenges her sense of corporeal integrity and agency, as she grapples with controlling her movements and traversing the world devoid of her left side's functionality. Her physician discerns her symptoms, while she remains predominantly oblivious to the absence of the left side of all things. In her perception, everything

appears whole and ostensibly normal: “She’s mostly unaware of her unawareness. She’s not aware that the left side of everything is missing. To her, it’s all there, and everything is normal” (77). She characterizes her body as though bisected, akin to half a person, expressing shock and embarrassment by stating, “I know I have a left hand, but I have no idea where it is” (77). This sentiment of bodily fragmentation and loss of autonomy is a prevalent experience for individuals with neurological conditions, underscoring the profound significance of embodied awareness and integration for our sense of self (Maiese 21-24). Sarah’s ordeal exemplifies the manners in which illness can disrupt our somatic sense of self and how this perturbation can impact individual subjects’ identity and agency.

Sarah endures the ramifications of “unilateral neglect,” “hemispatial neglect,” or, more precisely, the “left neglect” syndrome, a substantial impact resulting from partial cerebral damage to her right hemisphere. Hemispatial neglect represents a highly prevalent debilitating phenomenon following right hemisphere brain injury, typified by a behavioral bias in the ipsilateral damaged hemisphere and a loss of contralateral spatial cognizance (Rode et al. 177). Left neglect, a subcategory of unilateral spatial neglect (USN), constitutes a neuro-pathological disorder characterized by an individual’s inability to attend to or respond to stimuli presented within the left portion of the extrapersonal visual field. USN exhibits a higher frequency, severity, and persistence following a lesion of the right hemisphere (Stone et al. 46-47).

This neurological affliction is characterized by manifestations such as left-sided functional impairments, diminished left-side somatosensory cognizance, and an attenuated capacity to accurately gauge left-sided distances or stimulus magnitudes. Individuals suffering from left neglect skillfully capture visual stimuli while their eyes remain shut; contrarily, upon opening their eyes, they manifest an inability to attend to stimuli in the left visual field, which nonetheless engenders a deceptive perception of comprehensiveness and symmetrical representation. Left neglect arises from a diminution in neural resources that can be mobilized through sensory events situated on the left and motor plans directed towards the left side, as neural resources are incapable of concurrently undertaking and processing corresponding sensations or movements on the left side. In cases where neglect is severe, patients may behave as though one-half of the universe has suddenly ceased to exist in any significant form (Mesulam 194). Some individuals with left neglect also endure representational neglect, which consequently impacts their mental image construction and memory performance (Bisiach and Luzzatti 129-30). Left neglect would not transpire without the presence of corresponding targets on the right side. The representation of neglect reconfigures the comprehensiveness of

perceptual and bodily experiences.

The philosophical contemplations incited by this disorder, as reflected in the book's title, remain central to the discourse throughout the novel. The physician informs Sarah's husband Bob that she "has Left Neglect" and that "her brain isn't paying attention to anything on her left. 'Left' doesn't exist to her" (76). Furthermore, Sarah is "predominantly oblivious to her own oblivion," remaining "unaware that the left side of everything is absent" (77). To Sarah, "it's all present, and everything appears *normal*" (77; emphasis added). This dearth of sensory experience on the left side of her body epitomizes USN. Additionally, the narrative accentuates Sarah's inability to execute rudimentary life functions. Initially, owing to left neglect syndrome, Sarah is incapable of independently accomplishing fundamental self-care tasks in her everyday life. For instance, she struggles to put on shoes, bathe herself, dress herself, or fasten her garments autonomously (135-37). Such somatic challenges are prevalent among USN patients and can substantially curtail their independence and competence in performing daily activities.

Sarah's tribulations with external perception also constitute a pivotal theme within the novel. She is rendered incapable of discerning anything left of center, exhibiting an absence of awareness regarding objects and individuals situated on the left side of her central field of vision. Sarah's cognitive constraints become conspicuous as she endeavors to complete tasks. These impediments in spatial cognizance and attentiveness can profoundly impact a patient's capacity to accomplish basic surviving skills.

The manifestation of lost bodily sensation can be comprehended through Husserl's phenomenological elucidation of bodily sensation and corporeality, which contends that corporeality is engendered through a bifurcated function. In one aspect, the body constitutes a tangible fact with an objective spatial extension, possessing all the attributes of physical materials. Conversely, the body imparts "sensation" to the physical substance and orchestrates the intriguing space of self-reflection, permitting external objects to be situated in relation to the corporeal space through analogy (Husserl 36). In the context of Sarah's left neglect symptom, the incapacity to establish a comprehensive bodily perceptual system underscores the critical interpretations of somatic perception in acquiring corporeal knowledge or aptitudes.

