

PORTRAYAL OF EMPATHY AND SENSITIVITY TOWARDS DISABLED CHILDREN IN SELECTED WORKS OF INDIAN FICTION

DIPANJOY MUKHERJEE

Assistant Professor of English, Chhatna Chandidas Mahavidyalaya, Chhatna, Bankura.

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ABSTRACT: *The attitude of society towards individuals with disabilities has changed over time in India. Various factors like overall improvement in education, rise in income levels, and awareness about social causes have had a significant impact on the changing attitudes and consciousness. However, discrimination against individuals with disability remains a challenge stemming from the grassroots level in the nation. In this regard, fiction has always been a powerful method of expression that reflects different aspects of social reality. It has the power to influence people, educate them and bring about a behavioural change. The portrayal of characters with disability in Indian fiction has been more often than not associated with negativity or evilness. However, this portrayal has changed over time and nowadays various authors have presented stories on the theme of understanding various sociological and psychological aspects in the life of persons having the disability. This research paper is aimed at investigating in three Indian English Fictions namely *Flute in the Forest*, *Kanna Panna* and *Manya Learns to Roar*, the level of empathy and sensitivity towards children having certain disabilities.*

Key Words: *Disability, Discrimination, Challenges, Empathy, Sensitivity.*

I. Introduction:

a) *An introduction to the portrayal of people with disabilities*

Disability is defined as a long-term impairment that is physical, intellectual, mental or sensory in nature, hindering and impacting complete participation of the individual in societal interactions and activities. It is noted by Singh that representation of people with disabilities is often stereotyped, illogical and modest in most of the Indian fiction work, not many have done justice in understanding communication barriers faced by a disabled individual. Disabled characters are made to play a crucial role to highlight and accentuate the goodness of the able-bodied characters by being negative, sinful, evil and dangerous. In epical or classical literature there are a number of disabled characters who are represented as stereotypes; they are seen hatching conspiracies against the protagonist and playing the role of a villain. Manthara, the maid servant with a hunchback in the epic Ramayana and Shakuni, the crippled maternal uncle of Duryodhana in Mahabharata have shown their manipulative strategy, revengeful interference and inclination for depravity and immorality.

b) *Notable works of Indian fiction on the issue related to children:*

The few of the notable works in modern Indian English fictions that feature disabled children as their main protagonists, telling their own stories, are *Flute in the Forest* by Leela Gour Broome, telling a story of thirteen-year-old female protagonist suffering from polio. The thought process and actions of a young child stricken with a disability as well as her journey towards challenging prejudices and healing are depicted through this story. Another notable work is *Kanna Panna* by Zai Whitaker, telling a story of a visually impaired young boy. This story questions preconceived notions and prejudices that surround persons suffering from a disability. Along with depicting the topsy-turvy mind and thoughts of a visually impaired child, this story also depicts the struggles of adults trying to reconcile the idea of normalcy around him. *Manya Learns to Roar* by Shruthi Rao is a notable fictitious school story of a young girl. The story narrates the inner and outer torments faced by the girl suffering from stammering, a speech impairment. It talks about the need for acceptance and instilling confidence in the children suffering from some disabilities, through its moments of seriousness and lightness.

II. Aim of the study:

The main aim of this study is to assess the portrayal of empathy and sensitivity towards disabled children in selected works of Indian fiction.