



## SHAPING YOUNG MINDS: THE ROLE OF DISABILITY REPRESENTATION IN INDIAN CHILDREN'S BOOKS

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### Abstract

Children's literature plays a pivotal role in shaping young minds, fostering empathy, and promoting inclusivity. This study investigates into how disability is portrayed in Indian children's books, with a particular focus on three widely read titles: "Kanna Panna," "Against All Odds," and "Susie Will Not Speak." By closely examining these narratives, the paper aims to understand the representation of disability, the stereotypes perpetuated, and the potential impact on young readers. A critical analysis of these books will illuminate how disability is often misunderstood and marginalized in society. These books challenge the pervasive ableist attitudes that privilege able-bodied experiences. By highlighting the extraordinary abilities of characters with disabilities, the paper attempts to dispel misconceptions and foster a more inclusive worldview. This research endeavors to demonstrate that individuals with disabilities are not defined by their impairments but possess unique strengths and perspectives. Ultimately, the paper aims to contribute to a growing body of literature that advocates for authentic and empowering representations of disability in children's books, thereby fostering a more equitable and compassionate society.

**Keywords:** Disability, Discrimination, Children's Literature, Inclusion, Education

### Introduction

Discrimination against people with disabilities remains a pervasive issue across the world (Heumann and Joiner; Wong) including in India (Chib; Dalal), woven into the fabric of

everyday life. Despite progress towards inclusivity, many still face significant challenges. Social structures play a vital role in combating discrimination, but current approaches have glaring inadequacies. Even

with comprehensive policies and multi layers initiatives, people with disabilities still face daily discrimination. This necessitates a need of review in our approach to fight against such practices. Beyond a comprehensive review of our existing policies and their implementation for people with disabilities, we must also address societal perceptions. Education presents a significant opportunity to shape positive attitudes and understanding towards people with disabilities from a young age. Even at a young age, children notice how factors like race, language, gender, and physical ability can be linked to advantages and disadvantages. Biases like racism and sexism can deeply impact how children see themselves and the world around them. Creating an anti-bias curriculum equips young children to develop fairness, critical thinking skills, and the confidence to speak out against such injustice (Derman-Sparks).

Literature has a transformative potential to shape young minds and foster empathy, but the absence of disabled characters and narratives perpetuates ignorance and reinforces discriminatory attitudes. This not only hinders the development of inclusivity but also exacerbates societal disparities, impeding progress towards true equity and harmony. To navigate these complexities, we must re-evaluate educational priorities and proactively integrate literature that reflects the diversity of human experiences, including those of individuals with disabilities. Researchers studying older school children found that positive interactions, both directly with children with disabilities and indirectly through books, discussions, or simulations, can quickly improve attitudes and perceptions towards people with disabilities (Campbell; Jones et al.; Salend and Moe). Early childhood educators champion the inclusion of texts that promote awareness and positive attitudes towards peers with disabilities in young children (Conant and Budoff; Favazza et al.; Turner and Traxler). Through such efforts, we can dismantle

deep-seated prejudices and pave the way for a more inclusive and compassionate future.

This paper examines three works of Indian Children's Literature: "Kanna Panna" (2015) by Zai Whitaker, "Against All Odds" (2017) by Ramendra Kumar, and "Susie Will Not Speak" (2021) by Shruthi Rao, which provide how literature is strong tool to fight against prejudices against person with disabilities. These works feature distinctive characters with disabilities, shedding light on the diversity of abilities. The protagonists in these narratives' present disability as a form of diversity, striving to challenge ingrained ableism. These humanizing texts serve the purpose of inclusive children's literature, acting as both mirrors and windows, as described by Bishop (Bishop ix-xi). They serve as mirrors for disabled children, allowing them to see themselves reflected in the stories, and as windows for able-bodied individuals to gain insight into the lives of disabled characters. Consequently, children's literature within the framework of disability studies is actively challenging conventional assumptions about disability.

#### **Darkness to Light: Kanna 's Journey:**

Zia Whitaker's "Kanna Panna" beautifully narrates the poignant journey of a young boy named Kanna, grappling with a visual impairment. Initially, Kanna contends with stereotypical behaviors from his parents, who consistently inundate him with directives. His father, Appa, insists, "Look up! Head up!" , while his mother, Amma, issues a stream of commands like "Tuck in your shirt!" and "Straighten your collar!" followed by requests to redo buttons (Whitaker and Wadia 3, 5). Despite the outward perception of Kanna as an introvert, a rich inner world of thoughts simmers within him. Unfortunately, he faces a lack of attentive listeners, leaving his unspoken words to echo in the recesses of his mind. The narrative skillfully exposes how the external physical challenge becomes a symbolic device, falsely representing non-existent inner flaws –

epitomizing the literary concept of a "twisted mind in a twisted body." Kanna experiences a profound sense of alienation, feeling disconnected not only from his parents but also from society at large.