The left neglect syndrome induces corporeal agnosia in Sarah, precipitating her unconscious disregard of her body's left side and fostering the erroneous belief that her body's integrated totality excludes the left side. In such a predicament, when she "forgets" her left limbs, she becomes incapable of autonomously executing bodily movements necessitating coordination between the left and

right sides, such as grooming, dressing herself, and even walking: “Buttoning the length of my shirt with Left Neglect and one right hand takes the same kind of singular, intricate, held-breath concentration that I imagine someone trying to dismantle a bomb would need to have. I’ve finished three of the five buttons I intended on buttoning, and I’m utterly exhausted” (137). Her consciousness entirely disregards the left side of her body, as though it were an extraneous existence separate from her corporeal entity.

Owing to this affliction, Sarah must incessantly and consciously remind herself and impel her body to make conscientious efforts to incorporate the side that appears disconnected from her holistic self. Consequently, Sarah reconstitutes her sense of corporeality and re-apprehends her bodily cognizance: “It’s as if the cloth against my skin is informing my brain, *Feel that? That’s your left shoulder. Feel that? That’s your left elbow.* But another part of my brain, haughty and determined to get in the last word, keeps retorting, *Ignore this foolishness! You don’t have a left anything! There is no left!*” (90). For individuals afflicted with left neglect, the body’s left side, analogous to the presence of a prosthetic or alien appendage, alienates the cohesiveness of bodily subjectivity, preventing the body from establishing synesthesia and synchronicity with the body’s other components under the aegis of consciousness. As an outcome, she must deliberately maneuver her body and consciousness to engender proprioception, the awareness of one’s bodily position within spatial dimensions.

As Merleau-Ponty argues, “[T]he body is our general medium for having a world” (*Phenomenology* 146). Through particular physiological instances, Merleau-Ponty accentuates how tactile and even dolorous sensations constitute fundamental elements of human corporeal composition, unveiling the manner in which the body’s intentionality is amalgamated into quotidian functioning. In the context of *Left Neglected*, Sarah’s affliction precludes her from possessing an integrated, whole-body perceptual system, encompassing touch, thereby necessitating conscious manipulation of her body and heightened self-cognizance to generate proprioception. Sarah forfeits not merely her egocentric sensory discernment on her body’s left side but also her allocentric orientation within the external spatial milieu. The external world becomes profoundly distorted. For instance, she is incapable of perceiving individuals, occurrences, or objects situated beyond the epicenter of her visual field. In most cases, she has to concentrate on her movement all the time: “Look left. Scan left. Go left. It sounds simple enough, but how do I look, scan, or go to a place that doesn’t exist to my mind?” (128). By these words, she appears to exhort herself to concentrate her cognition and attentiveness on discerning the authentic world, which, albeit absent from her subconscious stratum, indeed subsists in her surroundings.

Post cerebral injury, her sensory encounters are wholly incapable of apprehending individuals or entities situated on her body's left aspect.

Individuals with unilateral neglect are entirely unaware of the half of the world they have lost, even to the extent of mistaking the remaining half of the external environment they are able to perceive as the entire world. Damage to the right hemisphere of Sarah's brain creates a tremendous gap in her perceptions toward the way her body works, which she took for granted in the past. The proprioceptive self-sense puts the body's orientation, rhythm, and movement within the grasp of one's bodily subject, which is why this bodily intentionality becomes the tacit knowledge that individual subjects take for granted in their daily lives. However, the bodily movements of patients bereft of their proprioception no longer embody tacit knowledge but instead are imbued with unfamiliar bodily cognition that necessitates manipulation in a wholly conscious manner. The salience of bodily perception in the development of bodily erudition and the enactment of ostensibly rudimentary yet intricate and multifarious actions, as well as the labyrinthine interrelation between the body, cognizance, and extrinsic entities in daily existence, is vividly exemplified.

In these pathological delineations, readers discern that the patient's visual, auditory, and kinesthetic consciousness operates aberrantly. Nonetheless, due to Sarah's corporeal incapacity to perceive her left visual field, she can solely exercise conscious control over her bodily posture via her auditory and kinesthetic senses, because of her ineptitude in eliciting auto-reflexivity. To a certain extent, her body no longer maintains a body-to-body subject relationship with herself; her corporeal form has forfeited the capacity to project spontaneous situational metamorphosis. She can no longer depend on her body's impromptu imagination and adaptation. In a way, Sarah modulates her body's impetus, posture, and perception, utilizing her lucid and explicit deliberate cognizance. All of this transpires because she cannot subsist in an imagination devoid of her situational projection but can solely exist in conscious imagination and somatic regulation. Evidently, if one's corporeal entity lacks the faculty to perceive tactilely, it cannot become one's own body within the tacit awareness of quotidian consciousness, and consequently loses ego boundaries.

