

Representing Difference: Disability, Identity and Inclusion in Children's Literature

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Abstract

The study examines how disability is represented in children's literature published in and for the Indian context. Children's literature plays an important role in shaping attitudes and beliefs, as it exposes young readers to ways of understanding difference, identity, social participation, and inclusion. Although previous research has explored children's engagement with social issues such as gender, ethnicity and class, issues of disability have received relatively limited attention within the Indian context. The purpose of the study is to analyse how disability is portrayed in children's literature and to understand the kinds of meanings about ability and difference that these narratives make available to young readers. The study employs qualitative content analysis of 15 English-language children's literature, purposively selected for readers between eight and 12 years of age. The findings indicate that recent children's literature shows an increasing effort to represent disability in inclusive ways. The analysed narratives challenge stereotypical assumptions and encourage a more nuanced understanding of difference and fairness. Overall, the study highlights the complex dimensions in which disability is constructed in Indian children's literature.

Keywords: Children's literature, disability, ableism, agency, representation, diversity

1. Introduction

Books are often understood as cultural mirrors that reflect the values, beliefs, norms and structures of the societies in which they are produced (McCabe et al., 2011). They serve as important sites through which readers encounter prevailing societal attitudes, beliefs, values, and cultural practices. This role is particularly significant in children's literature, where language and illustrations together shape children's understanding of the social world (Crawley, 2017; Hintz, 2020). Though mostly considered one of the simplest genres, children's literature wields powerful tools that silhouette new perspectives in society. Scholars (Chung, 2024; Clasen & Hassel, 2019; Mohanty, 2019; Street, 2003) have noted that children's literature communicates ideas about acceptable and unacceptable forms of behaviour while contributing to children's identity development. Through narratives, children gain access to social meanings that facilitate the interpretations of the relationships, roles and differences that surround them. As a result, children's literature, thus, fundamentally becomes an innocuous territory through which children make sense of their social reality and the world they inhabit.

The representations encountered within these narratives by children thus hold the potential to be accepted as typical or natural, particularly when alternate perspectives are limited (Curwood, 2013; Debroy, 2018). This influence can extend to the formation of attitudes towards marginalised groups. Historically, just as literary representations have reinforced biases such as sexism (Conforti, 2017; Clasen & Hassel, 2019; Mohanty, 2019), they may also reproduce ableist assumptions that shape perceptions of disability and

contribute to unequal treatment (Myers & Bersani, 2008). Perhaps even when biases are not explicitly stated, implicit norms embedded within the narratives (textual) and illustrations can influence children's perceptions and interpretations of difference. Though these children's books may provide spaces and opportunities for new imaginations, experiences, and predictions, they may also reflect limited or stereotypical representations that restrict alternative imaginations of social diversity. The persuasive power of children's literature has encouraged educators and researchers to examine patterns of representation in these narratives. In this context, this study investigates the representation of disability in selected works of children's literature and addresses the following research question:

- How is/are character/s with disabilities represented in these stories for young children? Is the representation ableist?
- How do linguistic positioning and visual representation affect the representation?

2. Literature Review

Children's literature provides an important platform for communicating culturally and socially sanctioned ideas (Cotton et al, 2013). Anyone utilising these narratives, especially parents or educators, must examine how cultural beliefs and social norms are embedded in children's literature. The textual and visual representations in these narratives are never neutral; instead, they help shape children's perceptions and interpretations of difference, equality, and identity. A substantial body of research indicates that children's literature influences children's developing sense of self and their perception of social groups (Clasen & Hassel, 2019; Conforti, 2017; Earles, 2017; McCabe et al., 2011; Skelton, 2010). Children may internalise the cultural assumptions conveyed through narratives, especially when these assumptions are presented implicitly as unproblematic or unnatural (Cotton et al, 2013).

Although representations of disability in children's literature have improved in recent years, there is limited research that examines portrayals of disability and their implications for young people within these narratives. Saunder (2000) suggests that thoughtfully selected children's literature can support the development of positive social behaviours and inclusive attitudes. In this context, Hurley (2012) explains how literary portrayals contribute to children's perceptions of disability, specifically when the characters within the narratives are depicted with agency and positive self-concepts. Conversely, the absence or distorted portrayals may contribute to negative self-perceptions. Studies demonstrate how much children's literature continues to convey implicit or explicit negative messages about disability (Saunders, 2000). When children encounter limited or only stereotypical portrayals, they may internalise beliefs about social hierarchy and exclusion. The absence of characters with disabilities in narrative can also reinforce feelings of marginalisation and limit opportunities for identification with the texts (Beckett, 2014; Hughes, 2015). Within disability studies, such concerns are often discussed through the concept of ableism and the privileging of the "able body" as a normative ideal. Disability scholars argue that cultural representations frequently construct the able-bodied subject as the standard against which all other bodies are measured, creating an instant category of normal (Lane, 2005). The medical model of disability frames impairment as an individual deficit that requires correction, while the social model emphasises the role of social and environmental structures and boundaries in producing disability (Adomat, 2014). The discourse of the able body thus positions disability as a deviation from an assumed norm that reinforces the hierarchies of bodily value. Examining children's literature through this lens provides insights into how narratives construct ideas about fairness, differences, and normalcy.

Historically, portrayals of disabilities in literature echoed religious ideologies and were not divorced from

social stereotypes. During the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, literary representations frequently associated disability with villainy (Dyches & Prater, 2000; Hughes, 2015). Even when more sympathetic portrayals emerged, narratives often relied on troublesome elements such as disability being cured miraculously or removed from the storyline through death (Wopperer, 2011). Disabled characters are usually depicted in crucial roles, but this remained negative. Traditionally, in India, the meaning of disability is seen in the cultural discourse, and within this ethos, ‘disability,’ ‘crippled,’ and ‘deaf’ are used synonymously (Ghai, 2015). These terminologies have brought forward two strands of definition (Sarker, 2019). The first definition, or category, casts disability in a negative light, labelling it as devilish and deceitful, whereas the second defines it as a flaw (Sarker, 2019).

Significant changes in representations began to emerge during the late twentieth century. In Western contexts, the Civil Rights Movement spurred the influx of the concept of diversity and the representation of disability (Wopperer, 2011). However, as Quicke (1985) put it, these representations were of poor quality and shallow in their characterisation. Unacceptable and ableist representation of characters with disabilities kept finding ways to children’s representation (Koc, 2012). However, the shift happens gradually, as observed in the later works (Kenderick, 2010). In India, it was not until the twenty-first century that disabled people found space in short stories, novels, and children’s Literature (Debroy, 2018). The advent of new publishing houses such as Duckbill and Tulika has taken a step forward in providing inclusive stories that represent characters with their tribulations and flaws without putting societal stereotypes on a pedestal. The emergence of literature featuring characters dealing with sensitivity and non-abelian representation helps children internalise a positive image. The notion that disabled characters cannot be protagonists could change as depictions of characters evolve. The agency and voice remain among the most crucial aspects of children’s literature, with a focus on the intended audience (Sarkar, 2019).

This development suggests a gradual shift towards a more inclusive and socially grounded depiction of disability. However, the persistence of the ableist assumptions and normative constructs indicates the need for continued critical examination of children’s literature.

3. Method

This study is a qualitative content analysis of 15 children’s books in English, purposively selected for children aged 8-12. These ages are transitional phases because, during these times, children begin to (a) read independently and engage actively in formulating their worldview; (b) explore their identity and think about their roles in society. The chosen books included characters with disabilities. The selected literature was analysed using a framework that integrates textual and visual representations. The focus was on studying the language utilised by the author, the relationship between the characters, and the underlying commentary towards the characters with disabilities in society. The selection of children’s literature followed particular requirements: (a) portraying a character with a disability and (b) the intended audience being children. I conducted interviews with publishers to understand current market trends in children’s literature and ran a Google search to compile a list of texts I wanted to analyse. Based on the suggestion and availability, I selected 15 children’s literature.

Table 1: Children’s Literature

S.NO	Books Selected	Publisher
1.	Abba’s Day	Katha

2.	Against All Odds	Penguin
3.	Vibhuti Cat	Duckbill
4.	Simply Nanju	Duckbill
5.	Kittu’s Very Mad Day	Duckbill
6.	Manya learns to Roar	Duckbill
7.	Susie will not speak	Duckbill
8.	Kayu’s World is Round	Tulika
9.	A Walk with Thambi	Tulika
10.	Catch that Cat	Tulika
11.	I did not understand	Tulika
12.	Wings to Fly	Tulika
13.	Flute in the forest	Penguin
14.	The Bookworm	Karadi Tales
15.	Machher Jhol	Pickle Yolk

4. Findings and Discussion

Based on the research question, the outcomes of the reviewed books were categorised into various themes.

