





*Exploring How the Divergent becomes The Norm in Selected Works of
21st-Century Disability Fiction*

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استكشاف كيفية تحول المتباين إلى الطبيعي في مختارات من أدب الإعاقة في القرن
الحادي والعشرين.

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Abstract

Twenty-first century literature featuring disability has shown a marked flight from the traditional and conventional representations of disability as sites of pity, compassion or fear. Two novels that ostensibly delineate this shift in disability cultural studies are *The Quarry* (2013) by Iain Banks and *A Room Called Earth* (2020) by Madeleine Ryan. Although almost a decade apart, the two novels portray neurodivergent protagonists whose disability is neither a badge of shame nor a defining characteristic. This provided the perfect opportunity to step into the other side of the normality divide and experience the world from the point-of-view of intellectually divergent characters without any of the negative bias of an external, able-bodied narrator. The analysis revealed how in the subjective realities of these protagonists the traditional concepts of normal and divergent were completely inverted thereby solidifying the idea that disability is not an absolute condition but a relative and socially constructed one and similarly authentic representations can go a long way in displacing the stigmatization and misconceptions surrounding the disabled.

Keywords: disability, neurodivergence, autism, ableism

المستخلص

لقد أظهر الأدب في القرن الحادي والعشرين الذي يتناول موضوع الإعاقة تحولاً ملحوظاً عن التمثيلات التقليدية والإعتيادية للإعاقة كمواقع للشعور بالشفقة، والرحمة، أو الخوف. روايتان تميزان هذا التحول في دراسات الثقافة المتعلقة بالإعاقة هما "المحجر" (٢٠١٣) للكاتب إيان باتكس و"غرفة تُسمى الأرض" (٢٠٢٠) للكاتبة مادلين رايان. على الرغم من الفجوة الزمنية التي تبلغ تقريباً عقداً من الزمان بين الروائيتين، إلا أن كلاهما يصور شخصيات رئيسية من ذوي التباين العصبي، حيث إن إعاقتهما ليست علامة للعار ولا سمة تعريفية. وهذا يوفر الفرصة المثالية للدخول إلى الجانب الآخر من حدود "الطبيعي" وتجربة العالم من وجهة نظر شخصيات فكرية متباينة دون أي تحيز سلبي من راوٍ خارجي قادر على الحركة.

كشفت التحليلات عن كيفية انقلاب المفاهيم التقليدية لـ "الطبيعي" و"المتباين" تماماً في الواقع الذاتي لهؤلاء الشخصيات، مما يعزز الفكرة بأن الإعاقة ليست حالة مطلقة، بل هي حالة نسبية وبنائية اجتماعياً. وبالمثل، يمكن أن تساهم التمثيلات الأصلية بشكل كبير في إزاحة الوصمات والمفاهيم الخاطئة المرتبطة بذوي الإعاقة. الكلمات المفتاحية: إعاقَة. تباين عصبي. توحيد. قدرة (أو تمييز ضد ذوي الإعاقة)

1.0 Introduction

In her article titled “Disability, Losers and Narrative Remediation”, researcher Julie Avril Minich quotes the age-old adage of how history is written by the winners, while the losers write literature (Minich, 2014, p. 35). Literally speaking, the disabled, due to their economic plight and collective disenfranchisement have lost more than other social minority, thereby making a case for their representation in literature most potent. However, the truth is that even literature has been quite unkind to this minority until very recently.

Until not very long ago, representations of the disabled were few and far between and were primarily there to evoke feelings of pity and fear (Fiedler, 1982, p. 60). The “crippled”, for example, was seen as a condition that served the social purpose of admonishment, compassion or horror. It was not until Rosmarie Garland-Thomson’s article “Disability and Representation” (2005) that the literati collectively galvanized to look at how literary representations of the disabled could affect social justice, giving flight to cultural disability studies.

Since its emergence, one of the most significant tenets of disability studies has been the insistence that disability is as much a social construct as gender identity and not an absolute biological fact. People are not just disabled but always disabled in relation to something and it is literature’s job to solidify valid identities of the disabled and shape society’s perception of them through positive representation.

