

From Deficit to Diversity: Reconceptualizing the Differently-Abled Protagonist

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Abstract

Literature can act not only as a reflection of society but also as the nuanced portrayal of contemporary issues. The otherness of individuals with disability is one of the key themes in modern fiction. Sharon M. Draper's *Out of My Mind* and Mark Haddon's *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time* challenge society's perceptions of disability and highlight the intellectual and emotional complexities of their protagonists. The study questions how these texts reveal the trauma between the protagonists' otherness and assertion of agency through their unique narratives. It further examines how the protagonists struggle to overcome resistance and attain resilience to negotiate their identity. Through the comparison of these two novels, the study may highlight how modern fiction depicts the interplay of vulnerability and strength, concluding that resilience is not merely endurance, but an active engagement with a world that often underestimates individuals with disability.

Keywords: Differently-abled, Resistance, Resilience

Literature has always been characterized by human struggles, their victories, and the ambiguity of the human soul. It challenges stereotypes and societal prejudices by presenting differently-abled characters as complicated, strong, and independent people. Literature, according to Elaine Showalter, “becomes a vehicle for voicing the unspeakable and for making visible those silenced by dominant discourses” (Showalter 12). In contemporary fiction, writers narrate stories that can embody marginalized and differently abled characters not as objects of pity but as agents with intelligence and strength.

This study examines the portrayal of differently-enabled protagonists in Sharon M. Draper's *Out of My Mind* and Mark Haddon's *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time*. The authors expose the hardships, difficulties, and successes that people with disabilities face, and also underline how they attain dignity and self-discovery through these novels. This study also explains how fiction acts as a way of creating awareness and acknowledging differences in human beings. These characters are represented as powerful warriors and try to overcome personal and social obstacles, emphasizing the transformative nature of narration in promoting equality.

Differently-abled characters were often depicted in the history of literature in a weak, pitiful, or even negative manner. Disability was symbolized in classical and early works as a symbol of misfortune, punishment, or weakness. For instance, the physical deformity of the titular character in Shakespeare's *Richard III* is correlated with villainy and ambition, supporting the notion that disability is aligned with being evil or defective. In the same way, Quasimodo in Victor Hugo's *The Hunchback of Notre-Dame* is portrayed as an ugly and pathetic character whose deformity estranges him from society. These descriptions mirror the views on disability in the past that stigmatized it as something embarrassing or heavy that disregarded the uniqueness of the person, his or her strength, or humanity.

Contemporary literature, on the other hand, depicts differently-abled characters as powerful individuals who live their lives with their strong will and resilience. Instead of dwelling on their misfortunes, modern narratives explain how these characters encounter social restrictions and inner conflicts, and prove their dignity and self-image. Melody in Sharon M. Draper's *Out of My Mind* is one such powerful protagonist, a very clever girl with cerebral palsy. She is extremely intelligent and emotionally sensitive, despite what people believe her to be. Equally, in *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time* by Mark Haddon, the character of Christopher, a young boy with autism, is a problem-solver who is also persistent. The chosen novels dismiss stereotypes of showing sympathy towards differently-abled individuals and instead focus more on their empowerment.

This transformation of such narratives represents a shift in cultural interpretations of disability as human diversity, not a deficit. As Rosemarie Garland-Thomson describes, disability is not a defect or a flaw; it is a difference in human experience that uncovers the possibilities and limitations of the world we develop (Garland-Thomson 6). This kind of approach stimulates readers to value the power, stamina, and distinct outlook of differently-abled individuals, enhancing inclusiveness and understanding in modern society.

Melody's journey in the *Out of My Mind* deals with lot of physical and cognitive problems. She was born with cerebral palsy and cannot speak or command her movements, hence, she is viewed by other people as someone who cannot do anything. Since her early years, Melody experiences exclusion, ridicule and misunderstanding on the part of both her peers and adults. Although she is a very bright person, she lacks the ability to communicate effectively and this makes her feel isolated. But instead of internalizing this rejection Melody demonstrates in her early stages of resiliency in that she proceeds with her observation, learning, and psychologically interacting with the surrounding world. Her fight is not only

with her disability but also with the restrictions developed by society. Smith rightly points out that “Draper’s portrayal of Melody challenges readers to rethink the assumptions about disability, urging a deeper understanding of unseen strength” (Smith 45).

Self-awareness is the starting point of Melody resilience. She is aware that she is different but potential. She also realizes silently about her weaknesses and strengths throughout the novel and tries to be involved in classroom activities deliberately even when other people are not expecting it. Her will to speak and study becomes a moving force in her way. Her sense of not being heard is an ingredient in her persistence. She starts to work on coping strategies like memorization, noticing patterns and speaking out through nonverbal movements. She says that “I have photographic memory. I can remember everything” (Draper 15) and it shows that she has the confidence in her intellectual strength in spite of being underestimated by others.

One of the important phases in Melody’s life is when she acquires access to a communication device. The Medi-Talker enables her to finally speak out her thoughts, emotions and intelligence. This recently developed communication power becomes a great source of empowerment. It not only provides Melody with a voice but also changes the perception of people about her. Educators, peers and even relatives start to understand that Melody is a good speaker, who is able and wilful. The machine represents the existence of resilience not only in terms of being able to withstand pain but also in terms of finding instruments and remedies that can alter the situation. This technology activates Melody empowerment and turns into a part of her identity.

