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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



Different views of people on the Disabled in Wendelin Van Draanen's

The Running Dream

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ABSTRACT

Literature is used as a tool to voice the silence. The disability studies in literature have grown up only after the success of the disability rights movement. The disability rights movement aims to give equal opportunities and rights for the disabled. People's view on disabled persons differs from person to person. Some people react with fear, pity and disregard when they see the disabled people. Some may criticize them rather than viewing them as full people but some may be very friendly and encourage the disabled people. This paper focuses on the different views of people towards the disabled characters in the novel *The Running Dream* especially on Jessica Carlisle, a sixteen year old runner, who lost her leg in a bus accident. The friendship that she had with Rosa, another disabled girl, begins to change the way Jessica looks at life.

Keywords: Disability, Friendship, Encouragement, Success.

INTRODUCTION:

Disability is considered as mental, physical, sensory and intellectual impairment. It can either occur from birth or during the lifetime of a person. It affects a person's life and activities. The attitude of people towards disability is culturally and historically unstable. Sometimes the disabled people will be identified by their disability. In *Handicapping America: Barriers to Disabled people*, Frank Bowe writes, "Our memories of these and other characters often become indelible, impervious to any experiences. We may have with disabled individuals in real life. Somewhere in the back of our minds we associate disabilities with sin, evil, and danger" (109). Disabled characters are represented in literature along with



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normal characters. The writer writes only to show that they too are equal in emotional and intellectual level.

The views of the people on the disabled are as diverse as people are diverse. In literature too, in some fiction the disabled are given prominence. They will be the protagonist of the whole story. Each and everyone will take care of them and encourage them to do things. On the other hand, in some fiction they are treated in a negative way by their appearance. Some disabled characters in fiction will be portrayed in a manner to evoke pity in the hearts of the readers. The work will centre on the character and show the readers the struggles that they undergo because of their disability.

In literature, one can see that the society, sometimes even the family members regard disability as a shame. They prevent outsiders to have interaction with them. This inculcates fear and suspicion in the minds of the disabled, which is clearly portrayed in literature. Sometimes, people fail to regard the disabled as human beings with feelings and desire like the other self respecting individuals.

In the novel, *The Running Dream*, the author Wandelin Van Draanen has made a disabled character as the protagonist. Jessica Carlisle is a sixteen year old girl, whose leg was amputated because of an accident. Basically, Jessica is a runner. She considers running as an identity to herself. She Says:

I AM A RUNNER

That's what I do

That's who I am

Running is all I know, or want, or care about (6).

The author vividly brings out the agony of the central character in a moving manner. Jessica feels depressed when she saw her right leg without foot. The novel begins with her pessimistic thought, "MY LIFE IS OVER" (3) that she had within her mind. She cries and cries when she came to know about her amputated leg. Even though her Mom and Dad encourage her, she cannot accept it. She always thinks about running, her passion and dream. Her inner agony is that she cannot run again as she did once.



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After some days of treatment Jessica is provided with the crutches. In the beginning she finds it difficult to walk with the crutches. Being a disabled, she is not fed up of her disability, though she feels depressed. She tried to walk with the help of whatever she is provided with.

The disabled have been peripheral for century. But in the novel, the disabled character is brought to the center by the love and care of Jessica's friend Fiona. Fiona plays an important role in the life of Jessica. She finds out that Jessica is feeling depressed from inside. So she tries hard to get Jessica back to school. Each and every morning, Fiona rings Jessica to ask whether she is ready to go to school.

One can find here the struggles undergone by the protagonist when she attends school. Jessica dislikes going to school because she is ashamed of her amputated leg. But after some days, Fiona succeeded in getting Jessica to school named Liberty High School. When she entered the school, she feels like she's an "elephant in the room". Jessica feels herself shutting down. So Fiona advises her, "Be open, If you're friendly, they'll be friendly" (99). She views her friend as the one who is capable of doing the things which she wants. So she encourages her.

The author's sympathetic view towards disabled are clearly pictured through the character Mr. Vedder. Mr. Vedder is Jessica's teacher. On seeing Fiona pushing the wheelchair and struggling to handle with it, he feels sympathetic not only on Jessica, but also on her parents, who were handling her throughout the day.

One can see here how even the teacher who is supposed to embrace people with disability shows contempt for Jessica. Ms. Rucker is the teacher who teaches maths to Jessica. When Jessica enters the class, she does not enquire about her health or anything. She just asked Jessica whether she is willing to sit with Rosa Brazzi, another disabled girl who suffers from Cerebral Palsy. From this one can see how the teacher's view on the protagonist's disability hurt her when she is directed to sit back with her wheelchair. On seeing this Jessica's mind got disturbed. She can't digest the fact that now she is a disabled person. She has a mental crisis whether she is a kid with a special need. This makes her uncomfortable. As she struggles to cope, she feels she's both in the spotlight and also invisible.



How the disabled are neglected by their abled counterparts who were once friends is explicitly brought out by the writer. Jessica had enmity with Vanessa Steele. They both were runners. After Jessica's accident, Vanessa was the one who got the first place in 400 m running. Vanessa gave importance to Jessica only when she was able to run. But after Jessica's accident she does not even consider her as a friend. Vanessa's rivalry towards Jessica did not change even after she saw Jessica without foot. She behaves in a rude and strange manner. From the act of Vanessa, one can understand the thing that, even though, people have sympathy towards the disabled person some of them have rivalry too. The author portrays the change of human behaviour through Vanessa. She doesn't even consider her as a human when she met Jessica. She was busy with her running matters and avoids Jessica when her mother introduces Jessica to Vanessa.

The author effectively portrays the feelings of oneness between Rosa and Jessica. Rosa Brazzi was also a disabled girl who was affected with cerebral palsy. When Ms. Rucker makes Jessica to sit with Rosa, Jessica feels bad. But when she starts to communicate with Jessica, she feels very happy to have a friend like Rosa. Rosa helped Jessica voluntarily to study math because Rosa is good in math. People may feel that the disabled people cannot do anything and they will be very weak. But in the novel, even though, she is sitting in a wheelchair, her mind is very sharp as a razor in math. Rosa succeeded in making Jessica getting A Grade in math in the end of the novel. Jessica with her prosthetic leg reached her goal by becoming a runner with Rosa in a race in the end.

The indomitable will of the protagonist is well portrayed by the author. Kyro, Jessica's track team coach helps her to get back her missing running dream. He was the one who showed some YouTube clippings to Jessica. In that video, Jessica saw "Oscar Pistorius". Kyro says, "He's a four-hundred-meter sprinter, and a double below-knee amputee. Those are running prostheses" (143). On seeing that videos, she started to have night and day dreams of running again. Kyro was building Jessica mentally and physically by coaching her.

The author throws light on the benevolence of the people. What the disabled need is not just the physical support but also the moral support. Kyro and track team helped Jessica to buy prosthetic leg. For the prosthetic leg they need 20,000 dollars. So they tried hard to get



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the money. Gavin Vance, with whom Jessica had a crush, writes an article in the newspaper. His sympathy towards Jessica bloomed into love at the end of the novel. He helped her in practising running. He runs with Jessica whenever he can.

The paper highlights the different views of the people towards Jessica. Some are encouraging, some are loving and caring like her parents and friend. Some are behaving in a rude manner like Vanessa and Kaylee's Friends, who treat her as a stranger and also Ms. Rucker, who make her sit in the back of the class room.

Despite the varied views of the people on the disabled, the love, care and encouragement of their loved ones can make them come up in their life and acquire a position of their own.

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