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Representation of disability and childhood trauma in what happened to you and a helping hand

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Abstract--Children with disabilities are more prone to be traumatized, especially when they happen to recall painful experiences from their pasts that might have proximities to their impairments. Authentic representation of disability is lacking in literature targeting children and young adults. Authors with disabilities have to undergo many hindrances for publishing their literary works. The study aims to critically analyze the two texts by comparing the representation of characters with disabilities by disabled, and non-disabled writers. The study shows that there is misrepresentation in characterisation and use of language in the narrative by a non-disabled author. Diversity in children's literature is given the required justice only when readers, both disabled and non-disabled are able to see and relate themselves in the books that they read. It is important to educate young readers to socialize with disabled people, and to create awareness regarding the suppressed psyche of people with disabilities and to let their voices be heard.

Keyword--disability, childhood trauma, suppressed psyche.

Introduction

“The marvelous richness of human experience would lose something of rewarding joy if there were no limitations to overcome. The hilltop hour would not be half so wonderful if there were no dark valleys to traverse.” (Keller) Learning and physical disabilities affect millions of children each year, making them eligible to receive special education programmes (National Center for Education Statistics, 2018). In children's and young adult literature, characters with disabilities should be

depicted in a realistic manner. In addition to giving readers with factual and realistic facts about a handicap, writing should promote empathy and acceptance (Miller,2012).

It's difficult to find an authentic representation of disability in books for children and young adult. "According to the Cooperative Children's Book Council's (CCBC) 2019 study, a disabled main character appeared in only 3.4 percent of all children's literature. Finding disabled protagonists who represent multiple marginalized identities, such as disabled characters of color, disabled LGBTQ characters, disabled religious and cultural minorities, or disabled fat characters, are even more difficult. Given the landscape of existing disability media and the barriers disabled authors face when trying to get published, these statistics are unsurprising."(Leary)

There are only a few books that expect readers to empathize with a diverse range of people with disabilities, including multiple marginalized disabled characters. One of the reasons for lacking authentic representation of disability is that: It is difficult for disabled authors to get published. Before their book is acquired, a disabled author must go through a series of industry gatekeepers, including literary agents and editors, and they face challenges at every turn, such as the concerns regarding marketing, if they will be sent on a book tour, and if any of the publisher's seasonal marketing budget will be allocated to them.

Since the 1970s, the representation of disability in children's literature has been the focus of shifting attitudes in society. The desire to integrate children and youth with disabilities into mainstream society has prompted authors and educators to take novel approaches. Despite the fact that society has featured more diverse characters with disabilities, most of them appear to be the hero or the punch line in these narratives, putting emotional strain on children with disabilities while reading these novels. Overall, it is critical that literature convey correct information about a specific impairment, as this allows children to learn more about disabilities and dispel any preconceptions they may have about them. Empathy and acceptance should be promoted through literature that depicts characters with impairments.

The use of children's literature to represent disability mainly intends to give powerful instances of how readers can all relate to individual diversity. This is especially true when it comes to figuring out how disabilities affect people's lives, as well as that of their families and friends. "Disability studies is a field of study that looks at the meaning, nature, and effects of disability."("Disability Studies") Initially, the area concentrated on the distinction between impairment and disability, "with impairment referring to a mental or physical impairment, and disability referring to a social construct."("Disability Studies") Disability studies is a new subject that focuses on the sociological, political, historical, and cultural aspects of disability rather than medical or rehabilitative issues."("Disability Studies")

While depictions of disability in children's literature have historically been rare, they have provided valuable insights into, as well as perpetuated prejudices, for an otherwise underrepresented minority population. Studies of how people with

special needs are portrayed in children's literature frequently connect a diverse range of handicaps together in the examination of the issues, regularly classifying mental, physical, cognitive, and emotional impairments under a broad definition of the term "disability" out of necessity. While the issues that each group faces range greatly in terms of particular concerns and needs, they all face many of the same challenges when it comes to being represented in children's literature. Characters with disabilities have been depicted in English-language children's literature throughout its history.

Disabled writers have to overcome greater obstacles than non-disabled writers. When writing about disability, many authors and illustrators faced numerous challenges, including ableism. The term "ableism" refers to discrimination against disabled persons, both intentional and unintentional. These behaviors make it challenging for disabled writers to break into the industry, succeed, and keep widening the reach of their voices. At any moment in the publishing process, from the original spark to the final draught, disabled authors may confront challenges to their work and their disabled identity. Non-disabled publishing gatekeepers rejecting the works of disabled writers for not following stereotypical narrative arcs found in many successful books authored by non-disabled writers is a major ableist stumbling barrier for disabled writers.

