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Re-examining Disability in Durjoy Datta's Hold My Hand: A Perspective

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Abstract: Durjoy Datta's Hold My Hand published in 2013 is a young adult fiction, centres on the romantic relationship between Deep, a bookworm who is highly introverted and Ahana, a young woman who suffers blindness due to a rare congenital disease. This paper sets disability studies as a framework to re-examine the novel's representation of blindness and distinguishing between socially constructed disability and medical impairment. The novel is set in the urban landscape of Hong Kong challenges the ableist stereotype by emphasising on agency and sensory - rich worldview of the female protagonist Ahana, while critiquing the romanticisation of disability for the benefit of the abled - bodied character development. The plot of the novel intersects disability with themes of love, self discovery, identity and the cultural stigma in the contemporary popular Indian English Fiction. A close textual analysis of the novel offered an ambivalent representation that resists reductive pity narrative and points toward empowerment yet it is constrained by familiar reoccurring themes and conventions such as "supercrip" and uses disability as narrative prosthesis. This kind of study can provide a scope for the largely unexamined presence of the disability in the mass - market of Indian English Literature. This can also presents a need of the intersectional rights - based portrayals than can help with the inclusivity and socially responsive cultural representations.

Keywords: Disability, Self - discovery, Supercrip, Rights.

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Introduction

Durjoy Datta is an impressive author of the modern Indian popular young adult fiction. His career is built around the narrative that blends romance, personal growth and relatable struggles of a millennial. He is the author of more than a dozen of bestsellers that includes the titles like *Of Course, I Love You!* published in 2008 and *The Girl of My Dreams*, published in the year 2016. His works often presents a protagonist who has to navigate through emotional turmoil of relationships and found a vast appealing to the urban youth. *Hold My Hands* publish in 2013 stands out as a different work as it has the idea of disability to the core rather than at the peripheral of the plot. The novel centres the male protagonist Deep, a self-proclaimed ‘nerd’ who travels to Hong Kong to learn about new cataloguing software and the female protagonist Ahana, a confident young woman who is blind caused by a rare congenital condition that affected her vision at a very young age. The beginning of the romance between them is introduced by Ahana who introduces Deep with the textures, sounds and smells of the city while Deep describes the visual landmarks to Ahana creating a dynamic of mutual exploration. However, Ahaan’s overprotective father, her ex-boyfriend Aveek (who is also blind) and Deep’s own insecurities about his unremarkable life leads to a complication in their lives.

The novel has been appreciated for its light hearted tone and the authentic description of Hong Kong. However, beneath the gloss of romance lies a multifaceted engagement with disability, specifically blindness which author portray’s as an integral part of Ahana’s identity above the social norms of being ‘abled’. The kind of representation invites a scrutiny through disability studies criticising the social barriers and not questioning the individual paucity. In the Indian English Literature, disability explores the post-colonial themes such as marginalisation, hybridity but completely ignoring the works like *Hold My Hand* in academic discourse.

Objective of the Paper

The major objective of this paper is to analyse how this novel undermines the ableist tropes while discussing blindness both as the medical condition and social disability? The paper argues that the novel inspires the disabled protagonist by highlighting her autonomy and her challenging of the ocularcentrism, it unknowingly keeps up with the problematic idea of using disability as a tool for the able-bodied character’s growth. The blindness of Ahana cuts across gender and cultural construct in Indian society where disability can form a sort of avuncular and social marginalisation within the family.

Methodology

This paper uses an analysis through close textual reading, drawing on from the quotations and narrative techniques to showcase the representation of disability. The secondary sources include a vast variety of research paper. The literature review surveys the portrayal of disability in modern Indian English fictions that dissects the novel's representation of the agency, narrative style and social dynamics. Finally, the conclusion features the insights and suggestions for future researchers.

By examining *Hold My Hand* through the lens of disability, this paper expresses how popular fiction can advance or stop disability discourse, particularly in an financial upper and urban setup where such narratives shape perceptions of difference.