4.1 Multidimensional Capable Characters

Scholars have argued that literary representations of disability should go beyond reductive portrayals that define or limit characters solely by their impairment. Instead, characters with disabilities should be portrayed as complex individuals whose identities extend beyond the label (Kleekamp & Zapata, 2019). Such multidimensional portrayals allow readers to engage with characters as capable social actors rather than as passive subjects defined by society's labels. For instance, several of the analysed texts in this study present characters whose lives are not defined solely by their disabilities. In *A Walk with Thambi*, the character Thambi is portrayed as an active child in everyday practices and routines. Although Thambi is blind, he walks around freely and enjoys the routines of a child. Thambi, being blind, does not stop him from doing his daily chores like any other person. Alternatively, Malathi in *‘Wings to Fly’* shows determination to race on a track. Her achievement as a racer indicates that she is a capable individual with multidimensional characteristics. When disability is situated as one aspect of the broader identity rather than a central defining feature, narratives create opportunities for young readers and others to recognise the everyday experiences, aspirations and competence of these individuals with disability. This multipronged facet of characters is a significant component. The narratives emphasise the character’s growth, agency, and participation, and how they evolve at their own pace, rather than focusing on their impairment. These narratives construct disability within a framework of growth, nurture, and competence, allowing characters to be recognised as individuals with multiple abilities and interests.

The characters' developmental trajectories further underscore their multidimensionality. For instance, in *‘Vibhuti Cat,’* Magesh’s character gradually discovers personal interests and adapts to the school's pace and demands. The narrative focuses on the processes of learning and adjustment, thereby situating disability within the broader spectrum of personal development. Across the analysed texts, characters are depicted as individuals with the potential to contribute meaningfully to their social world. Such portrayals encourage readers to engage with the everyday lives, aspirations, and emotional experiences of characters rather than relying on stereotypical assumptions. The stories convey a sense of normalcy, bringing these characters to life and making them more effective. A particularly effective representation of a

multidimensional character is Kayu in ‘Kayu’s World is Round’, where the autistic protagonist Kayu interprets the world through a distinctive sensory experience. It reveals the unique ways everyone views the world. For Kayu, everything is round, and he learns to use that to his strength. The narrative emphasises Kayu's strength by showing how their perception of roundness becomes a meaningful way of interacting with others. Instead of any diagnostic labels, the story flows with its plot. Such a portrayal strengthens the individual's depiction and worthiness, like any other.

However, not all portrayals sustained these complexities. In the story ‘I didn’t understand,’ the character of Manna experiences exclusion and bullying for being different. Although the narrative acknowledges social marginalisation, it ultimately resolves the conflict through Manna’s unconditional forgiveness and benevolence. Such simplification and resolution risk the emotional realities of exclusion by minimising the character’s potential experiences of pain, frustration, anger, or resistance. These portrayals may further unintentionally reinforce the expectation that individuals with disabilities should remain patient and accommodating in the face of discrimination. Scholars from disability studies have cautioned that overtly idealised representations can obscure the lived realities of structural disempowerment and stigma by presenting disability through narratives of moral virtue rather than the social struggle and unequal system. More nuanced portrayals of disability would allow space for the emotional responses associated with marginalisation, including resistance, anger, pain, and self-assertion. A comprehensive portrayal of disability should reflect not only resilience but also the confluent emotions and complexities of everyday experiences within ableist social environments.

4.2 Agency of the Characters

The character’s agency in literary representation extends beyond the depiction of capability or talent; it concerns the extent to which a character exercises choice, expresses their voices and perspectives, and shapes the course of their lives. In children’s literature, the portrayal of characters' agency is particularly important, as it determines whether characters with disabilities are depicted as active participants in their own lives or as passive side characters. The analysed narratives in this study demonstrate varying degrees of agency, representing characters who pursue aspirations, make informed decisions, and navigate everyday challenges. This is aptly highlighted by Gopi's courage in ‘Machher Jhol,’ where a visually impaired boy is portrayed as a caregiver to his loving father, taking on the role of an active decision-maker within the family. The agency and voice of the individual are shown in Gopu's stepping out of the house to buy fish, cooking it at his grandmother’s place, and returning with a surprise meal for his father. The character decides to leave the house to fend for his father. Disability, here, is not seen as a lack of being able. Similarly, Karthik, in ‘Against All Odds,’ a child with physical disabilities, demonstrates agency and resilience through the commitment to playing football, despite the structural and physical challenges. His determination and decision to follow his dream and play reflect the ability to define personal goals and act upon them. Moreover, Maithili’s determination in ‘Wings to Fly’ to race despite the women's team's unavailability and lack of access further highlights how agency is expressed through persistence and self-guided goals. These narratives placed individuals with disabilities within the framework of choice and aspiration rather than dependency. Agency is further represented in the dimension of mobility and engagement with public spaces. In Dip Dip, the protagonist's dynamic nature is depicted as she actively explores public spaces and does not see her wheelchair as a hindrance. The narrative highlights the freedom of mobility and reinforces the idea that individuals with disabilities participate in social life on an equal basis with others. It is a decision that reflects their agency—these characters demonstrate the strength to make informed choices about how they face the world. The reviewed books consistently