Sarah's pathological condition, an intricate interplay between the altered corporeality engendered by the alienation of her left side and her subjective consciousness, can be elucidated by Merleau-Ponty's discussions on phantom limbs in his early theory of corporeal perception. According to Merleau-Ponty, the body is the vehicle of being in the world, and having a body is to be involved in a definite environment, to identify oneself with certain projects and be continually committed to them (Dorfman 24). The body is the medium

through which one is conscious of the world. However, in the case of a non-normal state induced by physical disability or brain injury, the patients' habitual worlds stir up customary intentions in their minds, which they can no longer effectively draw into or be involved in, leading to an awareness of their disabilities (Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology* 97-98). The phantom limb sensation experienced by leg amputees occurs when they substitute some sort of stimulus for the stimulation channel from the remaining lower limb to the neural pathway in the brain perceived by the thigh. Patients frequently revert to and ruminate upon sensory experiences they had encountered prior to the loss of their limbs. Such recollections and emotions become intensified and augmented due to the colossal trauma, while their emotions are further projected onto the phantom limbs that have ceased to exist.

The phantom limb sensation and unilateral neglect syndrome concomitantly render the sensations of pain and touch considerably more pivotal than visual factors in the constitution of the frontier of the corporeal boundary of the self. In the context of unilateral neglect, tactile sensations permeate the entire body, engendering an apperception of both external and internal localization of the body as an integrated whole, thereby enabling the body to cultivate proprioception. Proprioception allows a concrete boundary for the self to be generated in the body as a part of the physical world, and a sense of self-reflexivity that transcends the physical body is further produced during interactions with the outer world. As Husserl notes, "the body as such can be constituted originality only in tactuality and in everything that is localized with the sensations of touch" (158). In this context, the senses of touch and kinesthesia constitute a system of self-orientation of the body as an integral component of the external world. Concurrently, both tactile and kinesthetic sensations assume a critical role in the subjects' capacity to orient themselves within the external environment.

In the instance of Sarah, the loss of tactile sensation on the left side of her body is tantamount to forfeiting the corporeal demarcation for this specific segment of her body. Although she can visually perceive the left side of her body, it is likely to be regarded as an instrument or prosthesis extrinsic to her holistic self, as opposed to her authentic self. For example, Sarah constantly speaks to her left hand and says, "Dear Left Hand, please reach up and grab a Diet Coke, it won't budge . . ." (211). The left side of her body cannot function to mediate her consciousness and the outer world. Husserl, in his discussion of corporeality, notes that the body is an organ of the will, the one and only object which is moveable immediately and spontaneously and is a means for producing a mediate spontaneous movement in other things (38-39). The body's inherent spontaneity and its capacity to differentiate between internal and external realms

render it the cornerstone for interactions between the self and the external world, as well as for the progression towards perceiving the other in the quest for intersubjective consciousness. Consequently, the body serves as the foundation and genesis of one's self-consciousness, perception of others, and comprehension of the external world. In this context, Sarah fails to perceive her left arm and leg as integral components of her body, and instead, regards them as instruments or prostheses.

Brain damage causes Sarah to process a pathological experience with physical alienation where mind and body become separated, leading her to the incapability of perceiving any tactile sensation on one side of the body despite the intactness of the limbs. The sensation of phantom limbs further exemplifies the concept "presence in absence," or namely "presence of the absence." Merleau-Ponty, in his course notes from the Collège de France, aspires to construct an ontological framework pertaining to the domain of perceptual experience, predominantly accentuates the supposition that this apprehended world exemplifies a "presence of absence," and advocates for the formulation of a concept of Being (*Institution* 178). This idea highlights the way in which individuals' perceptions of their own bodies intertwine with perceptions of the external world. The unilateral neglect syndrome experienced by Sarah embodies Merleau-Ponty's concept absence in presence, where the absent object can still be present in individuals' perception and understanding. Based on this phenomenon of left neglect, Sarah experiences a bizarre absence in her life, as she is reminded of it every time she attempts to use her left hand or turn her head to the left.

