



Disability, Representation and Voice of Resilience: A Study of Christy Brown's *My Left Foot*

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ABSTRACT

Literature plays a significant role in representing the body, and its literary interventions transform perspectives on and practices regarding disability, further reshaping society's stance. Literature and history have ample examples of the achievements of disabled persons, but they too had to undergo rejection, exclusion and defiance before positioning themselves into the mainstream. Christy Brown suffered from cerebral palsy and authored a memoir, *My Left Foot*, which is an example of the struggle to break society's preconceived notions about disability. His medical condition segregated him from the immediate social environment. Despite facing constant challenges, Christy produced a text that showcases existing social patterns and further raises the voice for the beliefs to be re-examined or altered. Marginalisation and exclusion reduce the opportunities to contribute productively. The marginalisation of the disabled describes the way disability is understood in the international context and discourses. The lives of the disabled have been a history of silence, further relating to Gayatri Spivak's 'Can the Subaltern Speak'. The present paper will discuss disability not as a feature of 'dysfunctional' bodies and minds, but as a creation of social structure. Secondly, it will examine how literature represents and constructs the concept of disability and can serve as a tool for inclusivity. Thirdly, the study will examine the silence, representation, and socio-cultural dimensions of *My Left Foot* to highlight the factors that bridge the gap between individual and societal beliefs.

Keywords: Voices, Representation, Disability, Inclusion, Literature

INTRODUCTION

Disability is a condition of the body and mind (impairment) that makes it more difficult for a person to perform certain activities (activity limitation) and to interact with the world around them (participation restrictions). Rosemary Garland Thomson says “whether one lives with the disability or encounters someone who has one, the actual experience of disability is more complex and more dynamic than representation usually suggests” (Thomson, 12). It affects the acquisition of knowledge and skills, in particular, any of various neurodevelopmental conditions affecting intellectual processes, educational attainment, and the acquisition of skills that are needed for one’s independent living and social functioning (Lee K., Cascella M., Marwaha R., Intellectual Disability, np).

Generally, disability studies explore the consequences of physical, mental and psychological impairments besides their definition. Such studies look at disability from a medical, legal, and cultural perspective and try to relocate the person through his or her background and the surroundings to either help out the disabled person or try to reduce prejudice and discrimination. Literature and history have ample examples of the achievements of disabled persons, but they too had to undergo rejection, exclusion and defiance before positioning themselves into the mainstream. Here, the memoir *My Left Foot* by Christy Brown has been studied through an interdisciplinary approach toward disability discourse to find out in the first place, that disability not as a feature of 'dysfunctional' bodies, followed by how literature represents and constructs the concept of disability and finally the factors that bridge the gap between the individual and the common beliefs of the society. Christy Brown’s medical condition segregated him from the immediate social environment. Despite facing constant challenges, Christy produced a text that showcases existing social patterns and further raises the voice for the beliefs to be re-examined or altered. It will also discuss how literature represents and constructs the concept of disability and can work as a tool for inclusivity.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Marginalisation and exclusion reduce the opportunities to contribute productively. The marginalisation of the disabled describes the way disability is understood in the international context and discourses. The lives of the disabled have been a history of silence, further relating to Gayatri Spivak's 'Can the Subaltern Speak'. Disability is a physical or cognitive condition that impairs an individual, interferes with an individual's motor system, or limits a

person's ability to engage in certain specific tasks or actions or participate in typical, mundane activities and interactions. Considering the Webster's dictionary definition of disability, which covers all fields, especially a person's physical condition, it describes a particular situation. WHO (World Health Organisation) says "disability results from the interaction between individuals with a health condition, such as cerebral palsy, down syndrome and depression, with personal and environmental factors including negative attitudes, inaccessible transportation and public buildings, and limited social support" (as cited in Home page of WHO, Disability, Overview, para 2). This further underscores the importance of the literature as an area of exploration for its representation of disability. Literature does not really define disability, yet a less-abled person is usually portrayed as a side character or the second fiddle. Although literature is not the real life, these disabled people are not given a full participation in literature as a whole, for example, in the comic series like "*Daredevil*" (an American comic series), "*Fullmetal Alchemist*" (a Japanese manga series written and illustrated by Hiromu Arakawa), the characters, Daredevil (Daredevil is the alias of Matthew Michael "Matt" Murdock, a blind lawyer. His origins stem from a childhood chemical accident that gave him special abilities) Izumi and Edward (a fictional character and a titular protagonist of the manga series titled as *Fullmetal Alchemist* was created by Hiromu Arakawa) are disabled by blindness, chronic illness due to missing organs and double amputee. These are all fictional characters, and most of them are Japanese creations. In literary works like *Gormenghast* series (1964) by Mervyn Peake, *A Song of Ice and Fire* (1996) by George R. R. Martin, *The Raven Cycle* (2012) by Maggie Stiefvater, *Six of Crows* (2015) by Leigh Bardugo, and *The Hunchback of Notre-Dame* (1831) by Victor Hugo, there is representation of characters. Except Victor Hugo, all other authors are American, and the characters they draw are all the protagonists of their respective stories.

