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Disabling and Enabling Words: A Comparative Study of Language and Disability in *The Fifth Child* and *The Story of My Life*

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ABSTRACT

This paper critically examines the role of language as a disabling mechanism within English literary texts, drawing on the theoretical framework of Disability Studies. It argues that language far from being a neutral medium, actively constructs, reinforces, and sustains ableist ideologies through metaphorization, medical discourse, and normative narrative structures. Using close reading of selective works such as Doris Lessing's *The Fifth Child* (1988) and Hellen Keller's *The Story of My Life* (1903), the paper will aim to demonstrate how language acts as a barrier to disabled people and how language often functions to marginalize disabled identities by reducing them to symbolic or pathological representations. However, the paper also explores how literary texts can resist these disabling tendencies through alternative narrative forms, linguistic subversion, and the reclamation of voice by disabled subjects. The research positions language not only as a site of exclusion but also as a potential tool of resistance and redefinition, challenging the hegemonic structures of normativity within literary discourse.

Introduction

Language is not a neutral or transparent medium; rather, it is a structured system embedded with cultural, political, and ideological meanings. The role of language is very important in human life. Language speaks the mind of its society. It is a reflection of how people see each other in a society. June Isaacson Kailes in *Language is More than a Trivial Concern* (2010) describes the essential role of language as:

Language is powerful. It structures our reality and influences our attitudes and behaviour. Words can empower, confuse, discriminate, patronize, denigrate, inflame, start war and bring about peace. Words can elicit love and manifest hate, words can paint long lasting pictures. (Kailes 4)

Disability Studies as a critical framework moves away from the medical model of disability, which views impairment as an individual defect, to a social model that recognizes how social, architectural, and linguistic structures produce disability. Lennard J. Davis and Rosemarie Garland- Thomson argues that language functions ideologically to produce the "normate" subject by stigmatizing bodily and cognitive differences. In his foundational text *Enforcing Normalcy* (1955), Davis posits that the rise of statistical norms in the nineteenth century led to the marginalization of bodies that deviated from the constructed average. Similarly, Garland- Thomson's work on visual culture and staring elucidates how disabled bodies are rendered hyper-visible through linguistic framing that marks them as aberrant. Thus, language does not merely reflect disability, it actively participates in its construction and regulation within cultural discourse.

One of the most pervasive ways in which language disables is through metaphorization. Disabilities are frequently employed as metaphors for moral, spiritual, or intellectual deficiencies: blindness for ignorance, deafness for obstinacy, lameness for weakness etc. These figurative uses of disability reduce complex lived realities to symbolic tropes, thereby erasing the agency and subjectivity of disabled individuals. According to David T. Mitchell and Sharon Synder's theory of "narrative prosthesis," as explained in The Body and *Physical Difference: Discourses of Disability* (2015) disability often serves as a crutch upon which literary plots are built, yet the disabled character is rarely afforded depth or complexity. Rather than engaging with the embodied experiences of disabled people, literature often appropriates disability to serve normative narrative functions, thus rendering language complicit in the ideological silencing of disabled voices.

Language and Otherness in *The Fifth Child*

To ground the theoretical arguments discussed above in literary analysis, Doris Lessing's *The Fifth Child* (1988) offers a compelling and disturbing exploration of how language shapes perceptions of disability, monstrosity, and otherness. Published in 1988, the novel departs from the utopian vision of family life

initially established in its early chapters and descends into a grim meditation on social exclusion and biological deviance with the birth of Ben, the titular "fifth child" (Lessing 12). Ben's presence in the novel is constructed almost entirely through the language of fear, alienation, and abnormality, despite the absence of any medical diagnosis. Lessing's narrative invites a close examination of how language—both at the level of character dialogue and narrative voice, operates not only to name and describe difference but also to enforce boundaries between the normative and the deviant. In this context, Ben's representation becomes a critical site for analyzing the disabling function of language; the way in which it pathologizes bodies, imposes ideological norms, and silences non-normative subjects.

Ben's characterization is deeply enmeshed in what Lennard J. Davis identifies as the ideology of the norm. In *Enforcing Normalcy* (1955), Davis argues that the emergence of statistical thinking in the nineteenth century led to the construction of a normative subject against which all deviations: bodily, cognitive, behavioural were measured. In Lessing's narrative, this norm is instantiated through the image of the idealized nuclear family: cheerful, fertile, and comfortable middle-class. Harriet and David's vision of family life is underpinned by a fantasy of uniformity and harmony. Language plays a key role in this fantasy, as the couple's discourse is replete with phrases like "happy family," "old-fashioned values," and "the perfect home" (Lessing 23, 45, 79) terms that carry embedded assumptions about normal development and social conformity.

