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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



The Dialectics of Disability: A Thematic Study of Terry Trueman's *Stuck in Neutral*

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ABSTRACT

Disability is usually attributed to a lack. However, disability metamorphoses into differently abled at times. An individual with numerous abilities lay trapped inside the disabled body. Terry Trueman's *Stuck in Neutral* (2000) is a real- horrific novel that portrays the internal agitations of a "teenage boy Shawn McDaniel", a boy who is simultaneously disabled and differently abled. A young adult fiction, the novel centers on a self-absorbed father and his own creation of imagined suffering of his son Shawn and how Shawn's disability fuels his father's creativity. The novel puts forward an ethical vindication to euthanasia and debates euthanasia as a permanent solution to end his sufferings. The novel reveals multiple facets of the trauma associated with disability- that of Shawn owing to cerebral palsy, his inability in expressing his real self who lays hidden inside his disabled body and his mother's child- like treatment of him despite him having a mature mind, emotional and ethical trauma of his father because of his decision to kill his son to end his trauma. A voyage through life, death, hope, love and loneliness, the novel is a mutual quest to understand each other. The paper seeks to study disability in relation to euthanasia and explores the question of euthanasia as a solution to disability.

Key words: disability, euthanasia, trauma, creativity

Disability is a term concealing multiple dimensions and different meanings. In a single sentence, it is attributed to the lack of something; it is the inability to do once daily needs and day to day activities. It may be physical, mental, intellectual, and sensory impairments. According to World Health Organization, "disability is an umbrella term, covering impairments, and activity



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limitation and participation restrictions. Impairment is a problem in body function or structure; an activity limitation is a difficulty encountered by an individual in executing a task or action; while a participation restriction is a problem experienced by an individual in involvement in life situations. Thus disability is a complex phenomenon, reflecting an interaction between features of a person's body and features of the society in which he or she lives”

.Disability is treated as a version of abnormality. It limits and prevents an individual from fulfilling his or her role that is normal for that individual. Handicaps and impairments are the two variations of disability. But it is not the synonym of disability. International Classification of Impairments, Disabilities and Handicaps (ICIDH) classifies disability into eight categories; mobility and physical impairments, spinal cord disability, head injuries- (brain disability), vision disability, hearing disability, cognitive or learning disability, psychological disorders, and invisible disability.

Cerebral palsy is a common motor disability caused by the abnormal development or damage of brain during the time of pregnancy and child birth. It is a disorder “that affects a person's ability to move and maintain balance and posture”. The word Cerebral palsy is a combination of cerebral and palsy. Cerebral means “having to do with brain”, palsy means “weakness or problem with using muscles.”

Our society has a tendency to consider disabled people as second grade citizens and to treat them as social burdens. They believe the life of disabled to be beyond the attributed normality. Treatment of disabled persons is a burning social issue nowadays. Current society has a tendency to consider them as different and deformed inferior or an alien rather than a differently abled one. In their view they are powerless and so social equality is beyond their reach. In Chinese culture disability is viewed as “a punishment for the disabled person's sins in the past life or the sins of the person's parents”. So they are denied opportunities and jobs and are treated as a weak category of the society with low self-esteem even though they are mentally



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strong. They are marginalized and expelled from the major arena of the society and are accepted as a special category with indifference.

Literature acts as a mirror held to the society, which reflects the dawn and dusk of social evils and other incidents. The theme of disability becomes a ground breaking issue in every genre of literature from the origin itself. Literature has a tendency to portray negative characters as disabled, and the main characters as normal. Throughout literature writers tend to create an awkward image of disability as normality is associated with goodness and abnormality or disability is associated with evilness and villainy.

Disability studies emerged as the product of disability right movement in the West from 20th century onwards. Theorists like Michel Foucault, and Irving Goffman's seminal works paved the way for the growth of disability as a discipline. Irving Goffman's *Stigma* is a classical study about disability analyzed social interaction, including those with "abomination of the body" who differed from the expected norms. Sometimes disability is viewed as a social and political phenomenon. In the lion share of literature, disability has a negative connotation. It is always associated with the damaged and inferior section of society. They have a collective identity and are treated as a special category. Due to the hegemony of the dominant group and their normality, some kind of deemed inferiority is attributed to the disabled people.

Children's literature and young adult fiction are the two categories of literature picturing various aspects of disability. Young adult fiction is a category of literature intended for teenagers and written from the perspective of a teenager. It deals with the dreams, desires, despairs, hopes and concerns of a teenager.

Terry Trueman is a prolific writer and young adult fiction novelist in English literature. His novels and poems embedded with profound themes of hope and loss of teenagers. His first novel *Stuck in Neutral* (2000) draws the reader's attention to the life of an intellectual mind entrapped in a disabled body. He also penned several novels and poems. His novel casket



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includes “*Stuck in Neutral*” (2000), *Swallowing the Sun*(2003), *Inside Out*(2003) ,*Cruise Control*(2004) ,*No Right Turn*(2006) , *7 Days at Hot Corner*(2007) and he wrote poems like *The Chinese Painting* ,*Black Lipstick* ,*Sheehan*, and *Love On the Rack*.