Most critics such as Leslie Fiedler (1982), Michael Bérubé (2005), and Diane Price (2013), to name a few, have spoken about how the disabled have been systematically marginalized and treated as the incapable “other” in contrast to their able-bodied counterparts in society. The only time a disabled character

featured in literature, it mostly haunted the narrative's periphery interjecting negative ideas about disability subconsciously, or when these characters were foregrounded, for example in Faulkner's *Sound and Fury*, the disability itself served as a moral barometer for other important characters. However, 21st-century literature marks a sudden shift, where disabled characters take centre stage not because of their disability but despite it.

Two examples of such literature include *The Quarry* (2013) by Iain Banks and *A Room Called Earth* (2020) by Madeliene Ryan. Written almost a decade apart, the novels share certain positive parallels. Both novels feature intellectually "disabled" protagonists who are somewhere on the autism spectrum, however, the novels themselves never make a direct reference to the protagonists' disability. These two novels not only give readers a chance to place themselves in the shoes of the disabled without all of the negative bias but also a chance to experience a world where the concepts of normalcy and deviance have been inverted.

Disabled characters have been perennially marginalized both socially and in literary representations. Always treated as the disenfranchised other, even when these disabled characters briefly punctuate the course of literary history, they rarely shine as independent and insightful individuals but as specimens of their specific disability. The disability, as in *The Woman in White* by Collins or several works of Dickens usually serves as a means to an end for the able-bodied protagonists¹. This has advertently and inadvertently led to the ostracization and othering of disabled characters for the longest time.

Novels such as Banks' *The Quarry*, and Ryan's *A Room Called Earth* provide an excellent opportunity to flip this narrative of the "disabled other" on its head, invert our understanding of the

normal and the physically (or intellectually) divergent and in doing so solidify how disability is in fact a social construct.

This research therefore posits the following questions: how do the intellectually disabled or neurodivergent protagonists of the two novels flip the phenomenon of the “othering of the disabled”? Do these disabled characters perceive their “otherness” in a world where they are quite clearly the minority or does a subconscious subversion of attitudes and behaviours make the normal appear as the “other” to them? To what extent can literature be used as a means of displacing the myths surrounding disability and revealing its socially constructivist nature?

1.1 Significance of the Study

The research emerged as an offshoot of the works of Rosmarie Garland-Thomson who ventured to ask a series of foundational questions in relation to disability in her work “Disability and Representation”. Thomson's investigations were concerned with the socially constructed nature of disability: how can positive or negative representation of disability alter our social perspective of it? Can literary representations displace our preconceived judgement of what is beautiful and normal? In some ways, this research seeks answers to these questions, but more importantly, it strives to solidify the importance of positive representation of disability in literature in the hopes of altering the systematized stigmatization of the disenfranchised and “othered” disabled.

1.2 Framework of the Study

The research explores two twenty-first-century novels, namely, *The Quarry* (2013) by Iain Banks and *A Room Called Earth* (2023) by Madeliene Ryan. The research opted for these two novels on account of the unique parallel between them of featuring neurodivergent protagonists whose disability rarely becomes the centre of focus in the actual narrative. This allows for a unique opportunity where readers get to experience the world from intellectually disabled characters' point-of-view without any external bias or able-bodied prejudice interjecting it.

Section 2.0 explores the prevalent body of literature on disability and its representation in literature followed by section 3.0 that finally analyzes how concepts of ability and disability are subjective, modular and shifting.

2.0 Disability and Its Representation in Literature- A Review

In their study titled "An Introduction to Race, Gender, and Disability: Intersectionality, Disability Studies, and Families of Color", researchers Liat Ben-Moshe, and Sandy Magaña define disability critical studies as the field that studies the "constructed" nature of disability as its entry point. This idea of disability, much like gender, being a social construct instead of a biological truism is one that resounds in the works of several other disability researchers (Ben-Moshe et al, 2013, p. 106). This also means that disability studies concern themselves less with biological deviances, behavioural differences, cognitive aberrations, and physical divergence and more with the meanings that society has come to attach to these. Disability studies strive to deconstruct these socially attributed meanings which often have a negative tint by pointing out the perception of disability as a personal tragedy, pathology, or deficiency (Ben-Moshe et al, 2013, p. 106).