However, this absence is also present in the external world, as Sarah's neglect of the left side of her visual field causes her to miss objects and people that are located on her left side. Sarah's incapability to perceive the left side as well as the outer environment challenges her perceptual faith in the world, as she is no longer able to take for granted that her perception of the world accurately represents reality. The concept of perceptual faith refers to the implicit trust that individuals have in their perceptual experiences of the world, meaning that the things perceived are whole and coherent, even if they are not entirely present. As Merleau-Ponty indicates, subjects must therefore assume a sort of 'perceptual faith' that guarantees the continuity of their sensations and hence the continuity of the world (*Phenomenology* 305-06). The phenomenon of sensory perception entails not only a passive mechanism of receiving and processing external stimuli, but also an active process that necessitates an embodied involvement with the environment. It is not solely a matter of visual or auditory sensing, but rather, a mode of existence in the world. In Sarah's circumstance, her manifestation of left neglect hampers this embodied engagement with the

world, resulting in a fundamental alteration in her self-perception and bodily awareness. With a condition of left neglect, Sarah is present physically but absent in her perception of reality. For example, upon awakening in the hospital after her accident, Sarah describes her incapacity to perceive her husband Bob with the following words: “‘Can you see me now?’ asks Bob. I see the prison, the window, the visitor’s chair, the TV. ‘No,’ I say. . . . ‘To the left.’ ‘There is no left.’ I hear him sigh in frustration” (94-95). Here, her body still has a perceptual faith that her left side is functional, and she is confused and disoriented when it fails to respond to her commands. This absence in her bodily experience creates a sense of disconnection and dissonance between what she perceives and what she knows to be true. She mocks her own situation as ludicrous: “‘Where is my left hand? I have no idea. . . . How about my left foot? That’s also missing. . . . ‘Bob, I know I have a left hand, but I have no idea where it is’” (77). Similarly, when Sarah is undergoing therapy to regain her left-side function, the fact that she can’t see the left side of anything seems surreal (127-29). In this context, Sarah’s experience of unilateral neglect reveals a bodily perception that is fundamentally incomplete and leaves her with a sense of disorientation and confusion, as she is only able to perceive half of the world around her. Consequently, she is forced to rely on external cues to navigate her environment and cannot fully trust her own perceptions. However, through the rehabilitation and cognitive reconstruction process, Sarah comes to understand that perception is not merely a matter of registering the presence of objects, but also involves the recognition of their absence. Thus, absence is not simply the lack of something, but rather a presence that is felt through its non-attendance, and individuals may experience this through encounters with objects that are not there.

In light of this analysis, notwithstanding the physical manifestation of her left arm and leg, Sarah does not perceive them as an integral part of her body but rather as entities separate from herself. Her tendency to address her left hand as though it were a distinct being accentuates this sense of absence. Additionally, the left side of her body appears to be more of a tool or an appendage rather than an intrinsic part of her true identity. The concept of absence, in this context, is not merely a lack of something but rather an entity that is perceptible by virtue of its non-existence. This notion of absence in presence has a profound impact on Sarah’s perception of the world and her place within it.

Female Body, Illness, Disability and Societal Gender Norms

The female body has been historically regarded as a repository of symbolic connotations and its perception and manifestation is intricately intertwined with social, cultural, and political contexts. The corporeal entity, functioning as the locus for sociocultural inscriptions and constituting the terrain upon which sociopolitical contestations and power dynamics transpire, has increasingly emerged as a salient subject for hermeneutic elucidation (Grosz 21). The corporeal embodiment constitutes a conglomeration of multifarious and often inconsistent components that comprise not only physical body parts but also intricate negotiations between personal encounters and the dominant cultural conventions. Sarah's experience of left neglect and her apprehensive consciousness of the scrutinized body serve as a poignant reminder of the significance of recognizing the embodied dimensions of societal gender norms. The novel *Left Neglected*, through its protagonist's struggles and challenges, highlights the urgent need to confront the cultural norms and expectations that perpetuate gendered scripts in mainstream society.

The portrayal of Sarah's experience of left neglect holds relevance for women grappling with illness and disability, whose physical vulnerability is often accentuated by the pressures of contemporary life. Sarah's diminished agency over her body necessitates a confrontation of her identity as a mother and a career woman, highlighting the challenges of reconciling her former abilities with her current bodily constraints. By foregrounding Sarah's plight, the novel exposes the societal demands placed on women to negotiate and balance numerous roles and identities, while simultaneously contending with the exigencies of embodiment.

In the novel, Sarah is portrayed as the quintessential middle-class, white-collar worker. Her occupation in corporate consulting is characterized by an excessive workload of eighty-plus hours per week, an arduous schedule that Sarah attests leaves her with scant opportunity to attend to her own personal welfare. In her own words,

[e]ven with all my years of training and experience, my determined work ethic, and the ability to simultaneously eat, type, and talk, the hardness of it all does sometimes get overwhelming. There are days when there is no room for error, no time for lunch or to pee, no extra minutes to squeeze one more of anything out of me. On those days, I feel like a balloon blown to capacity, ready to burst. (35)

Notwithstanding her vocational aspirations, Sarah simultaneously endeavors to fulfill the standards of her double vocation as a wife and mother. She endeavors to strike a balance between her arduous work schedule and the exigencies of

tending to her three children, allowing scant time for respite or amusement. This conundrum of juggling career and family, especially for women, poses a formidable obstacle. As she explains:

The majority of women in Welmont with children Charlie's age never miss a soccer game and don't earn special good mother status for being there. This is simply what good mothers do. These same mothers herald it as an exceptional event if any of the dads leave the office early to catch a game. The fathers cheering on the sidelines are upheld as great dads. Fathers who miss the games are working. Mothers who miss the games, like me, are bad mothers. (15)

Sarah's self-portrayals accentuate the intricate anticipations and stresses that women encounter in both their professional and personal domains. As an overburdened woman, Sarah's physical being is strained to its thresholds, while she endeavors to balance her familial and occupational duties. This echoes Sandra Lee Bartky's proposition regarding the regulation and mastery of the female body, by means of the patriarchal power dynamic that prevails in modern society. Bartky argues that this power structure shapes a feminine standard that accentuates the command and management of the female body, engendering a sense of incessant scrutiny and self-discipline amongst women (65). When women are confronted with a dissimilar standard from that of men, with regard to familial and social responsibilities, the hierarchical power structure can influence the daily experiences of women and their rapport with their bodies. In this context, Genova implies that a woman who attains excellence in her vocation is also anticipated to give priority to her role as a caregiver, leaving her with less time and energy for herself. In Genova's deployment, Sarah's situation sheds light on the perpetual struggle that women face in balancing their professional and familial responsibilities, within a society that still expects them to prioritize the latter.

These depictions highlight the salience of gender norms in heavily regulating the representations of mothers and wives, in both the public arena of the workplace and the private sphere of familial existence. Even Sarah, perceived as a privileged, white, middle-class, professional woman with purported authority, remains ensnared within the societal doctrines surrounding gender-based roles. The car accident serves as an impetus for Sarah, summoning forth a protracted list of responsibilities she must undertake concerning work, family, and community, illustrating the intricacies of her existence as a working mother. As the novel depicts:

You need to call Harvard before noon, you need to start year-end performance reviews, you need to finalize the B-school training program for science associates . . . you need to email the London office, you need to return the overdue library books, you need to return

the pants that don't fit Charlie to the Gap, you need to pick up formula for Linus, you need to pick up the dry cleaning, you need to . . . you need to . . . (113)

Despite her determination to cope with all the requirements of her career, family, and society, Sarah's story illustrates the societal expectations placed upon women to excel professionally while simultaneously fulfilling their traditional gender roles as wives and mothers.

Notwithstanding, Sarah's traumatizing cerebral injury impairs her aptitude to fulfill these expectations, as she grapples with brain disablement, visual disregard, and physical incapacities. This injury coerces her to confront the restrictions and redefine subjectivity beyond her gender-based functions. The notion that she possessed the capacity to flawlessly execute everything was an illusory concept that had engendered within her a belief in her own invincibility. However, she now finds herself akin to the rest of humanity: fallible and susceptible (214-15). Sarah's cerebral damage also exposes the limitations of gender norms in accommodating disability. She realizes that the expectations of her role do not consider the physical and emotional toll of her injury, and thus she is frustrated by her inability to perform tasks that were once effortless. Sarah articulates her vexation, asserting that she is incessantly reminded of her affliction whenever attempting a task previously accomplished with effortless finesse, as if her brain has the needed knowledge, but her body can't follow the commands (136-37).

Susan Wendell suggests that society portrays disability as a personal tragedy and a medical issue rather than a social problem stemming from oppressive social structures (107). This conception of disability is apparent in Sarah's initial interpretation of her injury as a personal shortcoming, rather than a byproduct of societal inattention to people with disabilities. Sarah is compelled to sustain her performance as though her injury has not impacted her, despite requiring assistance. In the novel, Sarah ruminates, "*You need to get better, you need to get out of here, you need to go home, you need to go back to work, you need to go to Vermont, you need to get better, you need to get out of here, you need to go home, you need to go back to work. . . . What happens if I don't get better? . . . What happens if I don't get better?* For a whisper, it is remarkably difficult to ignore" (115). The aforementioned excerpt delves into Sarah's inner turmoil as she navigates the treacherous terrain of disability and illness. The disruption caused by her left neglect injury has upended her once-established existence, jeopardizing her professional and personal spheres. The pervasive feelings of powerlessness and guilt that stem from her condition weigh heavily on her psychological state. However, in taking on the responsibility of her ailment, Sarah neglects the fact that it is not a result of her actions. Her attempts to conform to conventional

gender roles as a wife and mother while simultaneously juggling the demands of her profession exacerbate her feelings of remorse and inadequacy. Her physical limitations prevent her from fulfilling her prior responsibilities as a caregiver and mother, causing her to falter as she attempts to ascend to the second floor of her home to console her distressed children. The frustration and helplessness that ensue culminate in tears, underscoring the complex emotional and psychological turmoil that Sarah grapples with as a result of her illness. She reflects, “I’m sorry, baby! ‘Don’t cry! Everything’s okay!’ . . . He wants his mother. He wants his mother to walk upstairs and pick him up. And I can’t. I cry” (213). Sarah’s emotional response reveals the impact of gender norms and expectations on women with disabilities, adding yet another layer of difficulty to their already challenging situation.