Melody experiences prejudice and exclusion even with her communication device. Her schoolmates find it hard to view her as a peer and they tend to ignore her or mock at her disability. Melody is not angry but perseveres and is brave in response to these troubles. She

is taught to champion herself in a non-bitter way. This part of her experience shows that empowerment is well embedded in preserving dignity, confidence, and focus even in situations of discrimination. When Melody considers the responses of others, she remarks, “Sometimes I feel like I’m invisible” (Draper 22), which makes it clear that exclusion is a problem since it makes her feel like she does not belong.

Melody proves her strength by performing better than her colleagues in the academic quiz contest and displays her intelligence. The success of Melody is not only a winning but a breaking barriers and stereotyping. According to Johnson “Melody’s triumph is not only a personal victory but also a call for societal change, urging readers to question their biases”. (Johnson 78). Her experience shows her strong spirit and identity. Melody is able to transcend her shortcomings to be a model of how to survive when hardships arise both physically and socially. Her metamorphosis into a vocal person who is not afraid to speak and express herself symbolizes the universal fact that empowerment is achieved by persevering, being brave, and not giving up even when the situation appears to be too difficult.

In *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time*, the path of Christopher Boone to maturity and empowerment starts with his serious struggle to find his way through the world that is rather muddled, overwhelming and frequently aggressive towards him. Christopher with autism spectrum disorder sees the world in terms of logic, routine and pattern. The remarkable skill in mathematics is shadowed by his inability to socialize, sensory overload and emotional distress. In the first part of the novel, the efforts of Christopher to unravel the mystery of the death of Wellington alienate him further with his peers and the feedback he gets brings out the contrast between his inner-world and outer demands. According to Smith, “Christopher’s condition is portrayed not as a limitation but as

a different way of perceiving reality, emphasizing that resilience arises from embracing one's uniqueness" (Smith 51).

Christopher is very strong and resilient who never gives up on his efforts to find the solution to the mystery despite the complications he experiences. He takes his time and calculates every move, he orders his mind, and he is also persistent to find out the truth. He is not an emotive speaker but a rational and systematic speaker. According to him, he sees everything (Haddon 7), meaning he is more aware and more attentive to details, and he employs them to navigate his world. The strength of his spirit is manifested in his ability to shrug off confusion and anxiety particularly when those faced with situations that would make other people withdraw. Christopher is resilient not because of the obvious displays of emotion, but because of the stoic search of knowledge and mastery of his surroundings.

Christopher's journey takes a new turn, when he chooses to abandon his usual environment in order to go to London alone. It is a hard path full of sensory difficulties, fear of the unknown, and new people. The fact that Christopher could follow his map, control his panic and believe in his own abilities is a great stride to self-reliance. He dares to claim that he is able to do this: "I can do this. I will do this" (Haddon 233), just the way his willpower beats down his fear. The choice is the first step toward making him an independent person who is capable of choosing his own path in life, as opposed to being a child reliant on his mother. The trip itself is a metaphor of the escape of the limitations that seem imposed on him.

In the process, Christopher has to deal with the betrayal of his father who withholds painful truths about himself. The knowledge of this duplicity shatters the confidence of Christopher and his feeling of security, but he refuses to drop into despair. Instead, he proceeds with his search of answers and discovers the inner determination to defend himself

and make himself independent. His response serves as a good example of how resilience is being able to face the emotional pain and stay focused on purpose. The way in which Christopher can handle the intricate emotions and does not submit to them is an indication of how empowerment is beneficial in the form of intellectual clarity and personal strong will instead of emotional repression simply on its own.

Christopher manages to go to London alone to solve the mystery is a potent confirmation of his ability. When he returns, he is being recognized not because he is fitting the societal expectations but because he is courageous, persevering and intelligent. As Carter highlights, “Christopher’s journey embodies the triumph of structured thinking and perseverance in a world that often prizes emotional expression over logic”. Christopher’s strength lies in his capacity to remain consistent to his approach in the context of the complicated human relations.

The way Christopher acquires resilience and empowerment in *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time* is an excellent example of how inner strength, rationality, and perseverance can win over the odds. The lesson that his story teaches the reader is that empowerment does not rely on conformity or outward comfort but on the strength to confront confusion, lies, and fear and to stick to the truth of one oneself. The ability of resilience to transform is highlighted by the steadfastness of the character of Christopher, his problem-solving skills, and self-scheduled behaviour. In taking his own direction and making his own way, Christopher not only cracks a mystery but also reinvents the meaning of the word empowered in life’s uncertainties.

Out of My mind and *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time* revolve around disabled main characters, Melody and Christopher, whose experiences of breaking through to resilience and empowerment disrupt the established socially accepted notions. The

authors do not portray their main characters as pitiable people but rather as powerful warriors. In the way Melody insists on the ability to communicate, and Christopher displays the desire to know the truth and act as a rational person, both stories encourage a reader to define disability as a kind of ability rather than one that is lacking.

The resilience is depicted in each story in a different way. The emotional conflict of Melody being a person that is not heard and understood is the central theme of the journey, as communication is viewed as the pathway to expressing yourself and fitting into the society. On the contrary, the journey of Christopher is more logical persistence and the possibility to survive in extreme conditions, rather than the emotional contact or regulation of emotions and independence. These distinctions indicate the varied experiences of the differently-abled people and emphasizes the role of resilience in people with different challenges. The two stories are equally powerful yet they deal with the issue of empowerment in different psychological, social and developmental perspectives. To sum up, both *Out of My Mind* and *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time* are strong stories that encourage readers to celebrate the resilience of differently-abled individuals.

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