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Reframing the 'Normal Child' through Representation of Disability in Children's Literature

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Abstract:

On exploring the history of childhood studies and children's literature, it is clear that the power structure between adults and children have always existed and still exists. This presupposition of power has led to the creation of didactic stories and characters whose aim is to build a subject who can be moulded according to the desire of those weaving these narratives. Although, this is largely inspired by the Eurocentric model of childhood and children's literature, it should not be overlooked that Indians too have had such didactic interest rooted in their religious and mythological texts since times immemorial. These texts can also be credited for the creation of biases in the society in terms of important social constructs including gender and ability. In this paper, I will begin with a study of the representation of disabled characters within these texts and what impact it could have had on a child's understanding towards the subject. From there, I will move into a study of how these prejudices seep into the coinage of terms around disability and how they affect impressionable young minds. Finally, through a study of some contemporary Indian English children's literature, I will show how publishers and authors are trying to challenge these notions and make the space of the genre more inclusive without sensationalizing the subject of disability.

Key Words:

Children's literature, disability studies, mythology, inclusion, representation, appropriation.

On exploring the history of childhood studies and children's literature, it is clear that the power structure between adults and children have always existed and still exists. This presupposition of power has led to the creation of didactic stories and characters whose aim is to build a subject who can be moulded according to the desire of those weaving these narratives. Although, this is largely inspired by the Eurocentric model of childhood and children's literature, it should not be overlooked that Indians too have had such didactic interest rooted in their religious and mythological texts since times immemorial. These texts can also be credited for the creation of biases in the society in terms of important social constructs including gender and ability. The representation of perfect bodily features, superhuman-ability and good behavior have explicitly guided Indians to be obsessed with godly versions of themselves. A major example can be found in Indian mythological texts, a source that this paper heavily draws from, because for a long time these were the texts that ruled the practices and perception of Indians towards various important issues like caste, gender and disability. Given that, these were also (and still are) some of the first stories that a child is introduced to in the form of oral, traditional and moral tales, it is important to deconstruct these codes to understand how they indoctrinate young minds. As a starting point in this paper, I will begin with a study of the representation of disabled characters within these texts and what impact it could have had on a child's understanding towards the subject. From there, I will move into a study of

how these prejudices seep into the coinage of terms around disability and how they affect impressionable young minds. Finally, through a study of some contemporary Indian English children's literature, I will show how publishers and authors are trying to challenge these notions and make the space of the genre more inclusive without sensationalizing the subject of disability.

Mythological Texts and Disability

Each of the characters with disability in these popular mythological texts can be seen to be defined by their 'lack' and intention, favouring the understanding that a particular form of ability is more acceptable than others. Such characterization and idolization from an early stage of life, can easily seep into the consciousness of the listener's mind creating essentialized notions of what is acceptable or unacceptable, normal or abnormal, and good or bad. Such traditional view of disability in binaries of good and evil ends up overtly simplifying the complexities of identity, experience and agency. Anita Ghai aptly notes, "Disability cannot be comprehended in linear fashion. Traditionally, the meaning of disability in India has been understood from in relation to our cultural discourse. Within the dominant Indian cultural ethos, labels such as 'disability', 'handicap', 'crippled', 'blind' and 'deaf' are used synonymously" (Ghai, n.p.). These loose usage of terms and terminologies has further broken-down disability into two categories. One strand of the definition identifies disability with devilish, negative, villainous, deceit and mischief, and the other tends to construe it as a 'flaw', 'lack', thereby shrinking the agency of the individual. The two extremes de-humanizes the disabled person, defining her/him only through the lenses of disability.

To elucidate further, I would borrow two very important characters from Indian mythology. First off, we can take the character of Shakuni in *Mahabharata* who is predominantly used every time we discuss or refer to disability negatively. He has become the embodiment of everything evil and inhuman, a villain whose deformation becomes synonymous with his destructive intentions. His crippled body becomes synonymous with his character. Thus, the body and the nature of the person becomes one here and gets used interchangeably. Contrary to Shakuni's evil character, we have the blind king Dhritarashtra, who despite being the true heir was denied the throne because of his blindness. The consumption of such stories which lie scattered in our culture, has indirectly inspired generations to believe that disability is either a curse or punishment from God or a boon to prove one's goodness in the world. Instead of giving agency to individuals with disability, such perceptions have led to the notion that persons with disability need saving.

Furthermore, mythology has also helped the patriarchal Indian society to assign blame. The mother is questioned for her capabilities and the father is said to be cursed. These understandings are harmful not only when the child needs medical attention but also, when the child needs to go out in the world and create an identity for herself. The imperfect child struggles to fit into the otherwise 'perfect' world. In a postcolonial, nation-state such as India, the disabled body still remains colonized by ableism which identifies the disabled bodied as the other; and by creating this 'other' the society creates a

hegemonic system for children. This able-bodied subject is a reflection of everything that the disabled other lacks. Such idea forces society to believe in perfection of the self, both physically and mentally, creating an unhealthy sense of self-rearing. These prejudices affect the childhood experiences of most disabled children who face trauma and social exclusion.

Society and Disability

Even in terms of the socially-sanctioned vocabulary, we can see an irresponsible usage of terminologies when it comes to the subject of disability. Terms like '*bhaingi*', '*tunda*', '*pagal*', etc. often used for disabled individuals in India, more as a form of abuse than an identifier, can lead to instances of lifelong bullying and trauma for children with disability. This, along with the biases against disability as popularized by dominant images as perpetuated by our mythology, ends up having serious ramifications on the psyche of the disabled child which can have lifelong effects. This also has potential damage for the able-bodied child's understanding of the subject. Since, more than their reading material, children pick up a major part of their understanding on issues from what they hear, such prejudiced vocabulary can have adverse impacts on the mind of the hearer. As the conversations around disability and how we identify individuals with disability affect the perception of children building their vocabulary, it is imperative to properly filter our language by replacing these questionable addresses with a more appropriate balanced vocabulary. To re-claim the word, one has to de-clutter the word from its negative implications. Hence, through better stories on disability and using words to represent disability, writers can ensure a more nuanced language around disability discourse. Recently, the Indian government adopted the word *divyang* from *viklang*. *Divyang* means the divine one. This adaptation is problematic as it attaches the disabled body with the burden of being extraordinary identity. Such words essentializes the diversity of the disabled body and their experiences. Instead of using a language that portrays them as an homogenous other, Indian society should encourage a language accommodate their complexities.

Setting an Alternative Discourse

The comprehensive definition of disability should encompass all experiences and should identify disability in relation to medical, social, and cultural framework attesting agency. I always go back to Tom Shakespeare's definition of disability which resonates with my understanding of disability. Shakespeare states, "Disability is a multi-dimensional concept which should be understood in terms of a continuum. Human perfection does not exist. Everyone is limited in some way, whether it is a minor blemish and allergy or something more serious" (Shakespeare 5). Disability should be perceived from the spectrum of something that one is born with to something one can acquire over time. Although there has been much criticism around the medical model to understand disability, it should not be overlooked that there are individuals who suffer pain and exhaustion from their disability. Their experiences of struggling and living with their pain needs representation too. An individual might meet with an accident and lose his legs or suffer from a heart attack and get paralyzed or become old. But there are also individuals who are being disabled by the social and economic elements of the society; whose access,

participation and agency are crippled by exclusion from everyday life. Hence, to decipher the term disability one has to perceive it from both the models and represent characters that highlights the struggle, pain and experiences of disabled individuals with all their vulnerability.