Ben's birth violently disrupts this linguistic and ideological construct. From the outset, he is not described in clinical or developmental terms, but rather through a lexicon of monstrosity: "goblin," "alien," "Neanderthal," "animal" (Lessing 22, 44, 56). These descriptors are not neutral but heavily laden with historical and cultural connotations of abnormality and danger. This kind of language, as Rosemarie Garland-Thomson notes in *Extraordinary Bodies* (2000) functions to mark certain bodies as "spectacles of difference" (Garland-Thomson 117) rendering them objects of fear, fascination, or revulsion. Ben is not only excluded from the family's vision of normalcy, he becomes the embodiement of its failure. David Mitchell and Sharon Synder's concept of narrative prosthesis is particularly useful in analyzing Lessing's depiction of Ben. According to Mitchell and Synder, disability in literature often serves as a plot device, a form of narrative scaffolding that provides conflict, irony, or pathos, but the disabled character is rarely developed beyond the role of symbol. In *The Fifth Child* (1988) Ben is instrumental to the narrative's descent from idealism to despair. His presence accelerates the disintegration of the family, the alienation of the parents, and the breakdown of the social order they inhabit. Yet, crucially, Ben is never granted narrative subjectivity. His inner life remains opaque, his speech limited, and his perspective entirely mediated through the gaze of others, especially Harriet, whose voice dominates the novel. This narrative positioning

reinforces the disabling power of language. Ben is not simply portrayed as different; he is constituted as such through the narrative's refusal to provide him with voice or agency. As readers, we are invited to see him through the lens of able-bodied, neurotypical subject, and this very positioning reaffirms the marginalization of disabled identity. The lack of diagnostic specificity further complicates the portrayal. By refusing to name Ben's condition, Lessing avoids medicalization but also risks abstracting his character into a vague symbol of otherness. This rhetorical ambiguity reinforces the idea that what is truly terrifying is not a specific impairment, but the very concept of non-normative embodiement.

The language used by Harriet and David illustrates how everyday speech can sustain ableist ideologies. Harriet, in particular, often voices her ambivalence and frustration through emotionally charged and metaphorical terms: she calls Ben a "creature" and refers to him as "not one of us" (Lessing 66). This language acts as a discursive boundary distinguishing the "normal" children from the "abnormal" one and justifying his institutionalization and eventual removal from the domestic sphere. These linguistic acts functions as forms of symbolic violence that both reflect and reproduce social exclusion. Furthermore, Ben's inability or refusal to engage in "normal" speech, his limited vocabulary, lack of expressive language, and perceived cognitive difference renders him unintelligible within the linguistic framework of family. Judith Butler's theory of Intelligibility, as discussed in *Undoing Gender* (2004) suggests that individuals must conform to normative scripts to be recognized as subjects. Ben's failure to participate in these scripts positions him outside the bounds of recognizable personhood. Thus, language not only marks him as other but denies him the ontological status of a subject.

Although *The Fifth Child* (1988) clearly demonstrates the disabling function of language, it simultaneously critiques the desire for diagnostic certainty. Lessing resists offering a definitive explanation for Ben's condition, thereby challenging the medicalization of deviance. This ambiguity may be read as an invitation for the reader to reflect on their own interpretative frameworks, particularly the compulsion to classify, name, and pathologize difference. The novel's refusal to provide closure or redemption destabilizes conventional narrative expectations and opens up a space for critical reflection on the ethics of representing disability. However, this resistance is not without its tensions. While Lessing critiques the family's and by extension, society's treatment of Ben, the narrative does not fully escape the traps of symbolic appropriation. Ben remains a figure of disruption rather than transformation. His character, though central to the plot, is narratively and linguistically silenced, reinforcing the very patterns of exclusion that the text appears to interrogate.

While Doris Lessing's *The Fifth Child* (1988) critiques the societal and familial intolerance toward bodily and behavioural difference, its narrative perspective ultimately renders the disabled subject—Ben—as other, silent, and resistant to language. Ben's inability to conform linguistically or socially becomes the basis for his exclusion, exposing how normative language acts not merely as a means of communication but as a gatekeeper of human recognition. This thematic concern finds a compelling counterpart in the life writing of Helen Keller.

Language as Freedom in The Story of My Life

In *The Story of My Life* (1903) Keller's acquisition of language is conventionally read as a triumph of human will and educational perseverance. However, through the lens of Disability Studies, Keller's narrative reveals the subtle operations of linguistic normativity as a disciplining force. Where Lessing's fictional world silences the disabled subject, Keller's autobiographical text illuminates how language itself, its norms, assumptions, and exclusions, can function as a disabling tool.

Helen Keller's *The Story of My Life* (1903) has long been celebrated as an inspirational autobiography, a tale of courage, intellectual awakening, and transcendence of physical limitation through the acquisition of language. However, Disability Studies invites a more critical reading of this narrative, one that scrutinizes the ideological assumptions underpinning the representation of language, identity, and ability. From this perspective, Keller's journey into linguistic competence is not simply an empowering breakthrough, but a process of assimilation into normative standards of intelligibility and subjecthood. As Disability Theorists like Lennard J. Davis argue, disability is not an inherent defect but a social construction, often created through exclusionary discourses that privilege certain bodies, minds, and communicative forms over others. Language, in Keller's narrative, becomes one such tool of normalization, at once enabling self-expression and enforcing conformity.

Central to Keller's story is the moment at the water pump, where Anne Sullivan spells "w-a-t-e-r" (Keller 23) into Keller's hand, a moment traditionally interpreted as the genesis of her humanity. Before this, Keller is depicted as existing in a kind of pre-linguistic chaos or emotional darkness. The implication is that language alone grants access to reason, emotion, and social participation. Rosemarie Garland-Thomson's concept of the "normate" the imagined able-bodied, speaking subject becomes relevant here. In learning language Keller becomes legible to the normate world, but at the cost of her embodied, tactile knowledge systems being marginalized or forgotten. Michel Foucault's theory of disciplinary power offers an incisive lens through which to view Keller's education. In *Discipline and Punish* (1999) Foucault describes how institutions govern bodies by imposing norms and monitoring behaviour, not through overt coercion, but

through subtler means of normalization. Anne Sullivan's role in Keller's life, though often romanticized, can also be read as one of benevolent disciplinarian. Sullivan reshapes Keller's gestures, moods, and bodily expressions into grammatically and socially acceptable behaviours. Keller's chaotic bodily expressions and intuitive tactile communications are moulded into a form that society can recognize and accept. The acquisition of language, in this sense, becomes not just an educational achievement but a process of disciplinary integration, one which Keller learns not only to speak, but to embody the expectations of the speaking subject. This disciplinary function of language is not merely personal; it is deeply narrative. As David Mitchell and Sharon Synder argue in their theory of "narrative prosthesis," disability in literature often functions as a plot device, a lack of deviation that drives narrative development, only to be resolved or rehabilitated by the end. *The Story of My Life* (1903) follows this formula with precision. Keller's early disability constitutes the narrative problem, while her linguistic awakening serves as the triumphant resolution. But this structure perpetuates the ableist idea that disability must be overcome to achieve narrative closure. Keller's success is measured not by the richness of her non-verbal, sensory world, but by how successfully she overcomes to inhabit normative modes of communication. As such, the text inadvertently validates a reductive binary between silence and speech, chaos and order, disability and ability.

Prior to acquiring formal language, Keller experienced the world through a complex interplay of touch, motion, and emotion, which are modes of knowing that do not translate neatly into verbal expression. Yet these rich, embodied epistemologies are quickly overshadowed in the narrative by her linguistic transformation. Disability theorists, including Garland-Thomson and Tobin Siebers, have emphasized the importance of validating these alternative forms of perception and communication, which they argue challenge dominant aesthetic and epistemic standards. Keller's early experiences suggest a form of intelligence not reliant on linguistic rationality, but rather on sensory integration and affective awareness. However, the narrative subsumes these under the weight of linguistic normativity, presenting language as the ultimate arbiter of cognitive and emotional legitimacy. This erasure of non-verbal epistemologies reflects a broader cultural tendency to treat linguistic fluency as synonymous with human value.

Further complicating the question of language in Keller's narrative is the issue of voice and authorship. Much of *The Story of My Life* (1903) was edited by Anne Sullivan and John Macy, raising concerns about narrative mediation and the authenticity of Keller's voice. As Georgina Kleege and other disability scholars have noted, this mediation reflects a common tendency to frame disabled voices within normative parameters, ensuring their legibility to a presumed able-bodied readership. In Judith Butler's terms, this constitutes a politics of recognisability, in which the disabled subject is allowed to speak only if they do so

in ways the dominant culture deems acceptable. Kellers's narrative though ostensibly her own, is filtered through layers of editorial intervention, resulting in a story that affirms inspirational norms rather than challenging them. This process exemplifies how language can function as a gate keeping tool, allowing access to public discourse only on the condition of assimilation. Yet Keller's life also gestures toward forms of resistance. Her fluency in tactile sign, Braille, and lip-reading through touch reflects communicative modes that resist phonocentric norms. These practices represent what Tobin Sieber calls "disability aesthetics" forms of expression that challenge conventional ideas of beauty, clarity, and meaning. Keller's life when viewed beyond the text of her autobiography is a testament to the possibility of meaningful communication outside normative speech. Her advocacy for disability rights, social justice, and educational reform further indicates a shift from passive inspiration to active resistance. In doing so, she subverts the very systems that sought to script her identity. Her political commitments suggest a deep understanding of how language can marginalize and control, and a refusal to be contained within those boundaries.

In the light of these insights, Keller's *The Story of My Life* (1903) must be read not only as an account of linguistic empowerment but also as a text that reveals the complex entanglement between language and disablement. Language, in this narrative, serves as both a bridge and a barrier—as a medium through which Keller asserts her personhood, and as a structure that demands conformity at the expense of embodied difference. Disability Studies calls us to question the assumption that language is a universal good, and to consider how it can function as a tool of exclusion. Keller's narrative provides a crucial opportunity to reimagine communication not as a single normative standard, but as a diverse and pluralistic field, one in which all bodies and minds have the right to be heard, even if not in the ways conventionally expected.

Conclusion

The comparative analysis of Doris Lessing's *The Fifth Child* (1988) and Hellen Keller's *The Story of My Life* (1903) demonstrates that language is never a neutral instrument of communication, but rather a deeply political and ideological tool that shapes how disability is perceived, narrated, and lived. In *The Fifth Child* (1988) language operates as a mechanism of social exclusion, where the labels, descriptions, and silences surrounding Ben are stepped in ableist assumptions. From the earliest stages of his life, Ben is named in ways that render him as "other," a "monster," a "problem" terms that crystallize public fear and reinforce his marginalization. Lessing's narrative exposes how linguistic constructions not only communicate prejudice but also function as an architecture of social control, where the truth about Ben is mediated through the perspective of those who are positioned as "normal." Through such language disability is

pathologized and rendered a threat to the cohesion of the nuclear family and to societal norms, revealing how narratives about disability are constructed to maintain the boundaries of acceptability.

In contrast, Keller's *The Story of My Life* (1903) presents a more complex relationship between disability and language. Her journey towards acquiring language facilitated by Anne Sullivan is often celebrated as a triumph of human will and intellect. Yet, beneath this narrative lies a tension: while linguistic mastery allows Keller access to education, self-representation, and public engagement, it simultaneously forces her into frameworks shaped by able-bodied norms. The metaphors, symbols, and rhetorical devices she adopts are drawn from a linguistic heritage that has historically been used to other and sentimentalize disabled experience. Thus, even as she resists the silencing of disabled bodies by asserting her own voice, Keller's autobiography is mediated through a linguistic system that reflects the dominant culture's ways of knowing. The very words that empower her also risk reinscribing the very ableist paradigms she seeks to challenge.

When examined through the lens of Disability Theorists such as Lennard J. Davis and Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, both works underscore that the disabling force of language lies in its role as a cultural technology: it shapes the conditions of social belonging, defines who is seen as fully human, and determines the range of possible identities available to disabled individuals. Lessing's portrayal of Ben shows how pejorative naming and exclusionary discourse create a self-fulfilling prophecy, limiting not only how others perceive him but also how he is allowed to exist in the world. Keller's account, while more emancipator, still highlights the necessity of critically rethinking the inherited linguistic structures through which disabled people articulate their realities. Together, these two texts compel us to acknowledge that the power of language extends beyond description, it actively constructs disability as either a site of exclusion or a possibility for transformation. They challenge readers, scholars, and society at large to dismantle disabling vocabularies and to imagine alternative linguistic frameworks that affirm difference without reducing it to deficit. By exposing the dual nature of language, as both a tool of oppression and a medium of resistance, Lessing and Keller push us to reconsider the ethical dimensions of discourse itself. If language has the capacity to disable, it equally holds the potential to reimagine social realities, fostering narratives that are inclusive, respectful, and grounded in the lived experiences of disabled individuals. In this light, moving towards a discourse that resists ableist binaries is not merely a literary or linguistic project but a profound ethical and political responsibility.

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