One day, Kanna seizes the opportunity to explore cave temples with Aunt Chithi's family, marking a transformative experience. Guiding them through the tunnels, he openly expresses himself. Upon their return, a sudden power outage unsettles and frightens everyone, except Kanna. Calmly, he reassures, "Just hold hands and follow me" (Whitaker and Wadia 17). Unfazed by the darkness, he reflects, "Lights on or off, as if it made any difference to me. My body knew how to get out" (Whitaker and Wadia 17), showcasing that his insight surpasses his visual impairment. Whitaker's narrative skillfully unfolds Kanna's journey from darkness to light, offering an exemplary story. It conveys a powerful message to readers about embracing and celebrating the diverse abilities of both disabled and non-disabled individuals.

#### **Defying all Odds: Kartik's Journey:**

Ramendra Kumar's "Against All Odds" centers around Kartik, a twelve-year-old boy whose world revolves around his passion for football. Despite his left arm not fully developing at birth, described in the text as a "thin stump" (Kumar 11), Kartik never perceives any distinction between himself and others. His parents provided equal upbringing for him and his twin sister, fostering an environment where he felt no difference. In Calcutta, his friends and classmates accepted him wholeheartedly, treating him without making him feel distinct. However, Kartik's life takes a significant turn when his father, Adarsh, secures a job promotion, necessitating the family's relocation from Kolkata to Rourkela.

Upon learning about his impending transfer to a new school, Kartik harbored several anxieties. Thoughts raced through his mind, questioning whether people would accept him

in this unfamiliar setting. The prospect of adjusting to a new environment seemed daunting, and he couldn't help but wish that his father's job transfer hadn't necessitated this change. As the family settled into Rourkela, they were warmly welcomed by neighbors and colleagues who extended numerous invitations for meals. Kartik's initial concerns, however, proved to be well-founded as he observed a recurring pattern in the behavior of new acquaintances. A sense of discomfort enveloped him as he disliked meeting new people, anticipating the predictable sequence of reactions. The initial exchange would begin with smiles directed at his face, but as their gaze traveled downward to his left arm, the smiles would freeze and transform into either curiosity or pity. The impending social gatherings became a source of dread for Kartik, given the anticipated recurrence of these uncomfortable moments (Kumar 11, 16).

This poignant portrayal reflects and underscores the pervasive ableism experienced by Kartik. On his inaugural day at school, he becomes acutely aware of his perceived differences when his new class teacher, with good intentions, pledges to "take special care" (Kumar 18) of him. Kartik, however, reacts with alarm, feeling a need to assert his normalcy: "Kartik stiffened. Why did she have to take special care? He was a normal child and wanted to be treated like one. Just because he was eight inches short on some flesh and bone did not mean he was a freak" (Kumar 18). The author adeptly confronts society's inclination to view individuals with disabilities as inherently weak, passive, and constantly in need of care. This societal bias is further challenged when the class teacher exacerbates Kartik's discomfort by instructing his peers to be "kind to Kartik" (Kumar 19). In response, the students mock Kartik, labeling him "Tunde Kartik" (Kumar 21), a reference to the famous Tunde Kebab of Lucknow, and even manipulate his drawing of a one-armed boy, turning it into a replica of his sister. Kartik's sister, Kavya, incensed by the

situation, intervenes by organizing an arm-wrestling contest to defend her brother. Kartik's triumph in the contest becomes a poignant symbol, underscoring that physical impairment does not translate to overall weakness or inability. Despite Kartik's resilience, he faces additional hurdles when denied the opportunity to participate in football, a sport he passionately embraces, during a school sports period. Instead of considering his preferences, he is arbitrarily assigned to play chess, highlighting the systemic disregard for the choices of disabled individuals and their confinement to limited spaces. His capabilities are callously questioned when the football coach dismisses his aspirations with a demeaning tone:

'Really?' Peter Sir looked pointedly at Kartik's left arm. "Don't you realise what a tough game football is? Even many of my normal boys find it too rough to handle." "I used to play in Kolkata. I really love the game, sir." Peter Sir looked at Kartik, his eyes turning redder. 'This is not Kolkata; this is Rourkela. And my boys are among the best in the circuit. I suggest you read about football, watch matches and try to become a commentator instead. Football is not for boys like you'(Kumar 27-28).

