PORTRAYAL OF EMPATHY AND SENSITIVITY TOWARDS DISABLED CHILDREN IN SELECTED WORKS OF INDIAN FICTION

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ABSTRACT: The attitude of society towards individuals with disabilities has changed over time in India. Various factors like overall improvement in education, rise in income levels, and awareness about social causes have had a significant impact on the changing attitudes and consciousness. However, discrimination against individuals with disability remains a challenge stemming from the grassroots level in the nation. In this regard, fiction has always been a powerful method of expression that reflects different aspects of social reality. It has the power to influence people, educate them and bring about a behavioural change. The portrayal of characters with disability in Indian fiction has been more often than not associated with negativity or evilness. However, this portrayal has changed over time and nowadays various authors have presented stories on the theme of understanding various sociological and psychological aspects in the life of persons having the disability. This research paper is aimed at investigating in three Indian English Fictions namely Flute in the Forest, Kanna Panna and Manya Learns to Roar, the level of empathy and sensitivity towards children having certain disabilities.

Key Words: Disability, Discrimination, Challenges, Empathy, Sensitivity.

I. Introduction:

a) An introduction to the portrayal of people with disabilities

Disability is defined as a long-term impairment that is physical, intellectual, mental or sensory in nature, hindering and impacting complete participation of the individual in societal interactions and activities. It is noted by Singh that representation of people with disabilities is often stereotyped, illogical and modest in most of the Indian fiction work, not many have done justice in understanding communication barriers faced by a disabled individual. Disabled characters are made to play a crucial role to highlight and accentuate the goodness of the able-bodied characters by being negative, sinful, evil and dangerous. In epic or classical literature there are a number of disabled characters who are represented as stereotypes; they are seen hatching conspiracies against the protagonist and playing the role of a villain. Manthara, the maid servant with a hunchback in the epic Ramayana and Shakuni, the crippled maternal uncle of Duryodhana in Mahabharata have shown their manipulative strategy, revengeful interference and inclination for depravity and immorality.

b) Notable works of Indian fiction on the issue related to children:

The few of the notable works in modern Indian English fictions that feature disabled children as their main protagonists, telling their own stories, are Flute in the Forest by Leela Gour Broome, telling a story of thirteen-year-old female protagonist suffering from polio. The thought process and actions of a young child stricken with a disability as well as her journey towards challenging prejudices and healing are depicted through this story. Another notable work is Kanna Panna by Zai Whitaker, telling a story of a visually impaired young boy. This story questions preconceived notions and prejudices that surround persons suffering from a disability. Along with depicting the topsy-turvy mind and thoughts of a visually impaired child, this story also depicts the struggles of adults trying to reconcile the idea of normalcy around him. Manya Learns to Roar by Shruthi Rao is a notable fictitious school story of a young girl. The story narrates the inner and outer torments faced by the girl suffering from stammering, a speech impairment. It talks about the need for acceptance and instilling confidence in the children suffering from some disabilities, through its moments of seriousness and lightness.

II. Aim of the study:

The main aim of this study is to assess the portrayal of empathy and sensitivity towards disabled children in selected works of Indian fiction.
III. Analysis:
This section of the paper presents a comprehensive discussion on empathy and sensitivity towards disabled children depicted in the selected works of fiction.

a) Empathy and sensitivity in works of literature towards people with disabilities:
In oral and written literature, disabled characters have found their representation as well as have created their own niche in the stories. However, in the fictional spaces, such characters are often sidelined and are never provided with position accorded to the standard characters of protagonists, villains and such. They are more often than not represented at the periphery of the normal characters’ world, regarded with pity. In reality, persons with disabilities are a minor group of people, who are often discriminated by the society denying them the right to equality, proper education, employment and such. This discrimination has been the basis for negative image portrayal and under-representation in the fictional literature. The general lack of awareness, as well as lack of real-life experience on the part of writers, has been noted in their portrayal of characters with certain disabilities in literary works. Also, the author has noted that misinformation and lack of general awareness have made writers overlook the damage done to the mindset of the readers. The portrayal of persons with disabilities in literature is grossly under-sided, which have mirrored the real-life societal treatment of disabled people. According to George, the literature addressing the misrepresentation and misinformation of disability can act as an active tool in ensuring social equality and justice for all. Nussbaum also addressed the peripheral treatment of disabled characters in notable literary works. The author blamed this treatment of disability on the centuries’ old practices of discrimination, which was later reflected in the artistic process of writing. Singh presented an overview of the influence of politics over the aesthetics of disability in the postcolonial fictitious literature, highlighting the concern shown on the complex life of disabled individuals.

