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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



Documenting the Disability, Determination and Dexterity in Socio- Cultural Perspective in

Christy Brown's *My Left Foot*.

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ABSTRACT

This paper entitled “Documenting the Disability, Determination and Dexterity in socio-cultural perspective” in Christy Brown's “My Left Foot”, based on Disability Studies that explores the meaning, nature and aftereffect of disability. At first the field concentrated on the division between “impairment” and “disability”, where impairment is a cripple of an individual's mind or body, while disability was considered as a social construct. The novel “My Left Foot” is an autobiographical work of a Cerebral Palsy victim, who could only communicate with the world around him with his left foot. It is not only an amazing account of the determination which can be stronger than any disability but also a revelation of the utmost need of the human soul to escape from every sort of prison. The article reveals the evidence to one man's courage and hope. And it documents the writer's discovery of artistic talent, made possible by a growing dexterity and determination to communicate with the outside world. The paper also depicts the love and support of the family members, who denied societies, norms and assumptions, refused to give up on one of their own. It unknowingly paved the way for sufferers of Cerebral Palsy and other disabilities to be seen, heard and understood.

Key words:

Cerebral Palsy, Dexterity, Disability, Impairment.

The term “Disability” means dysfunction of particular organ of the person it can also called as physical impairment. According to the basic definition of disability it is a physical and mental imbalance, it can be related to any of the cognitive ability, intellectual capacity, mental growth, physical or any sensory problems or a combination of these. Disability does not just refer to a person's health. It does not equate to inability to achieve. People with disability have the



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same right as everyone else to make decisions for their own and to be active members of society. The study focuses on hidden talents that reside in a person who differently abled. It also brings out the psychological trauma of disabled person as well as their family members.

This article documents Christy Brown's exploration of artistic and literary talent, determination to communicate with the outer world in his autobiography *My Left Foot*. The story of Brown is a very courageous and touching one. The paper explores Brown's life as he struggles with cerebral palsy. Christy Brown is born with crippling cerebral palsy in a poor Irish family. He cannot move any of his organs except his left foot and can speak only in throaty voice. The disease cerebral palsy is also known as "brain paralysis" (while describing it in medical terms, it is impairment). The disabilities originate due to hereditary problems or at the time of birth. It may also cause at any stage during the lifetime of a person due to any traumatic disorders or disease.

This disability troubles the person from doing daily chores to lead a usual life. Here Christy who born with the defect of cerebral palsy was facing many difficulties in writing and learning. Doctors advise his family members to give up any hope of him having a normal and productive life. Rest of his family accepted this false diagnosis of Brown's intellectual capacities, but his mother refused to believe it. "Never!" said my mother almost fiercely, when this was suggested to her. "I know my boy is not an idiot. It is his body that is shattered, not his mind. I'm sure of that"(13).

Christy's mother is a most concerning character; because she dedicates her whole life to raise her son and keeps her belief unshakable throughout her lifetime. As a small boy he is confused with all his disabilities but he pays much attention to bring out his confidence for attains his goal. But everything is changed in a moment when Christy starts to write at the age of five with his left foot. His mother feels happy to see that as she thinks this as an evidence of her son's intellectual capacity and it also disapproves the doctor's false assumption on him. As Karen Gill review said



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Cerebral palsy is not contagious, it does not necessarily affect intelligence or cognitive ability and it is not progressive, so it does not get worse with age. Some people find that symptoms improve over time. People with cerebral palsy tend to have a normal lifespan and in many cases, a good quality of life can be expected. (n.p)

At first Christy used to spend all his time with books, later he also spent his time in painting. He got fame through his artistic work too. As a young boy he achieved something great for his age and it reflects Brown's growing dexterity in his disability. Christy himself quoted as "There, on the centre page, was the photograph they had taken of me the previous Friday. In it was a little boy in short trousers, his thin legs bent beneath one another, his eyebrows cocked up rather snobbishly, and by his side one twisted hand held tightly to keep it still" (66).

As time went on, Christy's siblings used to take him out for relaxation. There he starts comparing himself with others and he begins losing hope. But one day he gets an idea to swim like others and seeks favour from his brother. At that instant he recalled the moment he wrote the letter 'A' for the first time and gained the courage. From this incident it is proved that if we have enough mental strength; we can achieve anything. Here Brown stands as a role model for all the disabled persons with less manual capability. Christy's swimming experience is quoted as

"I lashed out frantically with my feet, and next thing I knew I was up the river. I kept kicking my feet out vigorously and remained top of the water. I heard a burst of laughter coming from the bank few moments later Tony swam up beside me. He held my hand and steered me towards the towpath, where Jim hauled me ashore, I lay there panting but triumphant". (46)

Lourdes is a small town in south western France, in the foot hills of the Pyrenees Mountain. It's known for the domain major Catholic pilgrimage site. Each year millions visit the grotto of the apparitions. In the grotto, pilgrims can drink or bathe in water flowing from a spring. Christy pays a visit to Lourdes. It furnishes him a major transformative experience. There he met numerous people with worse disabilities than him. This experience strengthens his mind



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and reduces his inferiority complex. For perhaps the first time in his life time he thanked God for all his given abilities. Christy's doctor improved his speech and motor functions a little with the help of some new advancement in cerebral palsy research. Brown expresses gratitude towards God for these slightest improvements in his condition.

