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ONE DAY NATIONAL SEMINAR

ON

DISABILITY, REPRESENTATION AND LITERATURE

held on 03 October 2019 and Organised by P.G. & Research Department
of English

S. T. HINDU COLLEGE, NAGERCOIL-2, Tamilnadu, India



Disease as Disability in Jodi Picoult's *My Sister's Keeper*

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ABSTRACT

Disability Studies views disability in various fields such as politics, culture, Ethnicity etc. and one such field is medical. Medical disability is the impairment of an individual's physiology and psychology. It can be also viewed as the difference between normal and abnormal bodies. Health is an important thing to lead a happy and peaceful life. *My Sister's Keeper* by Jodi Picoult is a heart touching novel which tells about the effects of a deadly disease that attacked one of the characters in the novel, Kate. A disease not only affects the person suffering from it but all those who are related to them tends to suffer especially the family members. The character Kate Fitzgerald, a 13 year old girl, who suffered from Acute Promyletic Leukemia, never wanted to live because of the painful effects of the disease on her. Her younger sister Anna Fitzgerald, who was a scientifically engineered child to save her sister too undergoes treatment and pain without being sick. The disease puts all the members in to traumatic experiences. The question of Kate's survival continuously prevailed in the novel. The disease made Kate to depend on the people around her both physically and emotionally and also made her disabled in her movement, thoughts and actions.

KEYWORDS:

Leukemia, Sibling Love, Family Bonding

The present paper portrays Disease as Disability in the life of Kate Fitzgerald. "A Sound mind is in a Sound Body" is a proverb which is of Greek origin which means both mind and body should be healthy. Disease not only affects one's body but also the emotional well-being of one self, One's relationship with others, their cognition, creative ability and many other things. Disease and Disability goes hand-in-hand in certain aspects. A person with



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physical disability needs the support of others in doing their day-to-day activities and also for their emotional well-being. The same does go for a person who suffers from life-threatening diseases.

The paper witnesses the Protagonist of the novel, Anna Fitzgerald, 13 year old girl, a Genetically Engineered baby with a sole purpose to save her sister Kate who was suffering from Leukemia. Leukemia is the cancer of the Bone Marrow or the blood forming tissue. Kate was only 2 years old when the disease was diagnosed. From that young age, she underwent medical treatment, number of hospitalizations, surgeries and even chemotherapy. Whenever Kate's disease relapses, Anna was the one who donated blood cells, Lymphocytes, Bone Marrow and all that is needed for Kate to survive. Because of her donation, Anna too underwent pain and suffering. But the one thing that Anna was told that all those she underwent was to save her sister. This shows the sibling love that prevailed between the sisters.

This paper also brings about the motherly affection of Sara who was adamant to save her child. She was in a firm state of mind that she will not let Kate die. But for that she even risked the life of Anna. She even ignored her elder son, Jesse Fitzgerald who suffered from Dyslexia. Because of the lack of parental guidance, he started doing certain things against society by setting fire to abandoned buildings. But what Sara had in her mind was to save Kate no matter what because the problem of Kate is dreadful than her other children.

But when Anna sues her parents for medical emancipation, her parents did not expect that from her. At that time, Kate was in high need of a Kidney from Anna due to her Kidney failure because of the disease. Sara knew that Anna was not this type to do such a thing and tried to convince her to donate her kidney but Anna was firm in her decision. She justified her stand by saying that the success rate of the surgery is low and her life will also be under risk.

But truth can no longer be hidden and it was revealed that it was Kate who wanted Anna to file for medical emancipation because Kate was done with living a painful life by undergoing pain both physically and mentally. So she asked Anna to help her by suing her parents. But unexpectedly it was Anna who loses her life in a major accident and her organs were donated to Kate and she survived.



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This article focuses on the situations and agony faced by Kate Fitzgerald. She as a young girl lost most of the happiness and delight in her life. She doesn't want to see her sister and her family suffer because of her disease. She experiences situations same as any person with physical disability undergoes. The main thing she lost was the beatitude and enthusiasm of childhood.

Childhood is the wonderful part of one's life to be experienced. The elated part of life which doesn't know about any problems and the stage that is filled with only happiness, the stage which the kids will be more inquisitive and curious to know lot of things, the stage which all their naughty behaviour will be admired and accepted by their parents most of the time. But Kate was not fortunate enough to enjoy the pleasures of childhood so does Anna.

Kate's most of the days of her childhood was spent within the walls of the hospital. She was not allowed to go out and play because of the fear that she might get any infections which can make her condition worse. There were days she longed to live a normal life unlike a patient. She longed to breathe fresh air but she hated the way people felt sorry for her when exposed to society. She felt ashamed of being without hair which she lost as a result of chemotherapy. All these concern of Kate about her outward appearance made her to feel low about herself. She was not able to visit her favourite places. She was always under the control of someone or else she has to depend on someone as a result of the incapacity to be on her own as a result of the disease.

When Kate's Kidney failed, she was subjected to dialysis. Her body was not in a good condition to do this treatment. She was confined to bed and she was taken care by her family and all her needs were met by them. She was cleaned, fed, supported by her family. All were bothered about her and they all wanted Kate to be healthy.

When Kate's disease was diagnosed at the age of 2, her parents were desperate and they wanted to save her any cost. When her treatment started, they had so many questions in her mind. As she grew up, the questions were still in their mind, "Will her hair grow back? Will she ever go to school? Can she play with her friends?" (62). But they did not get very sure answer for these questions.



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On the other hand, Anna had the greatest responsibility of saving her sister. She too faced number of hospitalizations, surgeries and pain. Even though they fight for things, both are more lovable towards each other. Anna was much devoted to her sister and she even risked her life for saving her. Kate wanted Anna to live a good life and so she forced Anna to sue her parents.

When Kate falls in love with Taylor, who was also a cancer patient, she experienced a fresh feeling of love and care from a man. She was so excited to be with him and was jubilant about their first kiss. She longed to be with him forever because she was so comfortable with him because whenever she was sick he was there to console her. She accepted her for being what she is. But the same disease separated them by death. After the death of Taylor, Kate's condition worsened. She was intolerable about his death and she behaved rash at times. Apart from her declining health her mind too became unstable.

The disease had a great influence on these people. Their happiness was snatched by the dreadful disease. Disease is also a disability and that is experienced by the characters. A person with physical disability needs the help of others to fulfil his needs. He will be emotionally unstable about his condition and it takes a lot of effort to build his confidence. He will be ashamed to meet people and will be not happy about being exposed in the society. The same does happens in the life of Kate who suffered from a deadly disease. She was unable to lead a normal life like kids of her age. She always needed someone to help her. The disease even let her to finish her life. At one point she was done fighting with the disease and wanted to die.

A disease weakens a person both physically and emotionally and that is evident in the life of Kate. It also increases the agony of the people around them. Even though Kate survived she was unable to come out from its effects because of the loss she faced and pain that she underwent.

This paper mainly focused on the disease as disability brings out the reasons from the novel and how it had its effects on the characters. The novel shows both the positive and negative side of life. As per The Guardian Review, "My Sister's Keeper is bittersweet, thought-provoking and poignant." It is difficult for a child to face all these painful



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experiences at a young age. So the effective and healthy functioning of our body system is very important to lead a healthy and happy life. But some things can never be changed and one such thing is death. Death is evident and let our survival be healthy.

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