b) Discussion of empathy in the chosen novels:
The adventurous story of thirteen-year-old physically handicapped Atiya, presented in Flute in the Forest, captures her spirit empathetically. The story moves into a wildlife sanctuary with her lonely rambles that are full of incidents and secrets. Events of Atiya’s life are narrated in such an appealing manner that makes its readers sympathize with the protagonist. The writer invokes sympathy in the hearts of the readers by describing how Atiya finds peace and solace in the quiet and serene jungle, a world not treating her differently for her disability. The emotional appeal in the writing which speaks of her journey towards healing is engaging. Atiya is not a demoralized girl; rather she is full of vitality and vivacity. Her spirit and enthusiasm know no bounds. She has learnt to fend for herself at a young age. Her left leg being a little shorter and weaker, she has to use her wooden walking stick to balance herself. The fiction opens with her determination of going into the forest, at the heart of which there is a sanctuary and which is home to wild animals, birds and reptiles. The jungle stimulates her inner strength and the sounds of the jungle comfort her a lot. In fact, she is more comfortable with trees and animals than with scores of loud, yelling, teasing children who often made fun of her. Atiya is not mentally crippled; rather she is intelligent as well as mentally alert. She is not a nagging and complaining girl; rather she has her own world of recreation and refreshment; her eagerness and curiosity make her bold and resolute. Her father’s profession as a range forest officer injects in her an aptitude for learning science and geography. Before she contracted polio and when her mother lived with them, Atiya began to learn the rhythm, footsteps and movement of a Bharatnatyam dancer to materialize her mother’s dream. But fate was not kind and favourable to her. Atiya’s mother left the family to carry on her dancing profession. With the passing of time, normalcy was restored to the agitated minds: ‘Life slowly limped back to normal. But the house was suddenly silent.’ Her father resolves to bring her up in a world which is devoid of music and dancing. Mysterious are the ways of fate. On one occasion she hears the haunting notes of a flute. She comes across Ogre uncle who teaches her lessons on playing flute. Her music lessons bring her close to the grouchy old anthropologist, Ogre uncle, and his Kurumba tribal daughter, Mishora. Almost double her age, almost a surrogate mother, and yet, able to come to Atiya’s level of understanding instinctively. Mishora was turning out to be another close friend. Gopal, Mrs. Naina Pillai’s son who had accompanied Atiya in her treks in the sanctuary and became a good friend of Atiya sends letter to her to show his gratitude: …every summer, I’ll be coming to see you and your father. I look forward to many more treks in the sanctuary with you both! Atiya’s teacher, Mrs. Pillai has sympathetic considerations for her. She has motherly love for this girl, always willing to do something for her: she knew it was a tough life for her, as it was, without a mother to share secrets with and a father who was more often than not, busy with his work and had little time to spare. Atiya loves everyone of her acquaintance. The passing away of Ogre uncle is a great blow to her sensitive and simple soul. On the tenth day prayer ceremony, she plays the flute and pays tribute to her teacher with his favourite piece ‘The Happy Spirit’. The energetic and positive note has not only pacified an aggressive elephant called Rangappa but also made her father take pride in his daughter. Atiya decides to study anthropology, to continue the research on
Kurumbas of that area and document all the remaining Kurumba music. Atiya's mental strength, iron determination and spirited resolution overcome her physical disability.

In Kanna Panna, the writer has empathically demonstrated that the phrase “normal life” has a different meaning for each individual. The author has compassionately described the Kanna's normal life, its challenges, and problems, by standing in the shoes of a visually challenged boy. As the story progresses, Kanna as a child is revealed as any other hyperactive child, who comes across initially as an introvert keeping to himself but is later revealed to be a talkative kid. Early in the story, the words inside Kanna’s head are described as “They roll and tumble and play games”. This is a joyous story that challenges the normal standards of society and tries to teach that physical differences and disabilities are no grounds for discrimination. The author’s narration of story whilst maintaining suspense on the visual impairment of child right till the end gives an empathetic tone to the story.