In Japanese manga, disabled characters are often portrayed or used for storytelling and storybinding, whereas in American works, disabled protagonists are part of mainstream literature and occupy a central position. In the 19th century, Victor Hugo, a French writer, chose a disabled person as his protagonist. The above views are quite modern, and if the historical representation of disabled people in literature is considered, there are a few examples to be found. In modern times, disabled people write about their own pain and agony, as is the case in *My Left Foot*, and if the textual representations of disability in Asia and Africa are observed, traces of disability can be found even in folktales. A folk tale of Korea (South East Asia), titled 'The Half Man' was born deformed (Translated by Tae-sung

Kim, Seoul: Society of Korean Oral Literature (Seoul National University). The 20th-century drama characters are often titled by their disabled protagonists like ‘The Blind Man’, ‘The Lame Man’, ‘Cripple Billy’, etc. In the Tudor era, the term “Natural Fool” referred to someone considered disabled. Although their honesty and advice were valued, it was believed that these people had a stronger connection to God and were therefore more holy and wise.

METHODOLOGY

Earlier, disability was studied as a subject of medical science as an impairment that needed medical care or a solution. The literature views it as a major concern, whereas society studies it negatively as part of a social problem. It has been studied from social, socio-cultural, political, and socio-political perspectives. All the views on disability illustrate potency, support, and determination, yet a lack of dialogue on representation is prevalent. Thus, this research aims to critically examine the construction of images and the discourse on disability in Christy Brown’s *My Left Foot* through a content analysis of representation, silence, and psychoanalysis. While trying to understand the concept of disability, the Norse mythological heroic poem "Saying of the High One" (encyclosophiaonline.wordpress.com) is an exceptional example that talks about the not-so-abled people, like,

The lame can ride horses,

The handless drive herds;

The deaf can fight and do well.

Better blind than to be burnt.

The beliefs of the medieval period in Europe present a completely different picture of this concept. During the medieval age, people with disabilities were considered to be cursed and/or such people had to face the bitterness of life as they were considered sinful.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

a) Concept of disability in Ireland - Christy Brown

Ireland uses Universal Design to design the built environment, products, services, and information and communication technology (ICT), so that they may be accessed, understood, and used by everyone, including people with disabilities. The National Disability Authority was founded in 2000 in Ireland with a clear commitment, on behalf of the Government, to improve the lives of persons with disabilities and to provide evidence-informed advice and guide the Government on disability matters. This country believes that people with disabilities should have equal rights and opportunities alongside other people to participate in economic, social, and cultural life. Through the NDA, efforts are made to enable them to reach their full individual potential in a society that embraces and accommodates a wide range of human diversity. The country decided in 2000 that disability must be a focus of all policies to ensure equality and human rights for all in the land. The UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD) – ratified by Ireland in 2018 – provides a framework to guide and drive disability policy and its implementation. The report of the Commission on the Status of People with Disabilities of 1996, titled “A Strategy for Equality”, marked an important step forward in mainstreaming of the disability policy, for making the country move from a medical to a social model of disability. This report discussed access to education, employment, and relationships, identifying them as barriers to achieving equality. Further, the Disability Act 2005 provides for Sectoral Plans in service areas, requires public bodies to take positive action to employ people with disabilities, and proposes the establishment of a Centre for Excellence in Universal Design. Nowadays, one can receive Disability Allowance from the age of 16. Those who receive Disability Allowance (DA) can access extra welfare benefits for their parents and other supplementary welfare payments.

b) Theory of disability

My Left Foot is a story of triumph over disability. The narrative reveals that physically disabled people are not mentally disabled. Compassion may inculcate a strong and indomitable will within them. The story shows love, help, and compassion toward Christy from his mother and the doctors beside him, as well as from other characters. – for example, the presence of his brother Paddy and their fight as siblings, his other brother who took dictation for the autobiography that he was writing (Brown, 171), his mother’s emotional support (Brown, 125), Dr. Warnants help (Brown, 128), doctors and Physiotherapists of the clinic (Brown, 57), etc.