described characters with disabilities as capable beings who could function, make decisions, and act on their dreams. In ‘Big Bully and Me,’ Krish portrays a character who overcomes his stammering to deliver a speech. The decision to fight against things provides a positive image.

Despite these positive illustrations and depictions, these narrative patterns raise one critical question. In many cases, recognition and dignity appear to be linked with exceptional achievement. Characters are seen gaining acceptance only after demonstrating exceptional perseverance or talent. This, too, can reinforce the expectation that individuals with disabilities must excel in order to be fully accepted within society. These portrayals risk narrowing the understanding of disability by privileging achievement over the emotional and everyday experiences. Another recurring pattern in the narratives is the use of symbolic metaphors—especially those of light and dark—to represent disability. These metaphors usually simplify complex emotions and social experiences by restricting disability to abstract symbolism. As a result, the nuanced experiences, realities of frustrations, social exclusion or uncertainty lived by the individuals with disabilities may remain unexplored and their emotions invalid.

4.3 Linguistic Positioning and the Visual Representation

Language plays a crucial role in shaping how individuals with disabilities are positioned within the narratives (Anke & Almendros, 2018). The language used to describe the characters' influence on readers' perception of their capabilities, identities, and social values (Hintz, 2020). Anke and Almendros (2018) argue that linguistic choices can shape a character's social position by reinforcing or challenging dominant constructs and assumptions about difference. The analysed books in this study employ positive language that emphasises competence and individuality rather than deficiency. For instance, in ‘Kayu’s World is Round’, Kayu, a child on the autism spectrum, is portrayed through language that foregrounds their distinctive way of experiencing the society and the world around them. The language details Kayu’s unique outlook on the world around him. The narrative strategically uses characters’ sensory experience and personal strength to portray and emphasise their position as equals within the narrative. Similarly, the analysed stories frequently portray the characters' abilities, capabilities, and participation in activities that might conventionally be considered potentially dangerous. For instance, Kittu from ‘Kittu’s Very Mad Day’ is shown riding a skateboard, an activity that highlights confidence and independence. Disability is usually defined in binaries: either put on a pedestal or treated condescendingly. Some of these books bring the acceptance of difference—a respectful way of looking at the world uniquely.

Berry and Wilkin (2017) explain that language can create discrimination and support inequality. These dimensions of language constantly reinforce ideas; a linguistic positioning of othering can recreate a recurring tendency to view disability as far from what we accept as ‘normal.’ However, none of the analysed books used discriminatory language for the characters. Such portrayals demonstrate the characters' positions and establish a space for connecting them. The visual illustration works alongside language to shape readers’ interpretation. Illustrations in children’s literature employ a parallel mode of meaning-making, often imparting ideas about identity and social participation that extend beyond the written texts. In the analyses narratives, the visual portrayal does not highlight the disability as a defining feature. Instead, disability is integrated into the narrative’s broader context and the story's flow. For instance, the illustrations of a wheelchair in ‘Catch the Cat’ and ‘Wings to Fly’ normalise disability. The illustrations demonstrate the characters' independence as they freely use their wheelchairs without assistance. The image of Malathi going down the racetrack, or Dip Dip’s journey to find Kaapi—her friend’s cat—both challenge stereotypical assumptions society makes about individuals with disabilities.

5. Conclusion

Every word we read shapes our perceptions of how characters with disabilities are portrayed in stories and influences levels of acceptance in society. A respectful and realistic description of disabled characters must eradicate a pedestal view. Although gradual changes and improvements are evident, simplified or misleading characterisations persist. Readers, parents, educators, authors, and publishers should share responsibility for urging accurate exemplification in books that cement ideas for us. A conscious effort must be made to recognise that characters demand depth and complexity. To bring out experiences that are not simple, but manage a level of vigour and appreciate the character's emotions. However, this surely does not mean that disability is portrayed in isolation or solely focused in a story, somewhat like any other; it should co-exist in the story world as it does in the real world.

7. Reference

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