

## **Beverley Brenna's *Wild Orchid*: A Stigma Narrative**

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### **Abstract**

Literature unfolds the truth, both visible and invisible. Literature is an umbrella discipline, where it not only focuses on popular subjects, but it also focuses on marginal themes, like disability. Stigma plays a major role in disabled individuals life where it discriminates the 'abnormal from the 'normal', and this creates a negative impact in the disabled individuals' life. The present paper titled "Beverley Brenna's *Wild Orchid*: A Stigma Narrative" focuses on Beverley Brenna's *Wild Orchid*, where the protagonist, Jane's struggle against stigma has an adverse impact on her life. *Wild Orchid* is Beverley Brenna's debut novel which explores the aspect of invisible disability. Jane Taylor. is the protagonist who experiences the disability in the form of Asperger's Syndrome.

**Key Words:** Stigma, Invisible Disability, Asperger's Syndrome

## **Beverley Brenna's *Wild Orchid*: A Stigma Narrative**

Literature unfolds the truth, both visible and invisible. Everyone witnesses what they see through their eyes, however, Literature looks beyond one's sensory capacity as it reveals the hidden stories of one's experience of culture which prevails in the society. Literature is an umbrella discipline, where it not only focuses on popular subjects, but it also focuses on marginal themes, like disability. Many writers have begun to raise their voice for disability in a positive light. The present essay

focuses on Asperger Syndrome portrayed in *Wild Orchid*, where a person diagnosed with disability faces stigma, which has an adverse impact on the life.

The novel *Wild Orchid* is Beverley Brenna's debut novel. The novel focuses on the protagonist, Jane's plight against stigma, where she is alienated and labelled as 'freak' by her classmates. The novel shows various similarities related to stigma i.e. emotions, thoughts, relationships, and behaviour. As a result of Stigma many disabled individuals are afraid to attend schools.

The word 'Stigma' has evolved considerably over the centuries. It refers to differentiate a person as different from 'normal' that is a person below the standard scale by portraying them in the negative lens. It also indicates that 'disabled' individuals are excluded from 'normal' individuals. According to Fife and Wright, "the specific nature of stigma associated with serious illness" (8) as it depends on three elements i.e. blaming oneself for the illness, the threat the illness represents to others, and the threat that it represents to individual competence.

In the novel, *Wild Orchid*, the protagonist Jane has been diagnosed with Asperger Syndrome, who faces Stigma; for example, she is overprotected by her mother. She is alienated from her classmates and she has been appointed with a Special Educator. Jane, at first, seems to be dependent on her mother, who creates an image that she is not capable of handling new things on her own.

Individuals across the world consider autism as a source of disappointment, shame, or annoyance. For example, in this novel, Jane's father leaves his family because of Jane's mental illness. Jane realises this and, she says, "I think Dad left because of my problems.... Being a good parent is helping your kids when they have problems, not disappearing" (14). Jane's father finds Jane an abnormal kid and, forces her to be 'normal.' Jane's father fails to understand her struggle instead blames her and, feels that she is a disgrace to her family.

However, Jane's mother sticks with Jane, and teaches her daughter how to behave in the society. She shows Jane to handle new things, as persons with Asperger Syndrome have difficulties in accepting new things. As Beenu Kumari in *Teaching Children with Autism* says:

Receiving a diagnosis of autism can be devastating to some parents, but for others, it can be a relief to have a label for their child's symptoms. Many parents can be overwhelmed by fear and grief for the loss of the future they had hoped for their child... However, these strong emotions also motivate parents to find effective help for their children. (13)

Asperger's Syndrome often leads to disruptive antisocial behavior i.e. individuals with Asperger Syndrome have repetitive behavior of doing things as David E. Gray in *Perceptions of Stigma: The Parents of Autistic Children*, says that "some with autism may flick their fingers repeatedly, hit, scream or hurt themselves" (102). Jane, while losing her IQ level, she screams and uses swore words to let go of her anger. She repeats things seven times when things go out of her hands. As she says:

I was having a lot of meltdowns, and at school, I insisted on sitting inside a cardboard box that was left after a new computer had arrived.... I have that feeling that number seven is lucky, and if I do things seven times, I feel safe. Like, I'll take seven sips from my glass instead of one big one, or bounce a ball seven times. Going around the car seven times was a necessary diversion for my anxious feelings. (14-15)

Jane's Syndrome forces her to be alone and does not allow her to mingle with other individuals. Her Syndrome stops her to make eye contact with others during a conversation as it makes her uncomfortable to continue. When Jane first meets Paul at Waskeisu, he does not make eye contact during their conversation which helps Jane to communicate without any trouble. She recollects, "I appreciated the fact that he didn't look at me – it made having a conversation much more comfortable" (34).