In literature where they are extensively presented, many of these people are denoted mostly, exclusively by their flaws, with no compelling features offered. Characters like this are commonly cast in the background or utilized to evoke compassion for the protagonist. Most of the critics believe that such works are often a child's first concrete interaction with disability that as a result, these sometimes hackneyed images of disabled people may induce confusion and worry in young readers when they engage with disabled people. Beyond stereotypes, numerous authors of children's books have deliberately worked to use the genre of children's literature to develop truthful and informative portrayals of various physical and mental disorders in order to educate and enlighten young readers. "Ten percent of the school population in the United States is currently designated as having a handicap that seriously impacts the child's capacity to succeed in the classroom," Wendy Smith D'Arezzo wrote in an article titled "Children's Literature in Education"; With so many school-aged children labeled as "disabled." "Critics argued that it becomes more important to acknowledge disabilities in such mainstream media as children's literature."(Smith)

"Rudman has asserted that "When any segment of society is excluded from its literature, the implication is that the group is without value."(Rudman 219) As a result, children's literature can be utilized to help young readers understand and appreciate their special-needs peers, creating more understanding and inclusion. "Such social inroads may be especially beneficial for disabled children, according to Barbara H. Baskin and Karen Harris, authors of "Notes from a Different Drummer: A Guide to Juvenile Fiction Portraying the Handicapped", because, among the many misconceptions about the disabled, the belief that their primary concerns begin and end with their specific impairment is an oversimplification."

According to Baskin and Harris, "Many disabled adults believe that coming to terms with their inability was a small challenge compared to the more painful

difficulties of isolation, overprotection, segregation, pity, or other comparable rejecting or punitive behavior." (38-72) "Positive examples of interaction in children's books raise the likelihood of acceptance." (38-72) As good and direct personal connections are structured and knowledge that normalizes and is internalized, rejection reduces.

James Catchpole, a children's book literary agent and author of *What Happened to You* opines that "I think the industry is changing quickly to keep up with what feels like the rapid pace of change in society, in terms of making space for marginalized voices. I would say disability tends to lag behind race and gender, but there are signs of things shifting nonetheless" (Catchpole). He has seen a drastic increase in interest among the publishing industry, as well as the representation of multiple identities since the Black Lives Matter movement. He describes the necessity of OwnVoice creators in diversifying publishing; "to stop allowing disability to be used as a literary device especially as a tool for emotional manipulation and mere representation of stereotypes formulated by the non-disabled writers." (Catchpole)

James Catchpole's debut picture-book, *What Happened to You* adds to the collection of OwnVoice books Joe, the main protagonist of the book, is the personae of Catchpole, who went through similar circumstances in his childhood; Joe is traumatized by the attitude of his peers towards him; substantially when he has repeatedly been asked about his missing leg. This vividly reflects the challenges of being seen as different by the other children. Catchpole expounds on the intense state of trauma in Joe through the lines, "Sharks were easy compared to kids Joe hadn't met yet." This reveals the repercussions in Joe arising from the fear of intermingling with his able-bodied peers. He finds happiness in spending time unaccompanied. The illustrations in this book reflect Joe's incomparable vitality and enthusiasm in playing games. In fact, the pictures speak for Joe. Joe's impairment is not given much attention in the initial parts of the book, and he is not presented as helpless; However Joe is labeled as 'disabled', by the ableist society and thus, becomes a helpless victim to the inevitable curiosity of young minds.

The title of the book *What Happened to You* is the question frequently pointed towards most of the visibly disabled people when they are exposed to the public. But this impulsive question can trigger strong emotions, especially in a kid if it is asked a lot of times even from strangers. James Catchpole opines that this is a personal question, "When it comes from a stranger, *What Happened to You?* can be an intrusive and jarring question." (Catchpole). For a disabled child, this question brings about bitter memories. When the kids start formulating their own conclusion, Joe says, "No! And stop staring at my bottom." (12) This instance highlights the insecurities in Joe when meeting a stranger. Joe moves to the playground only to play "Pirates" and have fun, but others are constantly seen him for his disability. He is illustrated in the book as a happy and enthusiastic kid before the other children notice his disability. He is portrayed as climbing on the park bench by getting hold of a rope. This indicates his skills in playing outdoor games that are considered exceptional, when it comes to a disabled child. Joe's state of trauma is articulated at its best through his angry and sad face. Joe only wants to play Pirates. But as usual, he has to encounter this haunting

question whenever he comes across another person. This is even a question Joe has to answer, but he doesn't feel like doing so.