Here, the primary character of the story, *My Left Foot*, Christy Brown, is a victim of cerebral palsy, which is a medical impairment and a congenital disorder affecting movement, muscle tone or posture. It can be treated with physical, occupational and speech therapy. Medical science says that there is no cure for cerebral palsy, and the parents of such children or patients need help and answers (Miller F and Bachrach S. J., *Cerebral Palsy – A Complete Guide for Caregiving*, 2017, p. 28). But it does not talk about the patient's determination or inner strength. Determination and inner strength may wrench out from medical therapies as well; the evidence is visible in *My Left Foot* – different techniques that were applied to different patients, starting from relaxing oneself, and on one such occasion, Christy realised that even a very normal person may not be in a position to do it properly. "Complete relaxation is something that even very few normal people can claim to possess." (Brown, 159) This autobiographical memoir portrays instances in which the doctor, attendant, and Christy's mother were the ones who motivated him to improve and who insisted, saying, "There is nothing that you cannot conquer, Christy" (Brown, 125).

c) Representation

Representation emerges from myriad signs and symbols, each conveying meanings that differ from conventional interpretations. The term 'representation' encompasses a range of connotations; for instance, Aristotle conceptualised it as an act of invention, construction, or creation. Stephen Heath argues that reality is a matter of representations, and that representation, in turn, is a matter of discourse (as cited in Preziosi, 1988, p. 357). Hence, representation is the ability of texts to draw upon the features of the world and present them to viewers and readers not simply as reflections but as constructions. Images thus present versions of reality shaped by cultures, thoughts, and actions. A representation can also be a narrative, a sequence of images and ideas, but is often avoided from being given definitive or concrete meaning, as there appears to be a gap between intention and realisation, original and copy of the material. Postmodernist representation questions the meaning of reality and how we understand the past today, often through texts that contain traces of historical events, documents, and historians. Roland Barthes once claimed that "where politics begins imitation ceases", highlighting the role of self-reflexive parodic art in postmodernism, which acknowledges the ironic reality that all cultural forms of representation—whether literary, visual, or aural—are inherently social and political in nature (Barthes, 1977). According to Mitchell, representation not only mediates our knowledge but also obstructs, fragments, and

negates it. Furthermore, representation cannot be given a definitive or concrete meaning, as there is always a gap between intention and realisation, and between the original and the imitation (Mitchell, 1994). Postmodernist representation poses questions such as who speaks, and whether it is written, oral, or transcribed. The forms may disappear, but words remain to signify the impossible. When representing the subaltern, it is important to understand who represents, who is being represented, for what purpose, at what historical moment, in what location, and using which strategies. Lennard Davis describes the politics of novelistic narrative representation as: “Novels do not depict life; they depict life as it is represented by ideology” (Davis, 1987).

The rise of modernism prompted a critical reevaluation of long-held notions about a fixed, unchanging relationship between signs and referents, or between words and the world (Foucault, 1972). For theorists such as Louis Althusser and Fredric Jameson, who engaged with postmodern debates, the focus shifted from the essence of representation to its operation and function within particular cultural contexts (Jameson, 1991). This shift introduced a cultural dimension to the concept of representation. Linda Hutcheon describes this ambiguity as representation embodying both “complicity and critique” (Hutcheon, 1989). To understand the transition from structuralist to post-structuralist thought, it is essential to consider Jacques Derrida’s contributions. Derrida’s method, known as deconstruction, offers a radical critique of philosophical, historical, and literary constructs by subverting the foundations of representation (Derrida, 1976). According to Stuart Hall, representation is not about whether the media reflects or distorts reality, as this implies that there can be one ‘true’ meaning, but rather about the many meanings a representation can generate. Meaning is constituted by representation, by what is present, what is absent, and what is different. Thus, meaning can be contested. A representation implicates the audience in creating its meaning. Power—through ideology—tries to fix the meaning of a representation in a ‘preferred meaning’ form. Creating deliberate anti-stereotypes is an attempt to redefine meaning. A more effective strategy is to go inside the stereotype and open it up from within, to deconstruct the work of representation. The decoding process results in a “re-presentation” of what producers want us to see rather than its intended meaning (Hall, 1997).