In this narrative, Kartik's left arm becomes the focal point of his identity, relegating him to a classification solely based on his physical condition. The coach, without witnessing Kartik's skills on the field, dismisses his capabilities and potential. Once feeling "like a normal boy" in Kolkata, Kartik now confronts a reality in Rourkela where he is consistently reminded of his differences. To understand Kartik's predicament, Robert Murphy's insight that "[s]tigmatization is less a by-product of disability than its substance" is pertinent (Murphy 113). It emphasizes that societal attitudes, myths, fears, and misunderstandings attached to physical flaws

pose a greater obstacle to societal participation than the flaws themselves.

This persistent othering results in Kartik feeling isolated and alienated. However, a glimmer of hope emerges when his English teacher, Mirza Sir, introduces him to his brother's football coaching academy. Despite facing initial bullying from a senior named Sanjay, who belittles him, Kartik responds by offering technical suggestions about playing positions. This unexpected shift prompts Sanjay to acknowledge Kartik's contribution and express gratitude with a simple "Thanks, dude" (Kumar 47). Against all odds, Kartik secures an opportunity to actively participate in the school football team and plays a pivotal role in the team's championship victory. Even Peter Sir, who consistently underestimated Kartik and viewed him as a liability, is compelled to admit, "Man, I have never been so happy to have been proved wrong," while patting Kartik on the back. He adds, "The chip was awesome" (70), signaling a transformative journey where Kartik overcomes stereotypes and challenges to prove his worth on the football field.

In a powerful exploration, the novel effectively challenges ableism, illuminating society's prejudiced views towards individuals with disabilities. It underscores the pervasive tendency to judge them solely on their impairments rather than recognizing their inherent abilities. Kartik's resilient journey dismantles prevailing myths and societal norms, encouraging young readers to perceive disability not as a limitation, but as a facet of diversity. As articulated by Davis, "disability is the difference that fosters a vision of a world where our diversity unites us in sameness" (Davis 14). The narrative advocates for appreciating disabled individuals for their distinctive qualities, fostering a more inclusive and empathetic perspective among readers.

#### **Silence to Speech: Susie's Journey:**

In Shruthi Rao's "Susie Will Not Speak," the narrative revolves around a determined



young girl named Susie, who grapples with a speech impediment. Resolute and independent, Susie observes the world beyond her home by peering over the wall. Initially reserved, she prefers staying indoors, avoiding socializing and playground activities. The neighborhood children, unfortunately, subject her to bullying due to her speech impairment, taunting her for pronouncing her name as "Thuthie," which they mockingly refer to as "Toots." The ringleader of the neighborhood kids, Mukund, exacerbates her challenges by singing the "Thuthie" song to tease her, creating an additional layer of difficulty for Susie:

ThuthieThuthieThoothie  
ThtrawberryThmoothie  
Poori and Kachori  
In Mythore and Muthourie(Rao 13).

Fortunately, Susie finds a new friend in Jahan, her recently acquainted neighbor residing next door. Jahan proves to be friendly and swiftly forms a bond with Susie. Excitedly, he affectionately calls her "Toots," unaware of the negative connotations behind the nickname. However, Susie reacts with anger instead of joy. It's only when Jahan's mother intervenes and reveals Susie's actual name, along with her dislike for "Toots," that Jahan recognizes his mistake. Determined to make amends, Jahan attempts to build a connection by introducing Susie to his dog, Splash. As Susie realizes Jahan's innocence, she forgives him, and their friendship deepens. Initially drawn to playing with other kids, Jahan observes them mistreating Susie and decides to stand by her side, exclusively engaging in play with her.

Susie finds herself consistently vulnerable due to the omnipresence of the letter 'S' in her life. Beyond the commonplace words containing 's,' her own name becomes the target of ridicule, with classmates mockingly referring to her as the "baaaaaby of our clath" (17). On her way home, Susie's frustration surfaces as she confronts her parents for selecting a name with two 's's, exclaiming, "My parentth!... They had to

name me Thuthie. With two etheth! There are so many nithenameth without even one eth, but no!" (18). In response, her friend Jahan suggests, "call yourself Sue" (18). This highlights Susie's internalized ableism, as she aspires to navigate a non-disabled environment by concealing her disability and avoiding appropriate support systems.

Although Susie is often grumpy and stigmatized, she is also infused with courage and grit, occasionally revealing a hint of vengeance. At Diya's birthday party, when Diya's father not only imitates her but also labels her as rude, Susie decides to have her own share of fun by turning off the ringer of his phone. The triumphant expression on her face is accentuated by the samosa and red chutney on her plate—a delicacy that makes Jahan's mouth water. However, Jahan, engrossed in devouring his own plate filled with cake and samosas, remains oblivious to Susie's victorious moment. This incident exposes the vindictive behavior that constant provocations can trigger in a child. Susie, anticipating the possibility of Diya's father mocking her at the party, experiences a mix of embarrassment and anger when he insists she repeat after him: "She sells seashells on the seashore" (25). Her fury is directed both at Diya's father for mimicking her and at herself for attending the party. In this portrayal, Rao carefully depicts the inner conflict of a child who desires inclusion in public events but simultaneously dreads the idea due to an inherent fear of mockery.