Joe neither wishes to undergo the trauma of getting constantly reminded of his disability nor to answer every single person who approaches him with the intrusive question. Through this book, James Catchpole is not just presenting his own life experiences through Joe, but also creates a tool to teach young readers about disability, and how to approach disabled people and build good friendships without affecting their emotions. The transition in the attitude of Simone, one of the kids in the playground, answers this question. Simone understands that Joe does not appreciate the constant questions about his other leg, and rectifies the emotional state of Joe by accompanying him in the game. Simone's question to Joe, "Do you ever get bored of that question about your leg, that you don't have?"(28) reflects her empathy for Joe. . More importantly, she realizes the unimportance of this unnecessary interrogation, which makes Joe happy.

The wordless page illustrating Joe's dismay and isolation at the children's behavior towards him presents the trauma of having a disability, feeling different than others, and feeling tired of the inevitable interrogation in daily life. Catchpole, by limiting the words of Joe at this point, makes the readers concentrate more on the changing emotions and facial expressions reflected in the pictures of Joe. He experiences trauma as the interrogation regarding his disability invokes the memories of his past thereby inflicting psychological pain uncovering a previously repressed experience in the unconscious. Karen George demonstrates Joe's psyche effectively through the gloomy and irritated appearances. Joe was blithely playing, and was unprepared for the problem. "But Joe didn't feel like telling the story, so he just said, what do you think?"(8) This response evoked curiosity in the kids, which created more turmoil. Joe, as a result of his futile attempt in tackling the stimuli, he has to endure the repercussions of his repressed memories.

Payal Dhar's *A Helping Hand* is a collection of epistles written from the perspective of a non-disabled child. The letters are addressed to an unnamed child who has a physical handicap. Since she was new to the school, the writer was asked to be her mentor. The writer unleashes her stereotypes for a disabled person and projects her initial reluctance to become the mentor of a disabled child. She points out the reasons as well, "...I can see that everyone stares at you. They stare at me because I have to hang around with you and be your mentor. Why did you come to our school? Why couldn't you continue going to whatever school you went to earlier?"(4) The girl is blamed for how her peers treat her. This clearly projects her stereotypical attitude towards her classmate. Non-disabled people, when they accompany persons with disabilities, are equally affected by the signs of ableism projected through the eyes of the society. They are equally tormented by the curious eyes, and relentless questions As a result, able-bodied people display reluctance to accompany disabled individuals. "I keep telling them that they can ask you whatever they want to know."(5) She tells her friends who are curious about her new companion, to go and ask her directly regarding her disability. She fails to develop concerns and empathy for her friend, who might not feel good to be asked about her disability. The writer even questions the girl

for not participating in outdoor games. The girl has to endure the trauma of being deprived of good friendship with her peers. The writer, who unwillingly becomes her mentor, considers the girl as a burden for her. "I am not going to be your minder forever."(6)

Individuals with disabilities deserve help from their peers in their day-to-day activities. This becomes the reason for the writer to help the new girl in her class and be her mentor. However, the girl in this story neither asked anybody for help, nor approached anybody to build friendships. The school environment, to which she is newly planted to, is both unfavorable and inaccessible for her. The playthings provided in the school playground are meant solely for non-disabled children. The writer realizes that the girl has difficulty in using the swing. "And also about coming on the swing. I tried and it is hard to get your balance if you don't hold it with two hands."(12) Joe creates his own world of 'Pirates' and relishes in this newfound amusement. On the other hand, the girl is presented as lonely and helpless, and perceived as unfit for her new school environment, which seems alien and inaccessible to her. Joe gets the company of a bunch of kids who empathized with the trauma underlying him, which made Joe delighted and feels comfortable in playing with them. The girl is deprived of friendship, which resulted in her withdrawal from all sorts of amusement in the playground. In contrast to the title *A Helping Hand*, the girl is rather forsaken by the ableist majority.

In contrast to *A helping Hand*, *What Happened To You* defies the common narrative of 'just asking', which is a misconception that no disabled person should have to answer to be valued and accepted by the society. In *A Helping Hand*, Payal Dhar expresses the idea of encouraging others to directly ask the girl about her disability, which must not be expected from disabled people. The writer presents only the physical disability and its limitations rather than revealing the identity of the character. The only information the readers can derive is that; the disabled character is a girl who is recently shifted to a new school. On the other hand, Catchpole addresses the character in the beginning of the story itself, by his name. Dhar's story lacks definite characterization. The story has instances that feature non-disabled characters by their identity. She compares the girl with her friends by the way how things are done using one hand. Dhar makes this comparison as an element to communicate the necessity of developing empathy for the girl. Catchpole makes use of the game of pirates, in order to divert the attention of other children from Joe's physique.

