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Challenging Disabilities in Children Literature: An Interdisciplinary Study of Meshak Asare's Sosu's Call

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ABSTRACT

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Discrimination and inequality between the abled and disabled has been a problem that attracted the attention of literary authors, legislators and international institutions. The United Nations had specified seventeen goals for Sustainable Development where the tenth one was "Reduced Inequalities". This goal along with the previously held convention for persons with Disabilities in 2006 aim basically at guaranteeing the prevalence of equality between the abled and disabled and at promoting technology to serve the disabled in transportation, health and education. Story-telling is one of the vital methods by which the difficulties in the life of the disabled can find an echo. Children Literature is a rich field and perhaps the most effective genre in raising the voice of the disabled. The African author Meshak Asare wrote his prizes-winning children story Sosu's Call to show both the negative and positive attitudes of treating the disabled. The paper is an interdisciplinary study covering the influence of literature, society and technology on the life of the disabled.

Keywords: African Children Literature, Disability, Inequalities, Sustainable Development, Sosu's Call.

Disability is a worldwide phenomenon and its studies have developed greatly creating different theories of disability. There have been studies devoted to the examination of this phenomenon in certain periods of history such as the medieval era and studies devoted to female authors who wrote about disability and/or experienced disability themselves. Other studies are interested in studying different genres of literature and how disability played a role in them and how it was dealt with by authors. These included disability in gothic fiction, in science fiction, in modern novel,

in poetry and in drama.

The present paper is an interdisciplinary study that attempts to cover the social, cultural and technological sides that affect the disabled. Besides, it aims to shed light on the role of children literature in enhancing and realizing the tenth goal of Sustainable Development which is "Reduced Inequalities". This goal aims at reducing all sorts of inequality including the way the disabled are treated either by their societies or by the surrounding institutions and organizations.

The choice of children literature is of great significance as it helps in cultivating a positive image regarding the disabled whatever the type of their disability. This is due to the fact that in certain works of literature the disabled were stereotyped as evil since their body is out of the norm. Besides, they may be portrayed as inferior to the abled, which is inconsistent with the equality demanded by Sustainable Development objectives. Throughout ages and across various works of art, the image of the suffering disabled used to be that of the marginalized who is - on the best estimation- nothing but a pitied creature. Children literature makes the presence of disability a norm and paves the way for new generations that accept the disabled and treat them as equal with no prejudice, bullying or hatred. At the same time it portrays a positive picture of the disabled as talented and useful citizens in their societies. In other words, it tells both, the young and the adult how to behave.

Moreover, narration and story-telling are regarded as vital to a portrayal of disability. Theorists of disability believe that it illuminates the creativity and results in impressive narratives. As cited by Alice Hall, Michael Bérubé mentions that disability "demands a story" ("Disability and Narrative" 570). The need for a story to produce literary narratives about disability is strengthened by many authors as further cited by Hall, David Mitchell and Sharon Snyder believe that the disabled are expected to describe and explain issues related to their bodies including their scars, their limps and perhaps their prosthesis. This description paves the way for composing a story

Sustainable Development was established through a number of events including the publication of the Brundtland Report (WCED, 1987), the Earth Summit in 1992, the World Summit in 2002, and the United Nations Conference in 2015. The United Nations held several negotiations among one hundred and ninety three countries in 2015 until they specified seventeen Sustainable Development goals. These goals were No poverty, zero hunger, good health and well-being, quality education, gender equality, clean water and sanitation, affordable

and clean energy, decent work and economic growth, industry, innovation and infrastructure, reduced inequalities, Sustainable cities and communities, responsible consumption and production, climate action, life below water, life on land, peace, justice and strong institutions and partnerships for the goals. The tenth goal of Sustainable Development is "Reduced Inequalities". One of its dimensions is disability.