Dr. Collis convinced Christy for stop using his Left foot for the medication. By the way he too agrees that and the physiotherapy begins successfully. Doctor felt that Christy's home has not enough space to do physiotherapy. So Christy's mother planned to build a separate room in their backyard with her small savings. Here his mother denies all the societal norms and treated him as a normal kid. She stands as a back bone for Christy throughout his life. As Vygotsky explained, "Every function in the child's cultural development appears twice: first, on the social level, and later, the individual level; first between people (interpsychological) and then inside the child (intrapsychological)" (Vygotsky, 1978, p.57).

While Christy is undergoing a medication he thinks of writing a book. Next to his mother, Dr. Collis comes forward to afford whatever he needs. Christy gets some clearance about his life, and he also gained some positivity from his friendship with Sheila. It was exposed in Christy's words that "She was like a mirror in which I could see myself at last without disguise"



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(137). Sheila appeared like a milestone in his adult life and through her he learns to precede his journey without falling in puddles. They both shares much in their fanciful letters and it paves a brightest way for his life

Christy decides to spread those positive vibes in the world of disabled peoples. He breaks down all the prison walls to use the artistic and writing talents. Christy has an idea to enlighten all the minds of suppressed disabled peoples; he wants to be a good example for the world of disabled people. Christy's only medium of communication with the outside universe is his left foot but it was useless now so he's searching another way for expressing his ideas.

The majority of people in this world struggle to gain a peaceful life. Cultivating the sense of curiosity is one of the best ways to experience joyfulness. It creates an openness to new exposures, which sets the basement for bigger opportunities to undergo the joy and completeness in life. Curiosity and courageousness changes Christy's life upside down. If a person has curiosity in their life, they'll try to discover many things and they also work hard to attain success. So this paper depicts the way of human's approach in their life.

In this world, people have born under two different categories. Firstly; some people are born with certain abilities but they didn't have much idea to create new things. Secondly; few born with extraordinary talents and those persons were stagnated due to disable bodied. Christy comes under second category. But we can't assume this fact as simply true because everyone in this universe born with a potential to change their life as remarkable. Unfortunately we settled ordinary without thinking much about our hidden talents. Christy is exceptional in this case, as a disabled child he used all his chance to bring out his talents and motivated himself to present him as an inspiring one. According to Michael L. Wehmeyer he defined;

The term self-determination has two primary meanings, both of which have a long history of use outside the disability field. The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language (1992) identifies self-determination as a noun and defines it as:

1. Determination of one's own fate or course of action without compulsion.
- 2.



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Freedom of the people of a given area to determine their own political status; independence. (n.p)

This paper also witnesses Christy's self-determination, when he tries to write an epigraph with the help of his brother. It doesn't come out as expected. Then Christy realizes that he needs to be an expert in his usage of words. There's no one to guide him in the home because none of them in his house was educated. At that instance he had an idea to seek favour from Dr. Collis. He telegraphs him and the doctor visited Christy with a bundle of books, he also gave some suggestions about writing style. Thus Christy starts writing his autobiography. He has chosen writing as a weapon for expressing his ideas to the world. He is not awarded to show his talent in his speech and he couldn't convey his messages through his mouth in a convincing manner, this weakness haunted him a lot. Later on he gained his courage from that weakness itself and used it cleverly at the right moment. Finally he received an imminent fame as a writer.

Society plays a major role in a disabled person's life. Children with disabilities are one of the most marginalized and excluded groups in society. They are facing daily discrimination in the form of negative attitudes, lack of adequate policies and legislation; they are effectively barred from realizing their rights to health care, education and even survival. The people look at them in a sympathetic way and they'll even criticize them at their back. Actually the cripple does not exist in a disabled person but it is in the minds of normal people.

Publicly, they say that the individual's disability affects other senses physically or mentally or they placate them as impaired. For example, some of them raise their voice in front of the blind people and assuming that they won't hear them or understand them. Here the society only focuses on a person's disability and they are not ready to accept their abilities. Many disabled persons undergoing such a frustrated life and feel ashamed to face the public because of these discriminations. Some children as well as their parents are losing their courage and remaining inactive.

Everyone should search their capability that is buried in them. No one is born as an insane. If we use our intelligence in correct time surely the success will knock the door and enter



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in our life. While learning new things Christy's fiery attitude will be exposed. Throughout the article we can trace the mindset of a disable person. Actually they are not expecting pity or any concessions from the outer world but they are longing for equal opportunity to live a successful and independent life.

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