Representation and Appropriation

Till about a very long-time popular perceptions of disability have led the representation of such characters within fiction to also be heavily laden with prejudices that are associated with it. This is not just the case in India, but its presence can also be felt in literature from the west. The disabled child featured in the works of children always figured as a minor character or as a character who would aid the main protagonist in assuming greatness. The disabled character represented had no agency, usually emerging from an economically poor background, having bleak experiences and ultimately dying. He was reduced to a case for charity. The disabled child was someone who would always remain secondary to the main protagonist (who was almost always an able-bodied character). For example, the character of Tiny Tim in *A Christmas Carol*. He is painted as this happy, innocent and sweet character who is unfortunately deformed and uses a crutch to walk. Despite his 'unfortunate' deformation and suffering, he is shown as someone who has accepted his fate and uses his "active little crutch" to enjoy festivities with his family. He remains grateful and his family's suffering and acceptance shows their religious belief that it is god who gave Tim his deformity and they should all accept it and move on. Along with creating such a sympathetic character, the main aim seems to have been to project a sense of repentance in Ebenezer Scrooge. Tiny Tim was a source of character development for the protagonist. Tiny Tim was given no agency. His work was to portray this grateful sympathetic character who quietly accepts his fate. Similar sympathetic representations were popular in the early nineteenth century works which displayed such attitude towards disability. Unfortunately, such descriptions simplify the struggles and experiences of children with disability. Very few children can relate to such exaggerated characterization, feeling more alienated than included.

With the advent of recent publishing houses in India, like Tulika, Duckbill, Tara, etc., a step towards inclusive storytelling seems to have been taken. These publishers try to tell stories representing children characters with their trial and tribulations and flaws without placing them on a pedestal. Radhika Menon, the director of Tulika publishing house explains that, "Many of the taboos we have imposed in children's books are a fallout of our colonial past. It is a Victorian western attitude – which ironically the West has got rid of and we are burdened with – which sees children quite apart from the adult world and having to be brought up protected from harsh realities" (Menon, n.p.). By unquestionably mimicking the western model, Indian children's literature seems to have separated itself from the age-old practice of storytelling where more agency was provided to children in comparison to the western stories. A comparative study of Indian and British folktales would clarify the advent of altering children's tales. Although, writers like Sukumar Ray, Rabindranath Tagore, Arup Kumar Dutta, Leela Majumder and Sunil Gangapadhyay, created characters with disability who became household favorites, the effect of inclusion in reality remained unchanged. The stories popularly found in textbooks

were that of Helen Keller and Sudha Chandran. In their representation the stories were about idealizing their struggles in overcoming their disability. For young readers such pressure can be more stifling than enabling, forcing them to look at their disability as something to overcome. The need of the hour is to give children stories that will provide them not with solutions and morality, but belongingness and tolerance. The problem with the overcoming model is that it promotes stories where the onus lies on the children to overcome their lack further promoting ableism. Contrary to the earlier works recent representation and stories highlights the disability of the children but also other issues that make their stories compelling and associable by its readers. The intention as Radhika Menon states, is to alter the gaze from sympathetic and delirious to "mischievous, stubborn, playful, happy, needy... just like any other kid" (Duckbill n.p.).

Inclusive and Honest Narratives

The new age inclusive stories have some expectations to fulfill. These expectations are both from adults and children. The protagonist, irrespective of the author must have a realistic agency and effect on its readers. Talking about her approach as an able-bodied writer, Payal Dhar provides a rather insightful point on how to begin writing as an outsider, "Easy: background research, whatever that might entail. At the very least, acknowledge the need for unlearning reductive theories about disability, and focus instead on how to imagine flexible, inclusive, elastic worlds in stories so that they may be reproduced in real life" (Dhar, n.p.). The main idea should be in giving voice to this marginalized section of society, but without oversimplifying their identity. Especially in the case of representing children with disability, writer's writing from an outsider's perspective end up presenting a two-dimensional idealistic image of the child. But, children are not as pure and innocent as adults often project them to be or want to believe. Children can be evil, naughty, brilliant, sensitive, obnoxious and even murderous.

Keeping this in mind, Duckbill launched the Children First initiative to discover/encourage writers to create narratives which identifies children as individuals before analyzing their disability, caste, class and gender. Their main aim was to foster the idea that irrespective of all the social, cultural and physical attributes, a child should be considered as a child first. Explaining why this is important, Zai Whitaker, an author who has written on disability for children, stated that she didn't want to build a character who was extraordinarily gifted or possess special powers. What will then happen to those children who live with disability and are not gifted with powers? Calling it the Taare Zameen Pe effect, Whitaker mentions how it is important to tell the child that he/she does not need to be excellent to face their problems. Whitaker mentions how it is necessary to also have the child who does not have a talent to find a place in her stories with all her flaws and imperfections. She wants to reflect on the trials and tribulations and borrow from the real-life experiences. A similar trend can be seen reflected in the recent texts produced in India by various independent publishing houses. In the next section my aim is to provide a taste of the changing narrative in Indian publishing houses through textual analysis of some of the prominent books that has established a base for nuanced narrative around disability and childhood.

Literature with a Difference

Why are you Afraid of Me?, written by Sheila Dhir, is a straightforward and bold book which puts forward the child in his natural form on each page. The book is direct and confrontational which can put children without disability in a defensive position. It is an important book irrespective of this approach and puts forward important questions that can be one of the reasons for children to behave in certain ways that they do. Each page reflects on everyday questions disabled people confront and the issues non-disabled children face when around disabled children. The disabled child answers these questions and give us an authentic narrative of his expectations from his peers. The questions asked in this story are important for other child readers to rethink their behavior. Any seven or eight-year old child when pushed out in the society struggle with finding their cohort. Their choices can be based on many things, but mostly children who share similar interests. When they confront someone, who are different from them physically or psychologically, they are afraid of connecting with them. Padma Srinath in her review of the book elaborates on this issue. She states that, children have a difficult time understanding their way around a disabled person. Although some children can brave their way and connect, others may fail to do so. This book helps in bringing forward the troubling questions non-disabled children faces when befriending disabled children. Padma Srinath on reviewing the book states, that this book can be an ideal read, for parent and child, together. It would help the child understand the world with a sense of security and ensuring to spread that security by not being afraid of the unfamiliar. It is the fear of how to behave which often makes us scared of approaching those who are different than us. We are being disabled by our fear of the unknown and the only way we can overcome it is by confronting these thoughts. The idea of privilege and gaze is questioned time and again in the text, for example, the lines, "Just because my legs are wobbly, they think my mind is wobbly too" states that children should be taught to look beyond physical appearances and not reduce individuals on the basis of their deformity. The text also addresses the question of gaze and how we can let our pre-conceived notion power our biases against others. This book can be used as an introduction to disability for children without disability and question their behavior of being afraid of those with disability.

Manya Learns to Roar is written by Shruthi Rao and is a part of the Children First edition introduced by Duckbill publishing house. The book became the winner of the Best of Indian Children's writing award in 2019. The book was also a winner in the Children First writing competition organized by Parag, an initiative of Tata Trusts, and Duckbill Books. The illustrations are by Priya Kuriyan, who has provided and teased the readers by revealing the naughty and adventure filled world of Manya and her friend. Manya Learns to Roar is a story about a ten-year old girl who wants to play the role of Shere Khan in her school play. Shere Khan is her favorite character and The Jungle Book is her favorite movie. Although, she failed to read beyond a few pages, Manya loves the movie adaptation and knows all the lines at the back of her hand. She is confident about the role until her English teacher feels her presence on the stage as Shere Khan can be a risk considering she stammers. It is not only her English teacher and principal who is unsure of her getting the role. She is constantly being bullied by her classmate, Rajat. All the bullying and questioning of her abilities to be a worthy Shere Khan makes her anxious and angry which makes her stammer more than normal. In all her trials Manya find solace in her friend