Asking private questions about the bodies, especially to a disabled person, can lead to traumatic conditions. They tend to withdraw from society and become introverts. The ableist society can empathize with their different peers only if they encounter with disabled people and understand their limitations. In *A helping Hand*, the writer incorporates the significance of developing empathy for the disabled, through a non-disabled person's point of view. Even though the plot addresses the social cause, concerning the treatment of individuals with disabilities by society, this is written only to target disabled readers. This makes the story converge to a relatively smaller group of audience. In *What Happened to You* Catchpole provides a remarkable representation of the lives of individuals with disabilities through his younger self.

Joe engages himself in playing pirates whereas the girl withdraws from playing with other children. The absence of one hand hinders her from taking part in games. Joe, on the other hand, is illustrated as discarding his crutches by a park bench, climbing on the swing by holding a rope. For him, nothing hinders from playing pirates and seeks delight in playing alone. When the children accepted his disability and treated him as a good friend, he felt happy playing with them. The girl seems to be unhappy with the surroundings she is newly planted to. She was able to do things independently even though she has a physical disability. She does things differently when compared to her non-disabled peers. It becomes miserable when she fails to accompany other children in the playground.

The story, articulated by a non-disabled person, doesn't directly feature the character with disability. The story is lacking a genuine representation of the character since the character has no voice in the story. The writer doesn't give account of the replies; the girl might have given, to her letters. By focusing solely on how the society becomes inaccessible for the disabled, the writer projects a social issue. Her psyche is not completely represented, and most of the instances are assumptions and interpretations of the writer. "Why don't you play with us? Why don't you come on the swing?"(12) "I guess you were just feeling shy."(12) These inferences are perceived merely from the writer's view, which points out her failure in understanding the true feelings of her friend. Even though she manages to satiate her necessities single handed, she has to encounter certain circumstances in which her disability forbids her to act. She stands in the corner when other children play. The writer opens the letter by conveying that "Well, you know who you are. And it's not like you're ever going to see this letter."(2) The writer has never mentioned the girl's identity, and she doesn't intend the girl to read the letters even if addressed to her. Lack of concern and empathy is prominent through the initial parts of this book. The writer was rather instructed by the teacher to become the mentor of a disabled child. The girl, just like most of the disabled people, is treated as a burden. From these instances, it is perceived that the story projects the significance of developing empathy in a negative way, through the lens of ableism.

It's a sobering fact that people with special needs, like many other minorities in society, are not as well represented in today's literature as they should be. Only a disabled author can completely understand the feelings of his disabled characters; he can more easily visualize the nuances of their mental and physical changes than a non-disabled author. Many of the authors have resorted to clichés and stereotypes when creating disabled characters. Most of the non-disabled authors couldn't justify their characters with disabilities. Such authors should make their character more than a disability. Disabled people are frequently thought of as objects rather than human beings, and writers tend to reinforce this view. Disabled people, like everyone else, have ambitions, frustrations, love and joys. Moreover, they too deserve better recognition in society.

In recent years, Children's Literature witnesses the emergence of literary works featuring disabled characters by the disabled, as well as non-disabled creators. In 2015 the advent of Own voice movement, which refers to "A campaign championing the right for authors to tell their own stories in connection to their diverse identities" (Thakur) rectified the lack of authenticity in representation and

quality, to a great extent. Underrepresented writers must be recognized as they are the ones who should push literature extensively to new and exciting limits. This movement opened wide opportunities for the writers who belong to the marginalized, and the diverse communities to overcome the obstacles in articulating their expressions. The emergence of literary works, especially those featuring characters with special needs, can create awareness and empathy among the disabled and non-disabled readers alike.

Diversity in children's literature is given the required justice only when readers, both disabled and non-disabled are able to see and relate themselves in the books that they read. James Catchpole's own voice book *What Happened to You* effectively sets an example by filling the void left by other non-disabled authors in the representation of disability. Catchpole articulates the story by incorporating the elements of fun, which makes the story appealing to young readers by bringing the images of animals such as sharks and crocodiles, and adventurous games that instill the seeds of curiosity and wonder. The book illustrates the trauma created by the intrusiveness of children's curiosity, and provides the message that every scar has a story, but not every story needs to be shared. Disabilities can't change the person's inner self. Hence society should change the stereotypical attitude towards disabled people and treat them as normal human beings by developing empathy and acceptance.

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