There were historical moments when disability was legally hidden from the public. For example, the United States prevented the appearance in public of people who were, in the words of one of these laws, "diseased, maimed, mutilated, or in any way deformed, so as to be an unsightly or disgusting object" (Chicago City Code 1881). These were called "the Ugly Laws" and they were issued to deal with the poor, the homeless, the vagrants, and those with visible disabilities during the period from the American Civil War (1867) to the First World War (1918). Despite the disappearance of the disables, novels were written about them. The civil rights movement in the 1960s and 1970s shaped social acceptance of race and gender identities and these as Stuart Murray reveals "laid the base and provided momentum for similar developments within disability communities in the 1970s and 1980s".

To the same effect, Henri-Jacques Stiker, in his book *History of Disability* (1999), suggests that the 1920s represented a huge change in the social and cultural history of physical disability. Huge numbers of the wounded soldiers returned from fighting with all types of injuries hoping to reassimilate into their communities. Consequently, the concept of rehabilitation appeared.

The selected work for analysis in this paper is an African Child story written by Meshack Asare entitled *Sosu's Call*. Meshack Asare was born in 1945 in Ghana, but lives now in Germany. He is considered one of the most influential African children's writers. He wrote *Kwajo and the Brassman's Secret* (1981) which became among the most important children's books published in Africa, translated into many languages and won the Noma Award. He studied Fine Arts at the

College of Art in Kumasi and taught in Ghana for 12 years between 1967 and 1979. His story *Sosu's Call* is a fertile soil for analysis since the story itself is rich with dimensions that can serve in reducing inequality which is a goal of Sustainable Development.

Sosu's Call, won the 1999 UNESCO first prize for Children's and Young People's Literature in the Service of Tolerance. The story is one of the top twelve titles of Africa's 100 Best Books; and has been named an Honor Book for Young Children by the African Studies Association's Children's Africana Book Committee, as a contribution to accurate and balanced material on Africa for children. This success in attaining all these prizes makes it worthy of investigation and study.

Sosu's Call is about a crippled boy called Sosu. He is deprived from being able to walk and go to school and from all the activities that other abled children can do. His village is on a lagoon, and one day when a storm approaches, most people were in the fields; but the sick, very young, and elderly were left behind in the village with Sosu. He was courageous and intelligent enough to figure out a way to warn the people who are working in the fields. When everyone is away fishing, working in the fields or at school, he crawls to the chief's house, where he finds some drums. He warns the villagers through drumming, and saves the village from total destruction by the sea. The chief and the people of his community are happy to reward him a precious gift that can be useful for him, a wheelchair. Now, it is easy for him to go to school just like the other abled boys.

Literature in general and the narrative form as represented in novels and children stories have played a great role in reflecting upon disability. The portrayal and displaying of disability can be traced back to various novels such as Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* (1726), Charles Dickens's *A Christmas Carol* (1843), Brontë's *Jane Eyre* (1847) and Toni Morrison's *Sula* (1973).

The present paper attempts to cover through

analysis five basic dimensions that are focal and essential in discussing the issue of disability. The first is the general stereotype of the disabled in various literary works; the second is the role and attitude of the society and government towards the disabled; the third is the role of the family in supporting and protecting the disabled; the fourth is the nature and personal traits of the disabled and the fifth is the role of technology in alleviating the problem of disability.

The General Stereotype of the Disabled in Various Narrative works

Many literary works stereotype the disabled as evil. The character of Quasimodo, the hunchbacked villain in Hugo's *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* is an example. Besides, the disabled are seen as "surviving at the periphery of the world of the normal" as stated by Somdev Banik who explains that the image of the disabled in various genres including epics, classics and children's literature used to be that of a marginalized evil one. In contrast, the abled characters are portrayed as innocent victims who are hated because of no convincing reasons.

However, disabled characters take the lead and become the heroes of a literary work in the case of biographies such as *The Story of My Life* by Helen Keller or *Joni* by Joni Eareckson where disability is treated positively.