After experiencing a series of challenges, Susie reluctantly agrees to undergo speech therapy. However, she becomes increasingly frustrated with the lack of noticeable improvement. Pronouncing the "sssssss" sound proves particularly difficult, resulting in a strained "Tstssth" (34). The continuous effort to keep her tongue behind her teeth leaves her feeling exhausted, and she perceives herself as looking "thilly" with constant cheek-pulling (35). Instead of boosting her confidence, the therapy classes exacerbate her self-

consciousness, instilling a fear of speaking. Her parents' indifferent attitude towards her struggles adds to her distress. When faced with the daunting task of presenting on photosynthesis, a word containing the problematic letter 's', Susie loses all hope. She decides to cease speaking altogether, resorting to communication through sign language or writing. Despite her mother urging her friend Jahan not to encourage the use of sign language, Jahan persuades Susie to resume speaking by highlighting the challenges of deciphering her messy written communication: "It wasn't even easy to read her writing. It was messy, like bird poop spattered all over the page" (55). Susie's proficiency in sign language is limited, and she struggles as an actor. Her determination is evident when she continues to abstain from speaking even after a kitchen accident leaves her injured while reaching for chips. Refusing to use her right hand, she insists, "I can still write" (59). This poignant display underscores the extent of her resilience and the impact of relentless bullying on her willingness to endure physical pain rather than face further mockery and miscommunication.

Susie's decision to cease speaking stemmed from the deep-seated trauma of enduring alienation and isolation among her peers due to her lisp. However, her friend Jahan, known for his resilience, endeavored to empathize by drawing parallels between his own accidents and Susie's speech impediment. This led him to refrain from visiting Susie, emphasizing, "I already have thirty-seven stitches in total. If I don't walk anywhere, I will not get hurt. So I will not walk from now on" (62). In response to Jahan's unconventional approach, Susie set aside her notepad and pencil, opting to resume speaking. She also willingly committed to continuing speech therapy and even presented a photosynthesis project at school without complaint. The author endeavors to sensitize readers to the challenges faced by children with speech disabilities, promoting an attitude of understanding,

inclusion, and love for those who seek acceptance despite their differences.

This compelling narrative is embellished with witty dialogues infused with generous doses of humor, ensuring reader engagement until the final sentence. It unfolds as a richly written tale of resilience, rebellion, and an unwavering demand to be heard and accepted. The story poignantly illustrates how Susie finds understanding in her friend Jahan, rather than in her parents or other adults in society. Desiring her words to be comprehended through various mediums—spoken, written, or expressed via sign language—Susie makes a significant effort to broaden the concept of childhood. Rejecting infantilization, her silence resonates more powerfully than her voice.

**Conclusion:** The critical analysis of three significant Indian children's books— "Kanna Panna" by Zai Whitaker, "Against All Odds" by Ramendra Kumar, and "Susie Will Not Speak" by Shruthi Rao—reveals narratives that effectively challenge and dismantle ableism in society. These stories act as mirrors and windows, fostering inclusivity, empathy, and understanding among young readers by exploring characters grappling with disabilities. The narratives intricately dissect the challenges faced by protagonists—Kanna, Kartik, and Susie—highlighting societal prejudices and misconceptions surrounding disabilities. These characters undergo transformative journeys from darkness to light, defying odds, and transitioning from silence to speech. The visual impairment of Kanna, Kartik's left arm disability, and Susie's speech impediment become powerful tools for dismantling ableist norms and showcasing the diverse abilities of individuals.

The analysis emphasizes the societal tendency to define individuals by their disabilities rather than recognizing their inherent capabilities. Kartik's football triumph and Susie's decision to resume speaking after a traumatic experience exemplify resilience,

rebellion, and an unwavering demand for acceptance. The narratives challenge internalized ableism, fostering an attitude of understanding and love towards those with differences. Furthermore, the paper advocates for increased representation of disabled individuals in children's literature to challenge ableist myths, promote self-worth, and contribute to a more just and equitable society. By broadening the concept of childhood and rejecting infantilization, these stories encourage readers to perceive disability not as a limitation but as a facet of diversity. Additionally, ensuring disabled-friendly access to books is crucial, fostering a harmonious environment for all to live and thrive on this planet. The compelling blend of humor, wit, and rich storytelling ensures reader engagement, marking these works as valuable contributions to the ongoing discourse on ableism in children's literature.

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