Literature Review:

In the Indian English Literature the representation of the disability, historically has served as metaphors for the social and post-colonial evils. The trio of the first novelist, especially Mulk Raj Anand in his 1935 classic *Untouchable* used physical ailments and disabilities as symbols for oppression making disability as a marker for societal exclusion.

The authors like Salman Rushdie and Anita Desai who belong to the new century or the post-colonial era in their works *Shame* and *Clear Light of Day* respectively, either represent disability especially related to psychology to either explore the themes of political repression or as a tool to explore the familial fragmentation. Clare Barker in her famous *Postcolonial Fiction and Disability* (2011) criticises the Global South literatures for making impairment inspirational, a pattern that can found in Indra Sinha's *Animal's People* (2007).

In pop-fictions such as Datta's *Hold My Hand* disability act as a catalyst for romantic endeavours and it breaks stereotypes because of blind protagonist. The relationship between Deep and Ahana is based mutual affection over pity where Ahana's confidence overcomes the idea of victimhood. Helen Meekosha's decolonizing disability framework highlights Ahana's story in Hong Kong is made difficult due to disability whereas it could be worst in the Indian context.

Representation of Disability in Datta's *Hold My Hand*:

The paper attempts for a close reading of *Hold My Hand*. The novel centres around the agency and overthrowing of the pity, ocular centrism by the characters especially Ahana who brings out the dynamic relationship which highlights the social disability. The analysis of the plot also brings out the dilemma and how the characters advance with empathy. Ahana's point of view of the daily events and her romantic entanglements with Deep act as supports her agency of gain an identity.

Ahana's agency challenges the traditional narrative at the very beginning of her tale. In usual narration of the disabled character, the character is passive but Ahana moves throughout Hong Kong very confidently. Deep from his standing notes, "She didn't once mentioned my disability, treated me nicely and sounded really genius." This standpoint is ironical as it showcases Ahana is emphatic towards him and it changes the power dynamics where she is guides and makes Deep safe against the traditional narrative where the abled body helps the disabled.

Ahana is very optimistic and self-assured that aligns with the social acceptance that the blindness gives an alternative perception and heightens other senses as she states, "If you were to just feel your food without being able to see it, you wouldn't eat half the things you like." However, this kind of portrayal borders on the idea of the overcompensation as the character is described 'stunningly beautiful and flawless' because not everyone with medical disability falls in such category.

Datta in his narration brings out a multi-sensory reflection of the events from the perspective of both Deep and Ahana. Deep enjoys the visual treats of the Hong Kong expressing his awe of 'glowing building' and 'neon lights' which Ahana counters with the other sensory ideas and responses with 'smells of the wondrous city'. This kind of binary challenges the visuocentric and highlights the inclusive epistemology. The second part of the text unveils very beautifully the world of the blind and an assertion by Ahana stating "stupid eyes, always ruining everything." Michell and Snyder's narrative prosthesis can be applied here as both the characters are dependent on each other, Ahana's blindness helps Deep to come out of his cocoon and helps him to grow as a human and for Ahana it helped her to find an identity away from her acceptance of her blindness. On the other hand Barker warns of romanticising or glamourising of an impairment in the post-colonial fiction as it is evident in the Deep's awe to the 'photoshopped' Hong Kong which was romanticised by Ahana's expression for his own benefit.