The Prospect of Revised Subjectivity in Limited Corporeality

Despite the myriad physical and psychological hurdles, Sarah demonstrates her resilience and adaptability in coping with left neglect. In the aftermath of the accident, she embarks on an arduous journey of rehabilitation, propelled by an unyielding determination and a positive attitude. Initially, she maintains an unwaveringly optimistic outlook, confident in her ability to expedite her complete recovery owing to her “type A perfectionist personality” (87). Driven by her quest to restore her former independent and professional status, Sarah remains steadfast in her pursuit, bolstered by her faith in work efficiency and capitalist values. However, this zealous pursuit of her goals has the effect of obscuring her own self-suppression. Sarah believes that her trajectory is a product of her own volition, even interpreting a poster at the hospital as emblematic of her unflagging positivity. Yet, she neglects to engage in introspection regarding the various factors that contributed to her previously frenzied pace of life. Over time, Sarah comes to the realization that reclaiming her past life is a formidable challenge.

During the arduous rehabilitation process fraught with numerous difficulties, Sarah engages in continual self-reflection, examining her lifestyle prior to her illness. Her retrospections may be perceived not only as a means of recovering from a traumatic brain injury, but also as a transformative experience that necessitates a reorientation of her mode of existence. Her prior strategies for accomplishing tasks are no longer viable, and she must learn to navigate a new way of life. As Sarah adapts to her new reality, she discovers that her former way of living was unsustainable and that her ailment has compelled her to confront

her own mortality, prompting her to revise her subjectivity. This self-discovery represents a departure from her previous emphasis on work efficiency and productivity. Initially, she must confront a fundamental lesson, namely, the need to continually acknowledge the existence of the concrete world on her left, noting

the first step in my recovery is to become aware of my unawareness, to constantly and repeatedly remind myself that my brain thinks it's paying attention to all of everything, but in fact, it's only paying attention to the right half of everything and nothing on the left. Every second of the day, it seems, I forget that this is so. . . . The second step, once I become aware of my unawareness, is to expand this knowledge over to the left, to stretch my focus and imagination past what seems like the edge of the earth, and find the other half. (127)

This shift in focus illuminates the significance of self-awareness and acceptance of one's limitations in the process of recovery. Furthermore, Sarah's emphasis on expanding her knowledge and stretching her focus to find the other half of everything suggests a willingness to challenge her preconceived notions and expand her understanding of the new reality. This expansion of knowledge is not limited to her physical recovery but extends to her personal growth and development.

In this manner, Sarah undergoes a significant transformative event that necessitates the construction of a revised subjectivity or self-identity, thereby adapting to her situation. As a consequence, she becomes more resolute and self-assured, refusing to be constrained by the limitations imposed by others. Despite the advice of her husband, Bob, and therapist, Martha, to prioritize her well-being, Sarah resists their attempts to restrict her behavior, as evidenced by her actions (88-89). She exhibits a tenacious determination to lead a fulfilling and relatively normal life, rather than simply existing in a state of safety. She declares:

Whatever I have to do here, I'm ready for it. Work hard, do my homework, get an A, get back home to Bob and the kids, and back to work. Back to normal. I'm determined to recover 100 percent. One hundred percent has always been my goal in everything, unless extra credit is involved, and then I shoot higher. Thank God I'm a competitive, type A perfectionist. (87)

By embracing this newfound sense of agency, Sarah embodies George Canguilhem's idea that illness can transform and promote growth, as it becomes "a new way of life for the organism" (44). Through confronting her limitations and reevaluating her priorities, Sarah finds a more fulfilling existence. Thus, left neglect, while a struggle and a loss, also underscores resilience and adaptation in the face of adversity.

Sarah's revised subjectivity represents a form of creative resistance, in which

individuals with illness, injury, or disability may seek to challenge dominant narratives and assert their own agency. Despite being informed of her limitations, Sarah's persistence and self-directed approach to rehabilitation is evident in her determination to train herself to perform daily tasks with left neglect (137). In addition to the rehabilitation process, Sarah becomes exasperated with her physical therapist, who is responsible for aiding her recovery, and chooses to take charge of the situation herself by clandestinely engaging in exercises that she knows will assist in her recuperation (155). With left neglect syndrome, Sarah describes her experience as doing a homework exercise. As her right hand crosses her body's midline into the unfamiliar territory of the left side, she feels uneasiness (182). This sensation is reminiscent of an unconditional trust exercise, involving a mix of instinctive fear, inner courage, and unquestioning belief.