In her seminal research work “Disability and Representation”, Rosmarie Garland-Thomson, cites some of the most popular works of literature that feature disability in some form or another. Anne Bradstreet for example imagined her own book as a deformed child. Then there is the disabled and revengeful cuckold in *The Scarlet Letter*, the disabled American as a contrast to the ideal American smears the writings of Ralph-Waldo Emerson, deafness features as a means of humour with Mark Twain, and other illnesses continue to feature as metaphors of horror and demise in the works of writers like Edgar Allen Poe and Walt Whitman (Garland-Thomson 523). In most of the examples cited earlier, disability dawdles at the periphery of the main narrative, acting more as a backdrop to the main action than constituting the action itself. There are few examples of novels where the protagonist himself or herself is disabled and fewer still where the disabled protagonist chooses to narrate the events of their life in person without foregrounding their disability.

Of primary concern to the study is the question of what the world looks like from a disabled person’s perspective. If the disabled is the “other” to the norm, then the norm should be the “other” to the disabled. The aim of this research is to unravel the ways in which the disabled other makes sense of the world around them in literature. Are their perceptions of the “normal” people as othering and alienating as vice versa?

Researcher Martha Stoddard Holmes in her article “Disability and the Parameters of Humanity” quotes an excerpt from the famous sensation novel *The Woman in White* to reflect on the almost degenerate and pitiable ways in which Walter narrates his first encounter with the mentally afflicted Anne. Holmes particularly brushes upon one of the preliminary scenes in the novel where Anne tentatively places her hand over Hartright’s

shoulder. As a mental asylum escapee, Anne cannot help but betray her “mental disability” but Holmes is quick to point out how quickly this “mentally disabled” character slips out of the narrative. According to Holmes, the problem with contextualizing Anne is neither unique nor exclusive to her character but similar dilemmas fester throughout the works of most nineteenth and twentieth-century writers including Dickens, Collins and Elizabeth Gaskell to name a few. (Holmes, 2014, p. 9) Physically and intellectually disabled characters, according to Holmes, have always been “under-historicized” and “under-analyzed” (Holmes, 2014, p. 9) relegating the question of how they are othered linguistically, culturally, socially, scientifically, in academia and literature to the back burner. Marginalization and segregation of the disabled characters must have been even more severe in the nineteenth century that had the tendency to see this minority as metaphors for lack and loss, tragically inferior or terrifyingly alien (Holmes, 2014, p. 9).

According to Holmes, representations of intellectual disability in literature are tainted by an inherent prejudice in language. A certain form of linguistic othering marginalizes these characters to various degrees of “incurable versus educable idiocy, imbecility, and mental deficiency” (Holmes, 2014, p. 11). Interestingly, the autistic protagonists of the two twenty-first-century novels have to a certain extent flipped this narrative. It would be fascinating to explore whether these mentally deviant characters, upon receiving the floor, engage in the same verbal marginalization of the “normal other” as the normal have subjected them to for the longest time in history.

Until the nineteenth century, literature was quite visibly and abashedly unkind to characters with any form of intellectual disability and referred to them in ways that were variously “painful

to hear” (Holmes, 2014, p. 11) including terms such as mentally defective, imbecile, idiot, simpleton, mindless, and natural. Holmes does however takes great pain to delineate how the nineteenth century literature took care of distinguishing between the idiot and the lunatic. She quotes David Wright who suggested that, at least, until the nineteenth century “insanity” included both the mad and the intellectually disabled, however, there is a demarcation between the idiots and lunatics.

According to Wright, the idiots of the nineteenth century were those who were either born intellectually deviant or developed this defect at an early age. Idiocy carried with it connotations of permanence and incurability. By contrast, the lunatics were those that were originally sane but suffered a mental impairment at a later point in their lives. Lunacy was not congenital and sometimes thought of as curable. This would bring our two protagonists in the category of the “insane”. However, as the narrators and arbiters of the worlds that unfold in *A Room Called Earth* and *The Quarry*, these characters sound anything but insane. This calls to mind Diane Price’s insistence on the need for “visibility” without which the “intellectually disabled” characters would continue to be othered as defective and incompetent by the abled narrators and critiques of literature.