This draws a connection between representation and literature. Cheyne, a biblical scholar, argues that fiction, due to its conventions and popularity, offers a unique platform for exploring and challenging societal perceptions of disability (Cheyne, 2019). Disability

intersects with various genre conventions, affecting the reader's experience and understanding of both the genre and disability. The affective engagement with disability in genre fiction has the potential to challenge and change readers' attitudes and perceptions about disability. By evoking strong emotions, genre fiction can foster a deeper understanding and empathy towards disabled individuals. Genre fiction often engages with its own history and conventions, making it particularly suited to exploring how disability is traditionally narrativised. This reflexivity allows for the creation of representations that act as catalysts for reader's reflection on disability (Cheyne, 2023).

My Left Foot is a deeply subjective narrative that offers insight into Christy Brown's inner world. This personal viewpoint allows readers to experience the world from his perspective, fostering an understanding. By highlighting his struggle, the author asserts his voice and agency, and the text represents his ability to write and paint with his left foot, a testament to his resilience and determination.

'Difference' or 'crippledness' or 'deformation' is generally overlooked, as stated by Rosemary Garland Thomson, anywhere in society or in theory. We have a general conception of a 'hero' who is without any deformity; we can say he is 'perfect in himself'. *My Left Foot* is a memoir of a person who writes it, being the victim of a medical impairment. The memoir clearly shows that the hero initially had no agency. It shows a continuous struggle not only with himself to express himself in daily life but also with the people around him, to be acknowledged, to be recognised as a living entity. There were only his siblings and a few neighbours in his surroundings. Christy was living in a 'not so confident' zone with cerebral palsy, which was already acting as a dominant agent in his physical features; moreover, he could feel on various occasions that he was not welcome. As he records his feelings in his memoir, he also clarifies his identity as a marginalised or subaltern. His 'dysfunctional' body and Christy as a person were treated as a creation from a different social structure.

This term, the term "social structure" is surrounded by very strong boundaries in our minds. These boundaries are all in our minds, as the 'disability' is just a physical condition. In general, the mental ability of such a person is thoroughly ignored. People with disabilities may face barriers that prevent them from accessing humanitarian assistance or protection. Now, more than 50 years after the first publication of *My Left Foot*, the EU has adopted a strategy stating that children with disabilities must be prioritised in conflict, post-conflict societies, and developing countries. Even in America, the Americans with Disabilities Act

(ADA) was first implemented in 1990; it was the United States Government's first step toward addressing the needs of citizens living with disabilities. But Stevie Wonder, blind singer and tech advocate, stated in his song at the 58th Grammy Awards 2016, “we need to make every single thing accessible to every single person with a disability” (Stevie Wonder, np.)

Inclusion and support for people with disabilities began in the EU with the Rights of Persons with Disabilities only in 2010. It generally aims to consider the specific needs of persons with disabilities to ensure their full participation in humanitarian action. The UN disability inclusion strategy is the result of a process launched in April 2018 to strengthen system-wide accessibility for persons with disabilities and mainstreaming of their rights.

The UNCRPD (United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities) came into force in 2006. India signed and ratified the act in 2007. India also had a PWD (Persons with Disabilities) Act in 1995. But when Christy Brown wrote *My Left Foot*, society could not think of looking at disability in any other way than as a liability.

Christy understands even the complex idea and is able to comprehend, but is unable to express himself due to disability. Like most children, Christy also expressed his pain, most of which was psychological, along with the peer problem. There are myths about the therapeutic interventions for cerebral palsy. *My Left foot* shows such instances of going through myths and struggling through the therapy, and finally improving to a better being in terms of coordination and cognition. Christy gradually overcomes the barriers to learning. When he was writing with the chalk between his toes, a doctor who came to visit his place to attend to his brother was astonished at his writing with his left foot. The doctor was impressed by Christy's willpower to learn. Later, the doctor learnt about Christy from his mother and provided medical advice and services to him. He visited Christy several times and became a good friend.

d) Silence and Articulation

The Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary defines 'silence' as the complete absence of sound, the act of refraining from speech, not discussing or mentioning something, or the prevention of speech. Similarly, the Merriam-Webster Dictionary describes it as restraint from speech or noise; muteness (often used as an interjection); the absence of sound or noise; stillness; and states of oblivion, obscurity, and secrecy. Silence is prevalent in *My Left Foot*,

where the author's identity is solely medical, and his utmost desire is to be able to speak clearly and come out of the cage of disability that has left him dependent upon others, including family members and doctors. That creates hopelessness in him (Brown, 103).