Ankita who is her source of support. They are best friends, and Ankita helps her focus on her dream to be Shere Khan. Manya, also receives support from her teacher Miss Sridhar Ali. Their relationship is focused mostly on empowering each other rather than a power hierarchy. Even though there are characters in her school who want to define her by her stammer, it is Manya's confidence and humor that gives her the edge. Her friends and teachers love her irrespective of her stammer and they make her confident. Shruthi Rao beautifully defined these relationships without making her into an idol. The story does not also bind Manya solely to the purpose of her proving others wrong. Manya is still the typical, naughty child in school. She and Ankita keep passing chits in the class to each other. They develop a new secret code language that only they can understand. Although, she confronts her bullies, but the story gives us a peek into Manya's friendship and other relationship that makes her more than her struggles. This book addresses bullying and helps both disabled and non-disabled children deal with trauma highlighting how friendships can empower us. The story also aims at providing children a sense of belonging by including stories about stammering and bullying manifesting the fact that it is okay to possess those traits.

A Helping Hand is written by Payal Dhar. The book is a level-4 book and is written in the form of a letter for students who can read it fluently. A boy is asked to show around a new student in his class. He is initially shown to be curious and uncomfortable about the job, but he decides to help the student out in any case. The new student has a limp hand which remains immobile. This hand bothers him and he struggles to deal with it. As he is responsible for being the first friend, he feels that he should have known everything about the hand. He gets more curious by the day and finally discusses the new student with his eldest sister. His sister helps him learn the word prosthetic hand which makes him a little more comfortable around his potential friend. The letter shows a gradual shift from being the curious, unknown stranger to a trustworthy and understanding friend. The story is narrated from the point of view of the non-disabled child and how they perceive disability in school. The honest representation of the curiosity and discomfort that ignorance builds in us, earns the book extra points. It is about learning and acknowledging one's flaws. Here, the mentor is unaware of his soon-to-be friend's condition. He develops an understanding over time and soon looks beyond the hand. Payal Dhar reflects realistic attitudes of a non-disabled child towards the changing nature of the disabled girl who has a prosthetic hand. The boy states, "Your new hand is so cool. Sorry but the old one was a bit boring. It was just... there. The new one is like magic, and you can move the fingers and grip it." He further acknowledges, "The funny thing is, I'm not that curious about your hand anymore. I don't know why." At the end of the story there is a Friend-O-Meter Quiz which qualifies how good one is at helping people fit in. The book in the form of letters gives it a confessional taste which is woven beautifully by the writer with the simple and honest language of children and is an important text in this domain.

Kittu's ~~Terrible Horrible No Good Very~~ Mad Day is a very interesting account of a boy getting lost, making new friends and eventually realizing his dreams. The book is written by Harshika Udasi as a part of the Children's First issue. The book was also shortlisted for the MAMI Word to Screen Award in 2017. The title of the book reminds one of the famous *Alexander and the Terrible, Horrible, No Good, Very Bad Day* series written by