Through her actions, Sarah challenges the traditional notion of capabilities and redefines it as a dynamic and fluid concept. Capabilities, traditionally understood as a static set of skills and opportunities necessary for a fulfilling life, are reimagined by Sarah as adaptable and subject to transformation. Her perseverance and determination to perform everyday tasks with left neglect demonstrate that capabilities are not fixed and can be reshaped through creative and innovative means. In her book *Creating Capabilities*, Martha Nussbaum argues that individuals with disabilities often face significant barriers to achieving the capabilities they need in order to flourish, and that this can lead to a sense of shame or inadequacy (82). Acts of creative rebellion can be a way for individuals with disabilities to challenge these barriers and assert their own agency, by finding creative solutions to the challenges they face and refusing to be defined by their limitations. As for Sarah, she starts to experiment with new ways of doing things in order to accommodate her disability, and all these acts of creative rebellion allow Sarah to reassert control over her body and agency. It is possible to live a full and meaningful life even in the face of significant physical challenges.

The emerging fields of neuro-literature and neuro-philosophy have raised critical questions about the impact of brain damage or alterations on self-identity. The concept of destructive plasticity emphasizes that brain injury can reshape cognition, leading to the emergence of new, distinct self-identities, rather than a mere compensation for or restoration of previous cognitive capacities (Malabou, *The New Wounded* 60). The novel *Left Neglected* delves into this transformative process through Sarah's traumatic brain injury, which erases her left-side world and forces her to confront her past and future. As she strives to recover and regain independence, Sarah also undergoes a reassessment of her identity in the light of her altered circumstances. This process is framed as a "dark double" of positive and constructive plasticity, which can "make form through

the annihilation of form” and “create an identity through loss of past identity” (Malabou, *The New Wounded* xix). Through this disruptive plasticity, the protagonist endeavors to gain a deeper comprehension of identity over time and cultivate a revised self-identity.

Amidst her injury and subsequent recuperation, Sarah undergoes a profound transformation in her sense of self and existence, which can be apprehended through the framework of destructive plasticity. A notable aspect of Sarah’s revised subjectivity is her newfound cognizance of the precariousness of her corporeal and cerebral faculties. Preceding her injury, Sarah had taken her physical and cognitive aptitudes for granted, presuming them to be constant and trustworthy. Nonetheless, following her injury, Sarah becomes keenly conscious of the vulnerability of her own physique and mentality. As Malabou elucidates, patients with cerebral lesions epitomize the malleability of such injuries, engendering distinct identities through obliteration rather than duplication, thereby unveiling the presence of “destructive plasticity” that shapes the psyche via identity disassembly (*Ontology* 18). Sarah’s experience exemplifies this idea, as she is forced to confront the fragility and contingency of her own body and mind in the aftermath of her injury, demonstrating remarkable resilience and adaptation which help to illuminate her revised subjectivity in the face of destructive plasticity. After months of rehabilitation and inner struggle, Sarah redefines and accepts her illness, learning to coexist with it through her setbacks. “Everything stopped,” says Sarah, “[a]nd although much of the stillness of the past four months has been a painful and terrifying experience, it has given me a chance to lift my head up and have a look around. And I’m starting to wonder. What else is there? . . . Maybe there’s a different road for me with a more reasonable speed limit” (287). After much self-reflection, despite rebuilding much of her ability, she refuses to return to her former job. Instead, she chooses a new path in life due to her illness. By redefining the value of her current existence, the loss of her left side becomes a form of salvation, allowing her to re-examine whether her life before the accident was worth living.

As she learns to adapt to her new reality, Sarah discovers new aspects of herself and her capabilities, a sort of destructive plasticity, which is not only a shattering force, but also a force of transformation and creativity, opening up new possibilities for being and becoming. Sarah’s experience embodies this idea, as she discovers new strengths and abilities that were previously unknown to her. As she indicates at the end of the novel, “I smile, . . . for going where my Neglect has taken us, for getting the new me. Because while I still hope for a full recovery, I’ve learned that my life can be fully lived with less” (320). The loss of Sarah’s left side becomes an important metaphor, symbolizing everything

that had been overlooked in the past, and is now being regained through this “loss.” As a result, Sarah makes up a chant for her revised subjectivity: “Look left, scan left, go left. I find my diamond ring and wedding band. Me and Bob. Look left, scan left, go left. I find my pink, plastic watch. My good friend, Heidi. Look left, scan left, go left. I find my silver charm bracelet and the three dime-sized discs. Carlie, Lucy, and Linus. Look left, scan left, go left” (320).

The vicissitudes of Sarah’s experience attest to a profound transformation in her ontological orientation, which is anchored in the concept of destructive plasticity. Her injury disrupts her sense of self, bringing into sharp relief the contingency and provisionality of her previously established modes of existence. The resulting upheaval exposes the inadequacy of her previous ways of being and renders them vulnerable to change and reconfiguration. This recognition of the tenuous nature of her embodied and cognitive faculties constitutes a potent illustration of the transformative potential of her injury and recovery, as it compels her to question and revise her preexisting assumptions about the nature of the self and its relation to others. Amidst formidable challenges, Sarah’s journey to rehabilitation has become a testament to personal growth and self-discovery. Despite the turbulent nature of her recovery, she has emerged with a newfound appreciation for the relationships in her life. Through the lens of her disability, Sarah has been able to reevaluate her connections with others and her place in the world. As she grapples with adversity, she comes to realize the subjectivity of her own existence and the profound impact that her relationships have on shaping her identity.

Conclusion

In the absence of maladies, the human form tends to recede peripherally, adopting a passive, unobtrusive presence that frequently eludes cognizance. Focus is diverted to quotidian activities, neglecting the intricate inner machinations of the corporeal being. However, when perturbations emerge, individuals confront their bodily existence, contemplating potential anomalies. During these episodes, the somatic experience becomes disconcerting and perplexing, as the body transforms into an enigmatic, disjointed entity beyond their control. This estrangement and impotence intensify amid illness, forcing individuals to face their physical constraints. The ailing body becomes a paradoxical entity, simultaneously familiar and alien, recalcitrant to attempts at mastery. In the case of the novel *Left Neglected*, symptoms associated with cerebral injury exacerbate feelings of powerlessness, subjecting individuals to their corporeal dominion. Thus, illness serves as a stark reminder of the intricate mind-body

relationship and the impact of physical well-being on self-perception. Despite its familiarity, the body remains an enigmatic, multifaceted construct, continually astonishing and defying individuals' anticipations.

A comprehensive examination of the literary work *Left Neglected*, utilizing the intricate nuances of the phenomenology of illness, elucidates essential principles, including corporeal cognizance, the phenomenon of absence coexisting within presence, and the manifestation of the human form's materiality. Sarah's experience with left neglect further highlights the amalgamation of prevailing gender norms and the intersectionality of infirmity and affliction among women. The novel intricately delineates Sarah's unyielding challenge to recontextualize her relationship with her physicality and her surroundings, ultimately exemplifying the prospect of cultivating a reconfigured subjectivity within the confines of limited faculties.

Left Neglected sheds light on the intricacies of human experience and the ways in which individuals navigate adversity. By examining the interplay between the protagonist's identity as a woman and her struggle with left neglect, this novel offers valuable insights into the gendered dimensions of illness and the potential for renegotiating one's sense of self in the wake of life-altering circumstances. In conclusion, this comprehensive exploration of *Left Neglected*, through the utilization of the phenomenology of illness and an interdisciplinary methodology, illuminates the novel's profound themes and offers a testament to the resilience and adaptability of the human spirit. Sarah's journey serves as an emblematic reminder of the crucial importance of self-acceptance, as well as the inexorable resilience of the human psyche when confronted with affliction and adversity.

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關於苦痛的神經學敘事： 莉莎·潔諾娃《被忽略的左側》中 體現認知與身體感概念再探

摘要

從文學的角度而言，書寫本身即是心智運作的極致表現，近年來，隨著神經科學的發展，書寫的內容重新探究大腦功能如何影響或改變人類所認知外在世界的「真實」。莉莎·潔諾娃兼具小說創作者與神經科學學者的雙重角色，她的《被忽略的左側》巧妙地以一位大腦損傷的個體為主角，結合神經認知功能的理解，串聯成一特殊的生命敘事。主角莎拉因意外事件右腦嚴重受損，造成「左側忽略」(left neglect) 後遺症。就內在感知而言，患者無法反射性地知覺到自己身體左側的感官經驗；就外在感知而言，亦無法察覺到中央視野左側的人事物之存在。透過文學性的再現，此作品關注體現認知 (embodied cognition)、身體感 (corporeality)、自我與他者的關係、可見與不可見、再現與忽略、可得與不可得等議題之哲學層次思考。本文將《被忽略的左側》作為神經學敘事的縮影，以身體知覺與主體意識為媒介，探索文學研究和認知神經科學跨領域匯流的可能性。以疾病現象學的視角審視這部小說，強調身體的空間意識、在場中的缺席 (absence in presence) 與關係性主體意識等概念，探究主體如何適應身體限制，重新調和身體和周圍環境的關係，以及重新建構主體性的可能。

關鍵字：莉莎·潔諾娃、《被忽略的左側》、神經學敘事、疾病現象學、身體感