Silencing can be understood as forcing someone to be quiet, suppressing their voice, or stopping hostile actions or criticism. It often reflects feelings of being unheard, ridiculed, ignored, or speaking without making an impact. Silence represents various aspects of the mind, life, and nature and signifies their presence in both personal and public spaces. Carmen Luke describes silence as a form of dissent and a survival tool, viewing it as a refusal to engage with research and a technique for resisting the historical legacies of colonialism (Luke, as cited in Kramarae, 1988, p. 235). Silence is a multifaceted concept, functioning as an auditory signal in linguistic theory, a pragmatic and discursive strategy, and a realisation of taboo or manipulation (Jaworski, 1993, p.3). Recognizing silence as a potential mode of communication, Jaworski (1993), in *The Power of Silence: Social and Pragmatic Perspectives*, identifies it as performing various functions: linking or separating individuals, healing or wounding over time, disclosing or concealing information, indicating assent or dissent, and signaling thoughtfulness or mental inactivity (Jaworski, 1993, pp.66-67). A ray of hope flashing through Christy's mind revealed his thoughtfulness and mindfulness as he looked at others and found himself, by comparison, in a better condition (Brown, 95).

Silence is a complex and cultural phenomenon which can be intentional and unintentional. Both kinds of silences have multiple meanings. Silence and marginalisation are interconnected and hence can push certain individuals towards the periphery, making them invisible. This invisibility leads to a lack of representation, thereby overshadowing minority voices. Silence can also be seen as a form of resistance, and the disabled may experience internalised silence. The memoir examines how disability is perceived, thereby showing resistance while giving Christy agency. The author's obscure world is waiting for a voice through his speech, to communicate clearly and without embarrassment to everyone in the outer world (Brown, 161). The treatment little Christy was receiving was more of a confidence booster, and in the process, he and other patients at the clinic may realise that they are different, yet they, too, are human beings. Among all others, only Christy could pen down that they too need compassion and 'attention' as everyone else (Brown, 156). The epistemological meaning is grounded in the philosophy of tacit knowledge, which in turn is the phenomenon of knowing without being able to articulate what we know, whereas the

ontological category takes up the silence of being or life itself (qtd in Clair 6). Articulation could be a simple grin (Brown, 55), yet it could be a proclamation of the identity of the articulator.

My Left Foot, being an autobiography, portrays the author's emotions including passing thoughts at every step. This autobiographical journey, however, shows the author's plight from an unspoken, not-so-understood world to the world of print media as a means to communicate all he could and should to the audience unaware of the world (every possible emotion) of disabled ('with twisted arms and legs'; [Brown, 156, para 2]). This plight was not a journey alone for Christy, a little one, to the young boy. This plight was shared and accompanied silently by his mother, whose presence was prominent yet infrequent. Her encouraging words made her vivid in Christy's mind and helped him take a step forward into the darkness of silence. Those steps were not loud, but the end result of that prolonged silence was certainly blaring and an eye-opener for the rest of the world.

CONCLUSION

The memoir pays a quiet tribute to Christy and his mother for the perseverance they showed throughout this journey of writing, learning, and relearning to write in a different way. Although we are not looking at the contribution of his mother, she is the one who denied the first myth told to her that Christy was beyond cure and "for your own sake, don't look to this boy as you would look to the others" (Brown, 11) –image construction started here as even the "doctors could not help in any way beyond telling her (mother) not to place her (mother) trust in me (Christy)" (Brown, 10 & 11). Among all these opinions, we are reminded of Stephen Heath, who opines that "reality is a matter of representation and representation is in turn a matter of discourses, of organisation of the images, the definition of the 'views', their construction" (as cited in Preziosi, 1988, p.357).

The role of representation in the reality of a disabled person, it is not unreal to state that representation often indicates the fate of a real person with extraordinary potential and a 'not so abled' body living in silence. It was argued that disability studies aim to work in a way to reduce prejudice and discrimination; it may also involve medical practitioners to help patients, who shun away in silence, to deal with situations full of myths. As described in the memoir, among many myths, the first one about 'giving up on Christy' was busted by his mother and Christy. He made it known to his family members that he could control only his

left foot and toes. He was successful in writing the letter ‘A’ after many trials and error. It happened before his father and siblings, while his mother was holding the slate steady for him. Christy busted many myths on his way to success, but the journey was a painful struggle to bring down a wall of constructed notions, to overcome invisibility, and to deconstruct the idea of ability and disability.

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