In Manya Learns to Roar, the female protagonist Manya of twelve years is a child who knows her mind and overcomes her disability of stammering for following her dreams. Manya’s anguish at her disability is described by the writer “tentacles would come snaking out of her stomach and cluch her throat. And trying to get a word out of her mouth would feel like trying to squeeze a hippo through a ring”. The writer has painted a holistic image through this, which has left the readers with the feeling of sympathy towards the girl going through experience never encountered or felt by them. The author also depicted the behavioral discrimination faced by people with disability. The constant fun made of Manya by one of her classmate Rajat depicts the cruelty of young children towards disabled persons, which in turn points towards the lack of empathy in social upbringing. In addition, the viewpoint of her English teacher and principal on Manya’s ability to get on stage is a clear depiction of social mindset.

c) Discussion of sensitivity in the chosen novels:

In Flute in the Forest, the highlight is the special magic created by Atiya’s flute, despite being prohibited to pursue it. The sensitive experience for readers is the music lesson and development between Atiya and Ogre Uncle, a grouchy old anthropologist as well as Mishora, his tribal daughter. This story enchantingly unfolds the plight of a physically challenged young girl living without a mother to support her. Atiya’s transformation through music as told by author depicts the level of sensitivity in a child finding her comfort zone in all things, big and small in the forest, unlike a normal able-bodied child. The description of Atiya's flute bringing her a sense of acceptance and answers to her unanswered queries also points towards lack of sensitivity on the part of society when dealing with the children with special needs.

Kanna Panna aims to teach its readers that persons with disability are no different than the “able” ones. It also teaches that physical differences should be treated respectfully not reproaching or pitifully. The story depicts Kanna’s visual disability being treated in a factual manner as well as his courage and fortitude being appreciated throughout the story. During the course of the story when Kanna steps in to save the day and rescue everyone from the maze of dark tunnels, the phrase said by Kanna “Lights on or off as if it made any difference to me”, projects the normalcy in life for him. Author has sensitively portrayed the shades of a visually impaired child, waiting for a chance to have fun. The chatterbox in him is revealed as he leads others confidently out of the tunnels, which deftly overturns the notion and prejudices associated with the visual disability. The inner thoughts of Kanna presented in the book emphasize that "being normal" is a relative term and there should be acceptance for unique “normal” in dealing with the person with a disability. The pictorial illustrations used in this book sensitively remove the perceived differences between abled and disabled persons.

In Manya Learns to Roar, Ankita, a friend of Manya, supported her when she was relentlessly teased by her classmates. The phrase "Because what she says is more important to me than how she says it. There are some people, you know, who speak so beautifully, but only hurtful words come out of their mouths", is much evident in this regard. It has depicted the sensitivity of a young child standing up to unjustified behavior and insensitive mocking faced by children with disability from their peers as well as adults. The story has picked on the need to sensitized young children for treating people having disabilities with due respect and normalcy. The author has given a message to the society through this book to change their behavioral mindset of the “normal” individuals of the society. This story also illustrates the role played by adults, in shunning the persons with disability by their ignorant and condescending behavior that leaves an impact on the impressionable minds. Thus the discouragement faced by the child suffering from disability due to disability and neglect as well as its impact on the confidence level of a young child is sensitively depicted in this book.

IV. Conclusion:

People having some form of mental, physical or sensory disability have been given equal rights as the able-
bodied individual’s. They also have the right to social justice and surviving in the least restrictive environment. The power of literature lies in its capability of impacting society, this medium can be used positively in dispelling the stigma associated with people having some form of disability. Unfortunately, for a long period of time, the fictional literary works have either marginally or negatively portrayed the characters suffering from some disability. The behavioral patterns in real-life situations have symbolically impacted treatment of disabled in fictional literary works. The reverse of this is also a social reality in present times. This point towards the need of influencing society, in particular, the attitude of young children towards treating disabled individuals equally and respectfully, is much notable. This paper has reviewed three current notable literary fictions, depicting the life of children suffering from some kind of disability. These works have depicted the simplistic lives of their protagonists, their struggles with preconceived notions and prejudices associated with disability and in the end, their victory over social challenges is depicted in an empathetic and sensitive manner.

These works have been quite accurate in depicting the young minds suffering from a disability. In particular, Kanna Panna emphasized on the need of widening the criteria for normalcy in the society. The quiet exterior and not-so-quiet mind of Kanna depicted in the society, call for fine-tuning of expectation around the children with disability. In Manya learns to roar, there is a quite accurate depiction of treatment that children with disability faces in school having the majority of able-bodied students and teachers. It points to the lack of equality and empathy, towards disabled individuals in real-life situations despite the claims of so-called social equality. The young life of Atiya, in Flute in the forest also accurately depicts the shyness, hesitation, and confusion of young child facing the discriminations and lack of acceptance due to disability. However, there is a common theme discussed in all the above-mentioned works that is the acute need of treating people suffering from disability without discrimination. A social message for eradicating the preconceived notions and prejudices related to persons suffering from a disability is central to these stories. It is the 'normalcy of disabled people' that the stories endeavour to highlight.

REFERENCES: