



**International Journal of English Literature and
Literary Theories**

International Peer Reviewed and Refereed English Journal

INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF ENGLISH LITERATURE AND LITERARY THEORIES (IJELLT)

ISSN: 3107-6505

Vol.:2: Issue: 5: 2026.

(International Peer Reviewed and refereed English Journal)

Editorial Board:

Dr. R. Gobinath

Prof. Sharif Atiquzzaman

Dr. Dr. Aravindan Balakrishnan

Dr. Athisayaraj Jebakumar J

Dr. P. Dinakar

Dr.P.Chitra

Dr. M.K. Praseeda

Prof. D. Deepikadevi

Dr. K.Usha Savithri

Dr. D.Solomon

Dr. S.Subash

Dr. K.M. Keerthika

Dr. B. Lingeswaran

Mr. B. Damodhara Prasath

Ms. P. Sherli

International Journal of English Literature and Literary Theories (IJELLT) is a peer-reviewed, open access academic journal dedicated to promoting research and scholarship in the fields of English language, literature, and literary theories. Published monthly, IJELLT provides a platform for academicians, scholars, educators, and researchers to present their original work to a global audience. The journal upholds the highest standards of editorial integrity and academic excellence through a rigorous double-blind peer-review process. We welcome a wide range of submissions from theoretical and critical analyses to practical research, creative writing, and pedagogical studies related to English literature and language.

Literary Theories

Re-reading Helen Keller: Ableism, Pedagogy, and the Politics of Disabled Voice

Chhaya Priya, Research Scholar, Department of English, Babasaheb Bhimrao Ambedkar Bihar University, Muzaffarpur.

Dr. Madhu Shalini, Professor, Department of English, Babasaheb Bhimrao Ambedkar Bihar University, Muzaffarpur.

Abstract: Helen Keller remains one of the most iconic figures in disability history, yet her representation has been shaped by ableist narratives that privilege individual triumph over structural critique. This paper re-examines Keller's life and writings through the lens of disability studies, focusing on ableism, pedagogy, and political agency. Drawing on the social model of disability and critical disability theory, the paper argues that Keller's legacy has been sanitized to reinforce normative ideals of productivity, independence, and moral perseverance while marginalizing her radical political thought and intellectual contributions. By engaging Keller's autobiographical and political writings—*The Story of My Life*, *The World I Live In*, *Out of the Dark*, and *Midstream*—this paper repositions her as a critical disabled intellectual rather than merely an inspirational symbol.

Keywords: Disability Studies, Ableism, Exclusion, Social Model of Disability, Medical Model of Disability



IJELLT

International Journal of English Literature and
Literary Theories

Introduction

Helen Keller occupies a paradoxical position in global cultural memory. She is celebrated as a symbol of perseverance, yet her intellectual, political, and activist contributions are often ignored or distorted. One of the presumptions is that as she was blind, she could not grasp the complexities of the world because of her twin weaknesses and many of her controversial views were furbished by people close to her. Her intellectual conclusions were under question of course, because of her physical weaknesses and were said to be manipulated. Educational curricula, popular biographies, and motivational narratives reduce her to a child who learned to communicate through heroic intervention, transforming her life into a sentimental tale of overcoming disability. Such portrayals obscure Keller's sustained engagement with education, socialism, feminism, and disability advocacy.

Disability studies scholars argue that such narratives are not neutral but deeply ideological. They reinforce ableism—the privileging of able-bodiedness and able-mindedness as normative ideals—while rendering disability meaningful only when it is transcended. This paper critically re-reads Helen Keller's life and works through the lens of disability studies, arguing that Keller's legacy has been shaped by ableist frameworks that restrict disabled agency, erase political radicalism, and sentimentalize difference. Placing the generally held image of Helen under scanner this paper proposes that the popular image has been sanitized to reinforce normative ideas of productivity and independence. Consequently, her radical political thoughts and intellectual contributions in other spheres of human existence are marginalized. This analysis will be underscored by social model of disability and critical disability theory.

Keller's autobiography *The Story of My Life* charts out the early struggles that Helen underwent as a child when she suffered from an illness and lost her sense of sight and hearing. The initial trauma of a child who could not decipher the implications of the twin losses was difficult to accept. The reaction of her extended family members was mixed. While her uncle considered her 'defective' and unpleasant, her aunt considered her to be the smartest Keller, only if people could learn to communicate with her. Undoubtedly, the supportive role of her parents, initially and her teacher Anne Sullivan, sometime later, played a large role in helping Helen overcome her weaknesses. Whereas in this spiralling of her growth chart the role of her family and teacher cannot be undermined, the passion of the individual involved is equally important, if not more. For because she read voraciously, her political convictions were formed and she emerged as a 'socialist firebrand' and remained one till her death.

The evolution of her persona as an activist, suffragist, is hailed as a remarkable feat but the image of Helen Keller that circulates and survives in public perception or the way she is introduced most often is one of her childhood. In this regard Olivia Adams in her blog post for the Library of Congress Blogs writes, that while most of us “read about Helen Keller’s childhood triumph over the difficulties of her deaf-blindness under the guidance of miracle worker Anne Sullivan, many are unaware of her second act as an activist and orator. Throughout the 1910s, Keller gave speeches all over the United States advocating socialism, suffrage and disability rights and later co-founded the American Civil Liberties Union.” Her views and opinions on society, politics, women and people with disability are often played down. What is upheld is the child image of Helen.

Literature Review

Scholarly engagement with Helen Keller has historically moved through distinct interpretive phases, each shaped by dominant cultural understandings of disability. Early twentieth-century writings and mid-century biographies largely adopted celebratory and hagiographic approaches, emphasizing Keller’s childhood education and the dramatic breakthrough associated with Anne Sullivan. These accounts positioned Keller within a narrative of miraculous overcoming, reinforcing what later scholars would identify as the medical model of disability, wherein impairment is treated as a deficit requiring correction. Such representations foreground individual perseverance and pedagogical heroism while neglecting broader social, political, and economic contexts.

The paper *Helen Keller: A Voice of People with Disabilities* by Samah Abduljabbar presents an overall view of Ms. Keller on education. Claiming that her views in this regard were largely influenced by her teacher Anne Sullivan, the paper focuses on the primary influences and motivations that shaped the views of Helen Keller.

Liz Crow in her article *Helen Keller: Rethinking the Problematic Icon*, published in *Disability and Society*, charts out the image of Helen Keller that is popular and yet claiming that it was created to elevate Keller from a human being to an iconic figure. Crow also calls for a rethinking of this iconic status and placing her story in the disability culture.

In Helen Keller: Voicing the Disabled Dr. Akansha Johar and Dr. Neetu Sharma present the contributions of Helen Keller in the political and social arena as well as in the field of education.

The dissertation of Michael Jay Surbaugh entitled *The Concept of Capability Consciousness: Learning from Helen Keller* poses questions how person with disability become aware of or is conscious of his/her capability? What is the role of education in the positive assessment of her capability? It proposes that capability consciousness is an aim of education of people with disabilities and provisions for individualized educational needs to be made in such a manner so as to challenge those beliefs and attitudes that are disabling to students with disability. There are numerous other works focusing on Keller's triumph over her disabilities, acquisition of language skill, communicative competence and representation of literary skills. Yet despite these growing recognitions, discussions of Keller's political writings often remain disconnected from theoretical analysis of ableism and epistemic injustice.

Research Gap

Despite the extensive popular and biographical attention devoted to Helen Keller, significant scholarly gaps remain in the critical evaluation of her intellectual and political contributions. Much of the existing literature centers on her childhood education and the dramatic figure of Anne Sullivan, often reinforcing inspirational or medicalized interpretations of disability. While such accounts provide historical value, fewer studies engage Keller systematically through contemporary disability studies frameworks, particularly with sustained attention to ableism, epistemic injustice, and disability epistemology. Moreover, Keller's political writings—especially in *Out of the Dark and Midstream: My Later Life*—are frequently treated as secondary to her autobiographical narrative. This separation has produced a fragmented understanding of Keller as a symbol of perseverance rather than as a radical disabled intellectual whose work critiques capitalism, poverty, and the structural production of disability.

International Journal of English Literature and

There remains, therefore, a critical need for integrative scholarship that reads Keller's autobiographical, philosophical, and political writings together within contemporary disability theory. Existing studies tend either to celebrate her biography, isolate her radicalism, or treat her as a cultural symbol detached from theoretical discourse. By synthesizing textual analysis with frameworks of ableism, normativity, feminist disability studies, and epistemic justice, the present study seeks to address this fragmentation and contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of Keller's intellectual legacy.

Aims and Objectives

This paper aims to re-evaluate Helen Keller's life and writings through the lens of disability studies, foregrounding ableism as a central analytical framework. The objectives of this study are threefold: first, to examine how ableist narratives have shaped Keller's public identity and cultural afterlife; second, to analyze Keller's major works as theoretical interventions in debates on disability, perception, and social justice; and third, to situate Keller within broader discussions of the social model of disability, feminist disability theory, and epistemic injustice. By integrating close textual analysis with contemporary theoretical perspectives, this paper seeks to reposition Keller not merely as an inspirational icon but as a historically situated disabled intellectual whose work remains relevant to present-day disability discourse.

Ableism and the cultural Construction of Helen Keller

Ableism functions as a dominant ideology that constructs certain bodies and minds as normal while marking others as deficient. Keller's cultural image has been shaped precisely within this framework: she is celebrated because she is perceived as approximating able-bodied norms of literacy, intellect, and productivity. The narrative of Keller as a miraculous exception exemplifies what disability scholars call the "supercrip" trope. In such narratives, disabled individuals are celebrated for extraordinary achievements that reaffirm normative values rather than challenge systemic barriers. Keller's story is often mobilized to suggest that disability can be overcome through personal effort, thereby diverting attention from structural inequalities. Ableism operates as a structuring force in the cultural construction of Helen Keller, shaping not only how her deafness and blindness is understood but also how her intellectual and political agency is permitted to appear. Keller's public legacy is made intelligible within this framework only because she is represented as approximating able-bodied norms of literacy, rationality, and productivity. Her disability becomes acceptable precisely because it is framed as overcome.

International Journal of English Literature and

Literary Theories

In overcoming her deficiency of sight and hearing, the role of her personal teacher, Anne Sullivan, has been accepted and established. Helen Keller consistently acknowledged Anne Sullivan's importance in her early education, particularly in enabling access to language at a time when deafblind individuals were widely considered uneducable. In *The Story of My Life*, Keller famously recalls the arrival of her teacher with words that have become central to her life narrative: "The most important day I remember in all my life is the one on which my teacher, Anne Mansfield Sullivan, came to me" (Story 11). This moment is frequently interpreted as the beginning of Keller's intellectual awakening.

However, its repeated invocation has also contributed to an ableist pedagogical myth in which Keller appears as a passive recipient of knowledge rather than an active participant in her own learning. While Sullivan's methods were innovative and deeply committed, the disproportionate emphasis placed on her role risks reinforcing, what Tom Shakespeare describes as, a framework in which disabled people are perceived as being "acted upon rather than acting". (Shakespeare 30)

Keller herself resisted such a unilateral interpretation of her education. Throughout *The Story of My Life*, she emphasizes curiosity, struggle, and reciprocal engagement, suggesting that learning emerged not from rescue but from interaction. A disability-studies reading therefore reframes Sullivan not as a savior who overcame Keller's disability, but as a facilitator who helped dismantle educational barriers created by an exclusionary system. Recognizing this distinction is essential to avoiding ableist narratives that credit nondisabled figures for disabled achievement while marginalizing the struggles.

The 'supercrip' trope, wherein disabled individuals are celebrated for transcending bodily difference rather than for challenging the structures that marginalize them are often used to narrate the struggle and triumph of Helen Keller's life. Rosemarie Garland-Thomson cautions that "when disabled people are transformed into inspirational icons, their actual social and political needs disappear" (Garland-Thomson 12). Keller's life story is repeatedly reduced to a sentimental narrative of triumph, obscuring the material realities of access, dependence, and systemic exclusion that shaped her experience.

That Keller herself resisted such ableist framings is very obvious in her autobiography. In *The Story of My Life*, she reflects on the emotional and social consequences of exclusion rather than sensory loss. She writes: "It is not blindness or deafness that brings me my darkest hours, but the acute disappointment in not being able to communicate with those I love" (Story 42). This statement shifts attention away from impairment as tragedy and point towards social barriers, anticipating the social model of disability by locating suffering in isolation rather than the body.

Ableism becomes especially visible in responses to Keller's political engagement. When Keller publicly advocated socialism, labour rights, women's suffrage, and anti-war politics, her views were dismissed as evidence of intellectual dependency. Critics attributed her opinions to manipulation, revealing a deeply ingrained ableist assumption that disabled people lack epistemic autonomy. Keller responded sharply to such attacks in *Out of the Dark*, declaring, "Oh, the stupidity of the wise! When I was blind and deaf, they praised me. Now that I speak, they condemn me" (*Out of the Dark* 34). This remark exposes what disability scholars now describe as conditional acceptance, wherein disabled individuals are celebrated only as long as they remain politically compliant.

This pattern reflects what Lennard J. Davis describes as the cultural power of normalcy, in which "the power to define the norm is the power to control the boundaries of the human" (Davis 29). Keller's credibility was affirmed when she embodied perseverance but withdrawn when she challenged capitalism and social inequality. Her deafness and blindness were weaponized to undermine her authority as a thinker, demonstrating how ableism functions as a mechanism of epistemic exclusion. Keller explicitly rejected such assumptions in *The World I Live In*, asserting, "The difficulties of my life are many, but they are difficulties of circumstance, not of disability" (*World* 8). This declaration directly challenges medical-model interpretations that locate limitation solely within the impaired body.

Keller further destabilizes ableist sensory hierarchies by reimagining perception itself. In a powerful reevaluation of sensory knowledge, she writes, "Sight and hearing are beautiful, but touch is the most intimate of senses" (*World* 61). By privileging tactile knowledge, Keller contests the normative elevation of vision and hearing, offering an alternative epistemology grounded in embodied difference. Her insight aligns with contemporary disability theory that understands disability as a site of knowledge production rather than deficit. Sentimentalization represents another subtle yet pervasive form of ableist control. Keller's public image was carefully curated to evoke pity, wonder, and moral uplift, leaving little space for anger, desire, or political critique. Such sentimental narratives render disability emotionally consumable while neutralizing its disruptive potential. As Garland-Thomson argues, admiration and inspiration are not opposites of oppression but integral to its operation.

Crucially, Keller linked disability to broader social and economic structures. In *Out of the Dark*, she insists, “Blindness is not distributed at random among the population. It is the result of social conditions” (*Out of the Dark* 52). This observation foregrounds the intersections of disability, poverty, labour exploitation, and inadequate healthcare, positioning Keller as an early critic of what is now understood as structural ableism. Revisiting Helen Keller through the lens of ableism thus reveals a sustained tension between her lived reality and her public myth. By celebrating her as an exception, dominant culture avoids confronting the systemic forces that continue to marginalize disabled people. Keller’s own words repeatedly resist this containment, insisting on recognition not as an inspirational symbol, but as an intellectual and political subject whose disability shaped, rather than diminished, her critical vision.

Ableism becomes especially visible in responses to Keller’s political engagement. While in college she was introduced to socialism by her lecturer John Mac, who was also a journalist. Initially she joined the Socialist party and later switched over to the more radical Industrial Workers of The World. Her involvement in the political sphere was diverse but carried out with great resolution. She campaigned for birth control, stood for the civil rights of the black people, supported women’s suffrage, was vocal against the United States’ preparation for war, and was a co-founder of the American Civil Liberties Union. Her sincerity for the poor, women, people with vision loss and the disenfranchised can be seen in her demand that they be given equal opportunities to live life fully. And the reason why she extended her support for these causes was her zeal to promote social equality and justice. Keller was a committed socialist, feminist, and anti-war activist, yet her political opinions were dismissed as evidence of intellectual dependency. Critics claimed that she merely repeated ideas fed to her by others, revealing an assumption that disabled people lack epistemic autonomy. But her literary output strongly reveal a mind that is clear of any doubt and views that powerful and caring.

Beyond *The Story of My Life*, Keller’s broader body of work complicates ableist reductions of her legacy. For example, *The World I Live In* (1908) offers philosophical meditations on perception, embodiment, and consciousness, challenging sensory norms and expanding conceptions of human experience. *Out of the Dark* (1913) extends Keller’s critique into political theory, addressing socialism, labour exploitation, gender inequality, and disability. In *Out of the Dark*, Keller explicitly links disability to social and economic injustice. This insight situates disability within structural frameworks of poverty, industrialization, and neglect, aligning Keller with contemporary disability justice perspectives.

Midstream: My Later Life (1929) further demonstrates Keller's intellectual maturity, chronicling her global travels, political advocacy, and reflections on disability and education. Together, these texts reveal Keller as a prolific intellectual whose contributions extend far beyond childhood pedagogy.

Sary Wander in his review of Wallace's book *After the Miracle: The Political Crusades of Helen Keller* says that Keller's views on war were hailed as controversial because she upheld that wars were fought on economic consideration and not on moral values. She also courted controversy with her views in support of eugenics which strained her relationship with the American Federation for the Blind. As a disabled woman, Keller navigated intersecting systems of oppression. Her body was subjected to surveillance, sentimentalization, and moral regulation. While celebrated for intellectual achievements, her sexuality and emotional life were treated as inappropriate or nonexistent. Feminist disability scholars argue that disabled women are often denied full personhood, particularly in relation to desire and autonomy. Keller's private letters and autobiographical reflections reveal emotional complexity and romantic longing, challenging desexualized and infantilized representations. Her experience demonstrates how gender and disability intersect to shape cultural expectations and limitation.