Judith Viorst. Although, the title scratches off the “terrible horrible no good very”, it attracts its readers to focus on the two word: Kittu and Mad. The book is a narrative of an otherwise bad day turned into a memorable one. Kittu is a very naughty, opinionated and humorous ten-year old boy, who has a lot to tell about his family. He has strong opinions about every member of his family and does not shy away from criticizing them. He lives in a joint family which he refers to as the “Most Chaotic Family in the World”. He is fond of only the youngest member of the family Chinmee, a three-year-old, who adorably misspells his name and calls him Tittu, and loves him irrespective of his shortcomings. One day, Kittu and his family of thirteen members take a chaotic trip and on their way back he is left behind at the Rain Basera Dhaba by his family. In their chaotic essence, everyone forgets about Kittu and realizes he is missing after they reach the next stop. This emerges as a new experience for Kittu and tired of his loud, chaotic family, he decides to make full use of his time away from them. Throughout the story one realizes that Kittu is not an ‘innocent’ child. He is mischievous, shrewd, cunning, trying to delay his chances in going back home, every single time. Kittu meets an ice-creamwala named Madhav who is initially shown to be trying to make a sale in order to get on with his work. But Kittu emotionally blackmails him and says, “You won’t help a handicapped child who has been separated from his parents and left alone in this big bad world” (Udasi 7). Kittu then takes his crutch out to stand in-front Madhav who realizes that he has to help the boy. Madhav decides to do the right thing and take him to the police. On realizing that Kittu is going to end up with the police who would ruin his chance to stay away from his family, he cooks up a story. He manipulates Madhav by saying that he is the son of a famous don from Mumbai and handing him to the police would bring him harm. Madhav, caught in the dilemma, takes Kittu back to his home. This incident stresses on Kittu’s manipulative nature in doing anything to stay away from his chaotic family for as long as possible. Kittu’s dislike for his family is also reflected in his language and how he identifies the adults in his family. He calls the adults, “tiny bigs” (Udasi 11) who will fight about stupid things. Kittu meets Madheshwari, Madhav’s daughter whom he initially dislikes. Both of them would challenge each other and be at each other’s throats playing pranks. The writer deftly weaves the story between Kittu and Mad and charts their development. Their characters grow from being enemies to friends. From stealing Kittu’s crutch to sharing their skateboard, the story shows a growth in each character. Kittu is in awe of Mad every time she skates. Their experience in the magical place of Janwaar Castle, where they find a space of their own to learn how to skate, reflecting how children can be accepting and encouraging for each other. Mad along with Skate Aunty helps Kittu fulfill his dream of skating. Although, he is yet to be a professional, it gives Kittu hope of not letting his dreams die. In the process of experiencing this adventure Kittu realizes he misses his family and feels anxious about the fact that his parents might never want him back because he has one leg? Kittu’s experience portrays him as a child who has a mind of his own and does not think about the consequences. He is selfish in a way every child is. His need for adventure and the way he turns a situation into a memorable experience is absolutely worthy of a read. He is neither over-sympathesized nor is his disability overlooked. The writer creates a balance and breaks the normative ideas of a child with disability. Tultul Biswas in her review of the book notes, “In her deft crafting of the story, Harshika Udasi begins to break stereotypes from the first page itself – in the way the world (in the character

of an ice-creamwala) looks at a lone child, in what could be a child's reaction to being lost in the middle of nowhere, in which today's portrayal of a family is, in what a boy on one leg and two crutches can or cannot do, and so on" (Biswas n.p.). She further describes that the characterization of the other characters is not merely as helping hands in the story. They are real, and "fleshy". Lavanya Naidu's illustrations add to the overall essence of the story, binding it beautifully with the narrative. Overall, the book does wonders for young readers who take on with the character into their realistic yet magical adventure of getting lost, finding a friend and learning ones' limitations.

Conclusion

Each book I have used in my analysis has a different way of dealing with disability and encourages multiple-cultural experiences. The subjective idea of normal should be put to test through these texts and by providing a plethora of narratives writers should try to accommodate every form of childhood. From Manya to Kittu, all the characters have one thing in common: childhood experience. In each of these stories the characters are not portrayed as naïve children whose life revolves around the suffering of their disability. Instead, the stories acknowledge their experiences of which disability is a part. My intention with the textual analysis was to bring out the different emotions of children with disability. For example, Manya's frustrations, Kittu's street smartness and manipulative talent makes these children agentic and relatable. These stories also ensure that children have a much better way of be-friending and dealing with uncomfortable issues like disability. Where adults might fear to ask, Sheila Dhar's story tells us how a first step towards honesty can help us understand strangers better. Hence, these stories can both be the window to new experiences or a mirror portraying similar experiences for the child. Although, Indian children's literature has come a long way, but there is a lot that needs to be done.

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