Discrimination between the abled and the disabled is estimated by Gartner as racism. Gartner believes that as the white people saw themselves superior to the blacks and men felt themselves superior to women, the abled see themselves superior to the disabled. The image of disability has been distorted as ugly and evil (1984, 31).

The Role and Attitude of the Societies and Governments towards the Disabled

Garland-Thomson suggests the existence of a direct and mimetic relationship between literature and social attitudes towards disability: "Stereotypes in life become tropes in textual

representation" (11). Accordingly, Literature is an important vehicle by which the social attitudes towards the disabled can be shown. Moreover, some societies mistreat and ignore the handicapped on the unfair assumption that the physically handicapped are useless. Sosu, the hero of *Sosu's Call* oversteps all that and helped his community despite their belief that he is useless and their insistence on preventing him from fishing with them. He proves to be both kindhearted and courageous.

The attitude of the society in the story has witnessed a change. It can be divided into two stages: The first is a negative one as the people adopt the common stereotype of the disabled as a source of evil. Sosu's father used to take the boy in his fishing, however, the other fishermen advised him not to bring him anymore and to leave him at home:

We don't think it is wise to bring that boy of yours out here. It is unlucky enough to have the likes of him in the village. We doubt if the Lagoon Spirit is pleased to have him sitting here as well!. We think you must keep him in your compound". p. 9

Here, the language that they use in describing the boy as a disabled denotes the prejudice and prevalent inequality in treating the disabled. The use of "the like of him" classifies him as a different species.

In addition, the culture of the villagers formed an aggressive attitude towards disability and stereotyped the disabled as a sign of bad luck. The beliefs of the villagers are themselves prejudiced towards the boy. They believe that he is a bad omen in their fishing trip "unlucky" and that the surrounding nature itself "the Lagoon Spirit" is not pleased with his presence.

The second stage in the attitude of the villagers towards the disabled boy is a positive one as it is the impact of the boy's heroism. When he proved courageous and saved the village; they carried him upon their shoulders and put him gently on his new wheelchair. Even their chief rewarded him with a "gleaming, new wheelchair" as well as his encouraging words: "We are all here and happy today because of one brave, little man –and his dog!" p.37 The attitude of the other abled children in the village is of great importance as it reflects upon the effect and influence of the new positive attitude towards the courageous disabled boy. They pushed him "gladly' in his new wheelchair.

The role of all governments is essential in helping persons with disabilities. In 2006, the United Nations held an international human rights treaty to protect the rights and dignity of persons with disabilities; this treaty is called 'the Convention of Rights of Persons with Disabilities'. Among the guiding principles of this convention is to provide them with equal opportunities to participate effectively in their societies, to respect and accept persons with disabilities, to encourage and invest the evolving capacities of disabled children and to allow them to preserve their identities.

Despite the effective role of Sustainable Development goals which attempted to support persons with disabilities and to ensure the equality of chances with no discrimination, some parts of the world such as Africa, suffer from difficulties in publishing their literary books about disability. Meshack Asare, for instance, published his children books outside Africa. Publishing houses has to support authors who tackle such important social, cultural and medical issues.

The Role of the Family towards the Disabled

The disabled families play an effective role that can never be denied. One of the blessings that Sosu is endowed with is his loving family. He lives with his parents, sister, brother and dog. Sosu's father is a fisherman. He saved no effort to "make him feel like a normal boy". He taught him useful work activities such as how to repair torn nets and took him in his small canoe so as to paddle and fish. Thus, the father cultivated in his son the feeling that he can be useful and

productive similar to the abled. The father does not surrender to the idea that his disabled son is useless. However, the other fishermen asked him to leave the boy at home as they regarded him useless and a source of bad luck on their fishing boat. Accordingly, he is left with the very young children and the old men.

As to his sister and brother, they used to teach him all that they learnt at school. He was unable to go to the school because of his crippled state and the unavailability of a wheelchair that can make it easy for him to go there.