Helen Keller's cultural afterlife, thus, reveals more about society's relationship with disability than about disability itself. Canonized as an inspirational icon, Keller has been repeatedly positioned as an exception—someone who transcended disability rather than someone who lived, thought, and wrote from within it. This paper has argued that such representations are deeply shaped by ableism, a system that values disabled lives only when they conform to able-bodied norms of productivity, optimism, and political compliance. By returning to Keller's own writings and situating them within disability studies frameworks, it becomes possible to move beyond sentimental mythmaking toward a more critical and ethical understanding of her legacy. Keller's texts consistently resist the medical and inspirational models that seek to contain her. From *The Story of My Life* to *The World, I Live In* and *Out of the Dark*, she reframes disability as a social and political condition rather than an individual tragedy. Her reflections on communication, sensory knowledge, labour, and poverty anticipate the social model of disability and contemporary disability justice approaches. Even the central role of Anne Sullivan, when read critically, underscores not rescue but interdependence, revealing how access and pedagogy—not cure—enable intellectual flourishing. Keller's insistence on agency challenges the ableist tendency to credit nondisabled figures while marginalizing disabled labour and cognition.

At the same time, Keller's life also exposes the contradictions of early twentieth-century progressive politics, including her entanglement with eugenic thought. A critical disability studies reading does not seek to idealize Keller, but to understand her as a historically situated thinker whose works both challenge and reflect dominant ideologies. Such an approach allows for a more honest engagement with disability history—one that acknowledges complexity rather than relying on uncomplicated heroes.

Therefore, retrieving Helen Keller as a disabled intellectual rather than an inspirational symbol has urgent contemporary relevance. In an era where disabled lives continue to be measured against norms of independence, productivity, and usefulness, Keller's writings remind us that disability is not a failure of the body but a test of social imagination. Listening carefully to her voice enables disability studies to move beyond narratives of overcoming and toward a politics of access, dignity, and justice—where disabled lives are valued not for their exceptionalism, but for their full humanity.

Re-reading Helen Keller through disability studies reveals a sustained tension between her lived reality and her cultural myth. Ableist narratives have transformed her into a safe symbol of perseverance while erasing her political radicalism, intellectual labour, and critique of social injustice. Keller's writings challenge sensory hierarchies, expose structural inequalities, and anticipate key insights of contemporary disability theory.

Reclaiming her as a disabled intellectual rather than an inspirational icon is essential for ethically grounded disability discourse. Her life and works remind us that disability is not merely a personal condition but a political category shaped by social, economic, and ideological forces. Listening to Keller's voice, rather than the myths constructed around her, allows disability studies to move beyond inspiration toward justice. Gary Wunder in his review of Max Wallace's book beautifully said: "Helen Keller did her best to live beyond the miracle and to show that she was more than the walking, talking embodiment of innocence, seeking light for the blind and sound for the deaf."

References

1. Campbell, Fiona Kumari. *Contours of Ableism: The Production of Disability and Abledness*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2009.
2. Davis, Lennard J. *Enforcing Normalcy: Disability, Deafness, and the Body*. Verso, 1995.
3. Garland-Thomson, Rosemarie. *Extraordinary Bodies: Figuring Physical Disability in American Culture and Literature*. Columbia UP, 1997.
4. Keller, Helen. *The Story of My Life*. Bantam Classics, 2003.
5. Keller, Helen. *The World I Live In*. Dover, 2003.
6. Keller, Helen. *Out of the Dark: Essays, Letters, and Addresses on Physical and Social Vision*. Humanity Books, 1999.
7. <https://a800200.US.archive.org>
8. Keller, Helen. *Midstream: My Later Life*. Doubleday, 1929.
9. Max Wallace- *After the Miracle: The Political Crusades of Helen Keller*
10. Shakespeare, Tom. *Disability Rights and Wrongs*. Routledge, 2006.
11. Wunder, Gary. *After the Miracle: The Political Crusades of Helen Keller*, by Max Wallace. *Braille Monitor*, vol. 66, no. 5. 2023.



**International Journal of English Literature and
Literary Theories**