Individuals with Asperger Syndrome need an assistant to help them with their everyday needs, and somebody has to be there for them to teach social skills like handshaking, nodding, and other body gestures. As a result, she is most of the time left alone in the class, "All of the boys I know are from my high school, and none of them wear golf shirt. Some of them talk to me, but none of them are boyfriend

material because they think of me as someone who has special needs” (27). Jane feels excluded from others, and feels different. She regrets her extra help, as it hinders her socialising.

When a child is recognized with Asperger’s Syndrome, it is the parent’s role to help the child to face the Stigma which prevails in the society. According to Russell and Norwich, when a child behaves ‘inappropriately’ i.e., some would explain that the child may be affected by autism or it's their brain has wired differently. One should seek the assessment for autism as it focuses on the child’s strength.

Jane finds it difficult when somebody interrupts her conversation; she feels crossed as she has to stop talking and analyze what the other person has said, and then she has to reply them back. This is one of Asperger’s Syndrome’s illnesses. She feels stressed when all of a sudden everyone talks to her as it takes some time to process in her brain:

When people say things I don't understand, then I really feel like I'm in the dark, and even writing it down here doesn't help much.... I can't pick up the same signals as other people. It's like being in a room with ten TVs on all at once, and I know there are words around, but I can't isolate any meaning from them. (42)

Individuals with Asperger Syndrome would like to do things in order, and they don't accept when there is a change in plans. Jane often encounters this kind of issues through her mother, who changes plans according to her will without considering Jane. As Jane says, “I do not like change of plans” (43). It is because, she has to face new things that she can't manage like the ‘normal’ individuals, she would like to use or see things which she has used or acquainted with, but with new things, Jane has to put a lot of effort to accept the new things and environment which sometimes makes her crazy.

However, because of Asperger’s Syndrome, Jane is frequently underestimated not only by her surroundings but also by her mother. Jane’s mother controls Jane’s day to day activities, and Jane has to inform her mother about her plans. Eventually, at Waskesiu, Jane happens to meet a boy, Kody, and things have started to change in Jane’s life. Although, Jane is an organized person, she changes her plans, in order to

go out for lunch with Kody. Jane informs her mother about her new plans, who suspects as she is overly concerned about her daughter.

However, things don't go as per Jane's plans because of her Asperger Syndrome; Jane feels uncomfortable when Kody comes close to her. She leaves the place abruptly, leaving Kody behind. When she returns, her mom has been worried sick of the sudden changes in her daughter's life, "Mom had the H in her forehead and said she was very mad... she had all sorts of questions... she said that if I was going to have a change of plans again, I should call her and let her know" (70-71).

Jane is overly protected by her mother, which makes her more dependent even she is matured enough to handle things on her own. Jane's life is scheduled by her mother, and she takes Jane wherever she plans to. Jane goes to Waskesiu against her will because her mother has planned a date with her new boyfriend, Danny. Jane does things as per her mother's instructions. When her mother goes overboard, Jane loses her temper, "I don't have to listen to this. You don't know anything about what's possible or necessary, and just because you're my mother, you think you can be the boss of me and you aren't. I'm the boss of myself" (141-142).

Asperger's Syndrome not only have defects but also it has some advantages like she has a pictographic memory. Even though Stigma has its effect on Asperger Syndrome, Jane sees her Syndrome in a positive light. Towards the end, she breaks the Stigma by making decisions on her own and trains herself to handle things on her own.

Nevertheless, Jane towards the end decides to deal her struggle on her own. Stigma beats her down whenever, she gathers courage to face obstacles. She is isolated, because of her Asperger Syndrome and this stigma forces her to take the role of a sick person. She is neglected by her biological father as well as her classmates. She is not invited to any birthday parties because persons with Asperger Syndrome will avoid being in crowded place since they prefer to be alone. Thus, persons with disabilities seem to struggle more in order to fight the 'normal.'

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