Sosu's dog is considered a member of the family. The role of Sosu's dog in the story sheds light on the fact that no one can underestimate the role of any creature on earth including pets. Part of reducing inequalities as one of the goals of Sustainable Development is caring for animals and respecting their rights. Sosu lives with his family and his dog, Fusa. Nothing is more interesting than watching it going here and there despite his feeling envious because of the ability of the dog to use his legs and move here and there. This feeling derived him to ask the question, "what good is a boy without a pair of good, strong legs?". p.7"

The Role of the Disabled's Character Traits

The portrayal of the boy is illuminating as he is an obedient and active son who learns how to repair the net, who paddles in the small canoe of his father, who prepares lunch for his brother and sister and who is ready to learn all that they have learnt at school. Moreover, he is courageous and intelligent as he thought of using the chief's drum to draw the attention of the far away men to rescue the village. His drumming was so alarming that it attracted the villagers and the people of the neighbouring village as well.

Sosu is not evil and he cares about the people around him. His self-motivation led him to a determination to find a way out of the problem; "But now, he could only think of many young children, the sick and the very old people and all animals that were all in serious danger. p. 22".

It is significant to note that Sosu cares not only for humans but also for animals despite his feeling of envy of the dog for seeing it able to go here and there and of the chickens for their ability to stand up on their feet and walk. He used to watch the dog following his sister and brother when they go to school. When he watches the dog playing with the chickens, this "made him so miserable" p.12 and his dog attempts by all means to cheer him up. The only game that sosu can play with his dog was to throw a corncob as far as he could so that the dog attempts to catch it before it falls on the ground.

The Role of Technology in Overcoming Disability

With the development of technology, new horizons of hope are opened for the majority of the disabled. Whatever the type of disability, there are suitable prosthetics that compensate the loss or weakness of the body organs. International Conferences devoted to the problems of disabilities recommended the use of technology to facilitate communication and transportation for the disabled to ensure the equality of all opportunities for the abled and the disabled.

The wheelchair is an essential means that helps the crippled to move easily from a place to another without much need from the abled. As Alice reveals, the image of the wheelchair has become a symbol of disability. In *Sosu's Call*, the boy is in need of a wheelchair to help him go to his school and study like normal students. Therefore, the reward given to Sosu is a wheelchair. Here, the wheelchair plays a great role in the life of the boy as it makes it easier for him to go to his school and to get an equal chance of education.

In fact, the high technology that is employed in providing artificial parts to substitute the disabled parts of the body has developed greatly. It can alleviate the feeling of disability for both children and the adults. Manufacturing prosthesis with high technology has become an urgent need. But prosthesis, according to Stiker, is not only the pieces of wood, iron, now plastic that replace the

missing hand or foot; it is also the very idea that you can replace. "The image of the maimed person and of the society around him becomes prosthetic. Replacement, re-establishment of the prior situation, substitution, compensation—all this now becomes possible language" (2019,123-24)

The final sentence in the story heralds the true peaceful message of the author which is that the disabled are equal to the abled ones, sharing them the same life opportunities: "He is just one of the boys of the small village, somewhere between the sea and the lagoon". p. 37

Conclusion

Literary works in general and children literature in particular attempted to shed light on the worldwide phenomenon of disability. These works dealt with all types of disabilities including the physical and the mental. Disables suffered from the prejudiced way by which they were treated by their societies and governments. The disabilities caused by First World War and Second World War have changed the attitude of both societies and governments. Rehabilitation became the target of many institutions and the development in technology helped and supported the disabled through manufacturing Prosthesis that facilitated their life and compensated for the loss or malfunction of parts of their bodies. The attempt to establish equality between the abled and the disabled is one of the goals of Sustainable Development and the tenth goal named "reduced Inequalities" is devoted to this objective. Now, after the founding of an agreement to protect the rights of the disabled in 2008, the establishment of the tenth goal of sustainable development, the change in the outlook of both societies and governments to disables, the development of technology and the increasing literary authors' awareness to the vital role of literature in dealing with this issue, new horizons of hope are to be created for any disabled across the world.

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