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Embodied Resistance: Reimagining Disability, Desire, and Defiance in Ilya Kaminsky's *Deaf Republic*

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Abstract: “Sonya and Alfonso teach signs in Central Square. When a patrol walks by, they sit on their hands. We see the Sergeant stop a woman on her way to the market, but she cannot hear. He loads her into a truck. He stops another. She does not hear. He loads her into a truck. A third points to her ears. In these avenues, deafness is our only barricade” (Kaminsky 22). When authoritarian violence silences speech, *Deaf Republic* by Ilya Kaminsky turns deafness into defiance. Set amid military occupation, the townspeople’s voluntary refusal to hear becomes a political weapon, with sign language forming a collective grammar of dissent. Kaminsky fuses his Ukrainian roots with a profound critique of violence, censorship, and resistance. This paper reframes disability not as a lack, but as a form of power- where silence, sign language, intimacy and embodied experience challenge the tyranny of audist and ableist norms. It interrogates the gendered dimensions of disability, critiquing mainstream feminist discourse for sidelining the desires of disabled women for motherhood and intimacy- often misreading these desires as forms of submission. Through *Deaf Republic*, Kaminsky reclaims marginalized identities, illustrating how motherhood, sexuality, and trauma can become insurgent forces. His work resists the erasure of non-normative bodies by asserting silence, desire, and embodiment as tools of survival and defiance, compelling us to reconsider the subversive power embedded in what is too often dismissed as weakness- resonating profoundly with the tenets of Crip Theory.

Keywords: Deafness, Embodied communication, Violence, Crip theory, Power, Resistance, Gender, Sexuality.

Ilya Kaminsky’s *Deaf Republic* is a striking meditation on disability, emigration, and resistance, deeply shaped by his personal history. Born in Soviet-era Ukraine, Kaminsky lost his hearing at the age of four due to a misdiagnosis, an event that not only marked his body but also positioned him within a world that

often equates disability with silence and powerlessness. However, through his work *Deaf Republic*, he is not merely presenting a collection of poems but a profound meditation on silence as both oppression and defiance. Kaminsky grew up in a society where silence was both a personal reality and a state-enforced mandate- one that demanded compliance from Jews, dissidents, and other marginalized groups through fear, oppression, and erasure. Fleeing to the United States as a Jewish refugee in 1993, he found himself navigating another form of displacement, where language, identity, and belonging were renegotiated. Therefore, in his work *Deaf Republic*, which is also styled in the verse-drama form, the power structures dictate whose voices are heard, whose bodies are controlled, and how silence, whether enforced or chosen, functions as both oppression and survival. By unsettling the reader's assumptions about agency and communication, Kaminsky's *Deaf Republic* forces a confrontation with the politics of disability, one's psychological and existential exile, as well as the pervasive violence during tumultuous times, challenging the very boundaries between impairment and resistance, passivity and power.

Kaminsky explicitly links the persecution of deaf individuals to systemic violence against marginalized communities, illustrating how disability becomes a constructed threat under authoritarian regimes. This can be seen in the militants' attempt to silence the deaf through the banning of sign language, which can be understood as a form of "disciplinary power", attempting to normalize and homogenize communication in the poem "Checkpoints" in *Deaf Republic*- "In the streets, soldiers install hearing checkpoints and nail announcements on posts and doors: DEAFNESS IS A CONTAGIOUS DISEASE. FOR YOUR OWN PROTECTION ALL SUBJECTS IN CONTAMINATED AREAS MUST SURRENDER TO BE QUARANTINED WITHIN 24 HOURS!" (Kaminsky 22). Such announcement not only dehumanizes but also pathologizes deafness, reinforcing the historical tendency to frame disabled bodies as aberrations requiring control, isolation, or eradication. This reflects the broader historical erasure of disabled voices, as societies have often sought to cure or eliminate those deemed non-normative rather than recognize their agency.

However, the dominating power dynamics between the occupying forces and the community is disrupted when the deaf boy puppeteer, Petya, challenges the authority of soldiers in the poem "Gunshot" in *Deaf Republic* upon the sudden arrival of militants during the puppet show in the town- "Sonya watches her

puppet, the puppet watches the Sergeant, the Sergeant watches Sonya and Alfonso, but the rest of us Petya lean back, gather all the spit in his throat, and launch it at the Sergeant” (Kaminsky 11). His resistance which is an embodied rejection of imposed silence is met with lethal force, as he is immediately shot, further underscoring the erasure of the marginalised and disabled individuals. This incident reveals how oppressive systems perceive even the smallest acts of defiance as existential threats.

However, when this young, deaf boy, Petya is executed by the militants for clapping at a public killing, the townspeople respond not with direct confrontation but by deliberately adopting deafness as a means of noncompliance. Their refusal to hear or respond transforms silence into a tactical mode of resistance, subverting traditional notions of both power and passivity. The town’s collective feigning of deafness in response to military violence also mirrors the historical silencing of marginalized communities- paralleling not only the Jewish persecution and state oppression but also the systemic erasure of disabled voices. Therefore, Kaminsky’s portrayal of silence is uniquely situated within disability studies: rather than depicting deafness as mere absence, he reclaims it as a radical, embodied resistance to authoritarian control, rooted in the physical, performative, and communal aspects of feigned deafness, as is also mentioned in the poem, “Such Is the Story Made of Stubbornness and a Little Air”- “What is silence? Something of the sky in us”- explicitly showcasing a force imbued with meaning, reinforcing Kaminsky’s broader exploration of nonverbal defiance (Kaminsky 47).

This resistance takes shape through the emergence of a communal sign language. The line “And yet, on some nights, townspeople dim the lights and teach their children to sign” underscores their defiance, as does “we were never silent. We read each other’s lips and said one word four times”, reinforcing that silence becomes a shared, resistant language against oppressive forces (Kaminsky 71). Kaminsky, therefore, reclaims deafness from a pathologized metaphor into a radical, insurgent identity- one that, far from isolating, fosters an alternative cultural and political order, which is also clearly observed when Kaminsky states in “Notes”- “The deaf don’t believe in silence. Silence is the invention of the hearing” (Kaminsky).

Thus, Ilya Kaminsky’s *Deaf Republic* exemplifies the intersection of crip theory, activism, and systemic oppression, demonstrating how disability functions as a form of political resistance rather than mere bodily limitation. Deafness, silence, and the use of sign language are operating as the collective political

stances that disrupt ableist structures. In *Deaf Republic*, the self-adopted deafness of the townspeople following Petya's murder can be understood as a radical reorientation of disability from a pathological condition to a site of resistance. The community appropriates it as a form of collective defiance, constructing an alternative semiotic world through sign language. This shift aligns with Robert McRuer's conceptualization of crip theory, which he describes "not as a fixed and delimited field but as a collection of positions, practices and perspectives against compulsory able-bodiedness, compulsory heterosexuality, and their intersections" (McRuer 68). In this framework, the townspeople's silence is a conscious withdrawal from the normative auditory regime enforced by the oppressor. Moreover, their shared adoption of sign language becomes both a symbolic and material rejection of the hegemonic discourse, transforming deafness from a medicalized or tragic identity into a chosen and empowering modality of communication. Thus, what is conventionally framed as impairment is refigured as a deliberate rupture of normative structures, enacting crip theory's core objective: to expose and resist the structural investments in able-bodiedness that underpin systems of power.

The townspeople's use of sign language exemplifies a shared redefinition of identity, as it forges a new mode of resistance that dismantles normative, phonocentric power structures. This also illustrates how marginalized bodies construct alternative cultural and linguistic spaces beyond the dominant normative discourse. Such linguistic transformation allows the townspeople to construct an alternative space of resistance and challenges the assumption that spoken language is the only valid means of communication. In adopting a shared mode of non-verbal expression, the people of Vasenka assert their own political and cultural autonomy resisting the state's control over communication. The town's silence is thus not passive submission but a calculated refusal, mirroring historical acts of deaf resistance against linguistic imperialism, such as the suppression of sign language in oralist education.

Historically, deafness has been framed as an affliction necessitating either religious salvation or national assimilation. The 19th-century transition from viewing deaf people as spiritually isolated to linguistically and culturally alien reinforced paternalistic narratives that sought to erase sign language in favor of oralism. The metaphor of silence as a void, imposed by hearing communities, reflects a broader ideological attempt to define deafness as lack rather than presence (Baynton). However, *Deaf Republic* challenges this imposed absence, reconstituting silence as an autonomous, fertile space of resistance rather than an affliction

to be remedied. By constructing their own linguistic enclave, the townspeople invert the audist metaphor of deafness as foreignness, transforming it into a site of communal solidarity. Their collective signing disrupts the state's phonocentric control, echoing historical deaf communities that have resisted assimilation.

Deaf Republic, through its innovative style, highlights the subversive power of non-verbal discourse. The collection reshapes literary conventions, making it a vital contribution to disability poetics. It blends poetry and drama, using visual, linguistic, and performative elements to craft a layered narrative of resistance. Its theatrical structure, with a prologue and epilogue, provides a fluid storytelling framework, while the invented sign language adds a semiotic dimension beyond words. The illustrated hand gestures function as both a narrative tool and a symbol of defiance, turning silence into a form of speech. By integrating visual signs with poetic language, Kaminsky foregrounds the corporeality of communication, emphasizing the body as a site of meaning-making. This fusion of text, image, and gesture reinforces disability studies' critique of phonocentric literary norms, challenging spoken language as the dominant mode of expression.

It is also significant to note that the townspeople's use of sign language in *Deaf Republic* is not entirely an act of agency born out of free will but also a necessary adaptation to oppression- a forced resolve rather than a chosen rebellion. While their signing resists the state's phonocentric control, it also comes at a cost, as seen in "And Yet, on Some Nights", where silence is both a form of defiance and a survival strategy. The tension between resistance and coercion complicates the idea of agency, showing that while sign language disrupts state power, it is also a desperate response to systemic violence. Their choice to sign is, in many ways, dictated by the brutality surrounding them, raising the question of whether agency can truly exist when survival is at stake. However, it is in the way Kaminsky presents *Deaf Republic* that compels us to see disability not as absence but as defiance. His powerful depiction of sign language transforms enforced silence into a subversive act, making survival itself a radical resistance against oppressive power structures.

Kaminsky moves beyond conventional narratives of passive suffering, emphasizing instead how resistance is lived and experienced through the body itself. The townspeople do not merely declare themselves deaf; they enact it through their bodily gestures, altered modes of communication, and deliberate disengagement from auditory authority. For instance, in the "Dramatis Personae", it is specified by Kaminsky that in the puppet theatre run by the Brothel Matron Momma Galya, "GALYA'S PUPPETEERS—teach signs

from the theater balcony, as if regulating traffic. For Soldier—finger like a beak pecks one eye. For Snitch—fingers peck both eyes. For Army Jeep—clenched fist moves forward” (Kaminsky 7). Their resistance is not symbolic alone- it manifests in their refusal to respond to verbal commands, their reliance on sign language as a covert system of defiance, and their collective reconfiguration of silence into an active political stance.

Foucault states his book *The History of Sexuality Volume I* that “where there is power there is resistance” (Foucault 95). Thus, power is inscribed on bodies, but also that bodies, in turn, resist by reappropriating the very mechanisms used to control them. The deafness in *Deaf Republic* is also not just metaphorical but physically performed, shaping movement, interaction, and survival strategies. Moreover, *Deaf Republic* critiques authoritarian regimes’ regulation of bodies and voices, drawing attention to the historical policing of disabled identities. The town’s resilience, however, undermines the erasure of the disabled existence, as silence is reconfigured into a powerful form of non-compliance. Kaminsky extends this resistance beyond collective deafness to individual autonomy, particularly through the women characters, who identified themselves as deaf representing the communal resistance, reclaim agency via acts of defiance, maternal strength, sexuality, and physical resistance. The brothel women’s insurrection also showcases how marginalized bodies resist oppressive forces, reclaiming agency through defiance and strategic subversion of power.

In *Deaf Republic*, Sonya and Alfonso’s relationship embodies how intimacy and desire become means of survival in an oppressive world, resisting war’s attempt to reduce bodies to instruments of suffering. Their need for touch, for closeness, and for the affirmation of love in moments of emotional pain and turmoil highlights the corporeality of communication- where gestures and physical connection replace spoken words, forming an alternative language of defiance. This can be witnessed in the poem “Sonya Considers Happiness” where Sonya’s physical restraint- “I hold him down with my smaller body”- is not just an act of control but a desperate assertion of presence, anchoring her husband, Alfonso, against his self-destruction (Kaminsky). His drinking- “You think it is brave to drink vodka all morning on an empty stomach”-reflects his disillusionment, yet Sonya remains a stabilizing force. The war’s intrusion into their private space- “They are bombing his hospital office” reveals that even spaces of care and healing are not spared (Kaminsky). Alfonso’s response, laying his glasses “on the table like a shining weapon,” transforms an ordinary object into an emblem of quiet

resistance (Kaminsky). However, their love refuses to be eclipsed by violence as Alfonso in the poem “While the Child Sleeps, Sonya Undresses” says- “I am of deaf people and I have no country but a bathtub and an infant and a marriage bed!” (Kaminsky 29). This is not escapism but an act of defiance- reaffirming agency through corporeal connection. Sonya’s final assertion in the poem “Sonya Considers Happiness”- “But I am a ripe woman a man could be happy”- rejects war’s attempt to render bodies sites of mere suffering, instead reclaiming sexuality as a space of resilience (Kaminsky). Kaminsky does not depict desire as passive surrender but as an active reclamation of selfhood amidst destruction. In times of war, where bodies are often reduced to instruments of suffering, their relationship asserts the importance of love and desire in maintaining agency. Rather than portraying sexuality as a site of subjugation, Kaminsky presents it as a means through which Sonya and Alfonso affirm their existence and resist dehumanization, striving to remain fully human despite the violence engulfing them.