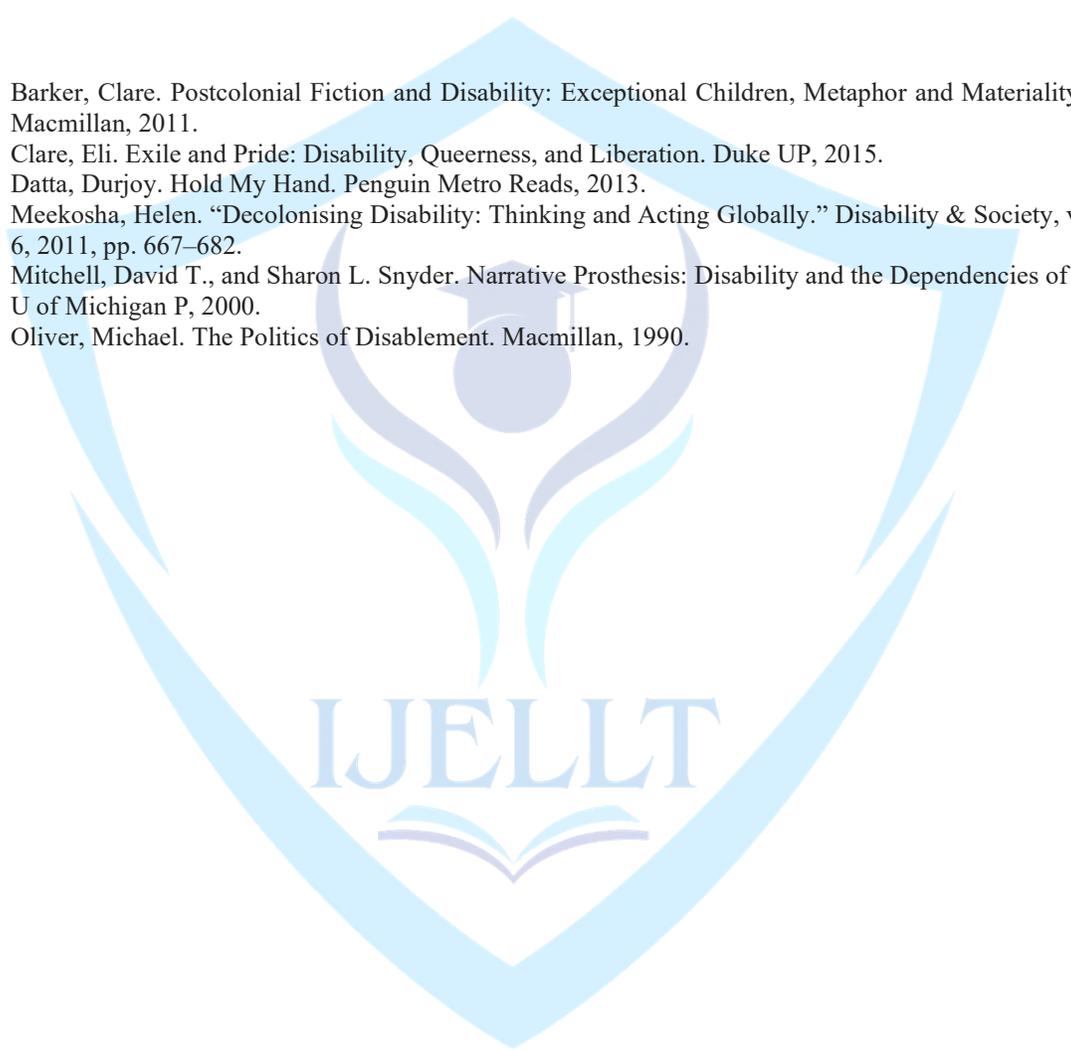
Ahana's father act as the embodiment of the stigma and kind of rationality to the social context of blindness. He treats his daughter's blindness as vulnerability and act as a strict Indian parents, being overprotective and in a way is a reflection of patriarchal attitude. Crenshaw's intersectionality clarifies this, as a woman, Ahana faces objectification and her relationship with Aveek is highlighted by internalised ableism through isolation. This act as societal stereotype, amplifies barriers yet Datta romanticises but escape the critique by creating an interference by Deep as Ahana states "it made me hope he would tell me that he still needs me despite all that he had."

Conclusion

Datta's *Hold My Hand* is a reformist step in Indian popular fiction which centers a disabled protagonist's sensory equity and agency pitting it in a straight line to challenge ocularcenterism. In postcolonial India where culture stands at a point of intersection with disability and globalisation, Datta's work calls for a deeper look at the changes need to be made to 'empower' a disabled body.

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