Terry Trueman’s novels realistically depict the dark side of his own life. In an interview he says that “I am not one of these writers who are interested or necessarily capable of great flights of the imagination”. His primary attempt *Stuck in Neutral* is a real horrific novel picturing the internal agitations of the teenage hero named Shawn mc Daniel who is simultaneously disabled and differently abled. This young adult fiction, centers on a self-absorbed father and his own creation of imagined suffering of his son Shawn and how Shawn’s disability fuels his father’s creativity. The novel puts forward an ethical vindication to euthanasia and debates euthanasia as a permanent solution to end his sufferings. The novel reveals multiple facets of the trauma associated with disability - that of Shawn owing to cerebral palsy, his inability in expressing his real self which lays hidden inside his disabled body and his mother’s child- like treatment of him despite him having a mature mind, emotional and ethical trauma of his father because of his decision to kill his son to end his trauma. A voyage through life, death, hope, love and loneliness, the novel is a mutual quest to understand each other.

Shawn’s disability is an entrapment for him because he can’t express the real Shawn to the outer world but he is eagerly waiting for that moment to free his self. He is incapable of doing his daily activities. He can’t control any of his muscles, fingers, hands, feet, stomach and so on. But unfortunately the real Shawn who is hiding inside a useless body has no power to break that menace. The story flows from the introduction of Shawn about his vegetative state due to cerebral palsy. His disability plays the villainous role in his family. It becomes the main reason for the separation of his father and mother:

First off, my parents got divorced ten years ago because of me. My being born changed everything for all of us, in every way. My dad didn’t divorce my mom, or



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my sister, Cindy, or my brother Paul- he divorced me. He couldn't handle my condition, so he had to leave. (Trueman 5)

Since he is disabled, his father is unable to cope up with the traumatic situation of his son. Shawn acts as a mute victim and witness of his own story.

Even though he is disabled, he has a peculiar ability of memorization. He remembers words and sounds even if he has heard them only once:

Here's some more: I have this weird – I don't know what you'd call it- ability? Gift? Power? Whatever name you want to give it, the thing is that I can remember everything I ever hear perfectly, with total recall. I mean *Everything! Perfectly! Totally!* I don't know of anybody else , anywhere , who can do this. Most people remember bits and pieces of things they've heard in life, but I've got it all, every sound, ever". (Trueman3)

He is able to remember and recollect those sounds and words whenever there is a necessity. But he is unable to express his internal musings to others. Society always showers pity on him and its constructed normality projects the disability of Shawn rather than his different ability. However he is ready to express his inner self but he can't escape from the nutshell of disability.

For Sydney E McDaniel, Shawn is the epitome of suffering. Even though he is suffering from cerebral palsy, his father creates a constructed suffering parallel to his suffering and which is higher than the original one. Sometimes Shawn feels a kind of electric charge in his brain and is termed as seizures. Brain is the only one active part of his body. For his family members, to witness this seizure is a horrific experience. But for Shawn it's a kind of escaping, because his immobile muscles will move on in accordance with his wish. "I love my seizures because they give me the kind of life I imagine normal people enjoy, and then some. They give me freedom." (Trueman 42)



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The novel mainly focuses on the theme of euthanasia -whether euthanasia is a complete solution for disability or not. In *Stuck in Neutral* Sydney mc Daniel decides to kill his son in the name of love to end his endless trauma. As far as he is concerned, wants to free his son from his pitiful situation.

He paused again, breathing deeply. “You can’t protect yourself at all! How can your mother or I or anybody ever keep you safe? My god, Shawn, you’ll never be safe. How can we protect you? You’re helpless” he turned away and spoke. “hopeless”. Then he added, so softly I could barely hear, “maybe you’d be better off if I ended your pain?” (Trueman 26)

The novel draws both the negative as well as positive side of mercy killing. Shawn is afraid of death. For him death is a big empty nothing. He witnesses death during a ride with his mom and sister. On that ride he witnesses an accident encountered by a dog. It creates a haunting fear in his mind. But he is unable to express that fear and his wish to live to his father. In the perspective of his father, Shawn is just like a puppet in the hands of fate and a laughing stock to the society. They always show sympathy and pity to him. As a father he thinks he has the liability to end his son’s life.

Stuck in Neutral mainly focuses on the positive perspective of Shawn about disability. Here disability becomes a strong source to produce great works. It acts as a great inspiration for his father to realistically picture his own son’s life. His condition makes a surge in his mind to create something in the form of novels and poems.

Trauma or suffering is a vital component of disability. *Stuck in Neutral* portrays various aspects of trauma like the physical trauma of Shawn because of cerebral palsy, emotional trauma faced by his father , ethical trauma related to the liability to kill his son, mental trauma faced by Shawn to express his real identity and so on.



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In *Stuck in Neutral*, Shawn is referred as a human vegetable. He is intrigued as to how human becomes a vegetable.

I couldn't figure out what they were talking about. Humans turning into vegetables? It sounded like a horror movie. In my father's eyes if I m a vegetable, a human vegetable, I ll never be able to enjoy life or be productive... (Trueman 31)

Shawn is treated as a deemed inferior in his family. His mother is the main care taker who considers him as a new born baby and his father also treats him like a baby. For the world he is as dumb as a fence post. But the adult Shawn is suffocating because of this consideration as a baby.

There is a quest for mutual understanding between the father and the son. This novel also teaches how to cope up with these situations. Disability acts as a barrier of communication in between Shawn and his father. The novel also focuses on the themes of love, patience, faith, tolerance and loneliness.

Thus disability studies emerge as a new discipline in literature and it has tremendous influence in our society. Through *Stuck in Neutral*, Terry Trueman spreads light on the different perspectives of disability. Not only this novel but also his other novels narrate his experiences in the discipline of disability theories. These works emerge as a new dawn to the dialectics of disabilities and pave the way for further areas of research.

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