Through a Foucauldian lens, it can be well witnessed how *Deaf Republic* challenges the ways in which power operates over bodies, particularly disabled and gendered bodies. Foucault in his work *Discipline and Punish* conceptualizes power not as a singular oppressive force but as a network of relations that discipline bodies through norms and regulations (Foucault 176). In this context, the authoritarian regime in *Deaf Republic* mirrors biopolitical control, where bodies are surveilled, silenced, and denied autonomy. However, Kaminsky’s portrayal of women- particularly Sonya and Momma Galya- subverts this regulatory power despite the heavy surveillance and threats surrounding their lives. In times of war, women’s bodies are often sites of forced subjugation and violence, especially the disabled ones. However, Sonya in the poem “Sonya Considers Happiness” says- “When the bombs fall we make children.” Similarly, Momma Galya and the women in the brothel defy their fate- not rejecting their sexuality, but wielding it strategically against the violent military personnels. They turn desire into resistance, subverting the very power structures that meant to oppress them. In “Galya’s Puppeteers,” Kaminsky writes: “Beautiful are the women of Vasenka, beautiful. When she licks the palm of his hand, he laughs. When finally he passes out, she strangles him with a puppet-string” (Kaminsky 56). The intimacy expected of them becomes a tool of war, demonstrating that their bodies are not passive vessels of oppression but active instruments of defiance. This illustrates a radical inversion of power dynamics, where seduction becomes a prelude to revolt. The performance of femininity, often socially

coded as submission, is here strategically re-scripted as resistance. These women convert their sexualized identities into tools of disruption, challenging the structures that seek to commodify and control them. In doing so, Kaminsky reframes the brothel not as a site of degradation, but as a battleground where the body itself becomes an instrument of political action.

This aligns with Tom Siebers' assertion in his book, *Disability Theory*, which states that the body is not merely shaped by social forces but can also influence and transform them: "It is as capable of influencing and transforming social languages as they are capable of influencing and transforming it" (Siebers 68). By embracing desire and wielding it as a strategic force, the women of Vasenka exemplify Siebers' notion that the body is not merely subjected to cultural narratives but is an active participant in rewriting them.

Kaminsky's portrayal of motherhood forcefully unsettles conventional and reductive narratives. Sonya's decision to conceive is not an act of submission but a deliberate assertion of agency within a world that systematically seeks to annihilate her identity. In the poem "Question," Kaminsky pointedly asks, "What is a child? A quiet between two bombardments," capturing how even the most intimate choices become radical acts of defiance in times of violence. This lens compels a critical reassessment of feminist discourse which, while rightly critiquing motherhood as a socially imposed mandate, has often failed to account for women historically denied the right to choose it. Particularly glaring is the silence surrounding disabled women who are routinely excluded from dominant frameworks of marriage and motherhood, their erasure constitutes a deep-seated form of structural marginalization. Kaminsky's poetry does not merely evoke this absence; it exposes the conceptual blind spot within feminist politics, reminding us that resistance must also include the struggle to access roles that others are forced to escape. In doing so, he reframes motherhood not as compliance, but as a contested and potent site of autonomy for those rendered invisible.

Sonya's pregnancy represents continuity and resistance- her child, Anushka, becomes more than a symbol of survival; she became a testament to the refusal to let violence dictate the terms of existence. She later on provides significant amount of purpose to Momma Galya's life who assumed the role of a mother by saving her after Alfonso and Sonya were ruthlessly killed. This is evident in the poem "Lullaby" where Momma Galya said- "I look at you, Anushka, and say to the late caterpillars goodmorning, Senators! This is a battle worthy of our weapons" (Kaminsky 64). Her maternal identity, born of violence and shaped by loss,

becomes an emblem of ethical resistance- one that undermines conventional roles assigned to women and prostitutes within both literature and society. In choosing to protect life in a world that actively annihilates it, Galya reclaims agency and repositions motherhood as an insurgent, subversive force. By reclaiming sexuality and motherhood as acts of resistance in the world regulated by stringent authoritarian regimes, the women in *Deaf Republic* challenge both the authoritarian forces that seek to control them and the societal structures that dismiss their agency, suggesting that oppression is not only about being forced into restrictive roles but also about being denied the power to choose them.

Kaminsky's *Deaf Republic* constructs a nuanced landscape of resistance, where agency emerges not through grand gestures but through the embodied defiance of the marginalized. In doing so, Kaminsky presents a profoundly layered vision of dissent- one that is intimate yet political, silent yet forceful, and rooted in the everyday negotiations of choice, constraint, and collective resilience. However, rather than offering resolution, the collection unsettles the reader, raising enduring questions about language, complicity, and the durability of dissent. In its refusal to present a singular mode of rebellion, *Deaf Republic* invites us to reconsider how silence, often construed as powerlessness, might instead become a site of radical potential- a space where resistance takes root in the most unexpected forms.

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