These socially devised categories for Holmes act as sound proof of how the categories of disability are a social construct. And she, along with other critics of disability studies, calls forth for a real shift in our attitudes towards disability which includes the confession that the disabled are not innately marginal but “purposefully marginalized” (Holmes, 2014, p. 12). These socially constructed categories lend the speakers a particular way of discussing the disabled which in turn sets the tone for how they are perceived in a given culture at large.

Finally, what makes it so crucial to enquire how these social construct have come to form themselves and in what ways can these evolve is the fact that disability is not at the periphery but central to the question of human existence. The category of disability, Holmes suggests, reveals the degrees to which intellectual performance acts as the entry point to a “liminal place between the human and the animal” (Holmes, 2014, p. 12). In other words, disability is the other half of the binary that determines what constitutes the “abled”. This makes it imperative to define what this research and the critical disability studies in general mean by the term “disability”.

To define disability, this research borrows from the work of Liat Ben-Moshe and Sandy Magaña according to whom:

Disability, if understood as constructed through historical and cultural processes, should be seen not as a binary but as a continuum. One is always dis/abled in relation to the context in which one is put. A person has a learning disability if put in a scholarly setting; using a wheelchair becomes a disability and a disadvantage when the environment is inaccessible; someone who wears glasses may be disabled without them when attempting to read the written language or see far away, but this can change depending on the context that they are seeing and being seen within (Ben Moshe et. al, 2014, p. 105).

This definition slightly contrasts with Elisabeth Griffiths’s more medicalized definition of disability according to whom the latter is a condition that posits some kind of physical and mental impairment hindering a person’s ability to perform their daily tasks (Griffiths, 2020, p. 128). As Ben Moshe put it, critical disability studies tend to lay emphasis on the “fluid” nature of disability. But fluidity here does not imply that it is not biological.

In contrast, it assesses the biological limitations in relation to the degree of hindrance it creates in one's day-to-day activity. When one keeps in mind Nibras Ahmed Abdullah's sentiments in his article "Sexism and Racism in "The Bluest Eyes " that biological differences have been prehistorically the root cause of segregation and disenfranchisement then this obsession with abled bodies looks to be all the more sinister (Abdullah, 2023, p. 563).

However, the greatest dilemma, when it comes to disability is faced by those that do not look visibly disabled. The two protagonists featuring in this research both border on this liminal divide. Their "disability" is more of an intellectual nature and even then is not necessarily stifling. According to academician Elisabeth Griffiths, in a world where disability is becoming more of a fluid phenomenon, people whose disability are invisible risk being misjudged and underappreciated for their efforts more than those whose disabilities are more visually apparent. The only way to ease the pressure and minimize the stigma on individuals with non-visibility is disclosure, with all of the complexities of identifying as 'disabled' (Griffiths, 2020, p. 129).

If disability is a fluid phenomenon then surely its binary other, that is ability, must also be an equally fluid concept. Quoting Goodley, Griffiths comments on a similar concern. If, like disability, ability is contextual, temporal and not clearly demarcated, then the neoliberal citizen is fully able only when he is "willing" to overcome all barriers to capability and ability. According to Griffiths, the marked identity of a neoliberal citizen as willing to surmount all obstacles in the wake of his ability is a double-edged sword. It confers all responsibility on the individual and creates room for criticism when the individual is unable to surmount these obstacles. (Griffiths, 2020, p. 125-126)

An important aspect of critical disability studies is to identify a collective experience of “othering” for the sake of its normalization along with celebration of differences. This collective celebration of otherness, according to Price, runs the risk of being seen as entrenched in the earlier ideology of individualism. It would be a shame to reduce the crux of disability studies simply to an ideology of celebrating individualism. Disability studies are not just about embracing the differences but more importantly about rejecting the banality of the dominant norms that try to efface the distinctions of race, gender and subjective experience and create “extra-ordinary” bodies that serve as “non-conformity incarnate” (Price, 2013, p. 199), resist assimilation, and offer experiences that are both collective while at same time rejecting a norm.

For Price, a long-time contention between critics of disability studies and those of feminism and other literary studies is whether or not to see disability as a pathology or an identity. The works of Garland-Thomson, especially the publication of “Extraordinary Bodies” really galvanized critics and social and literary commentators to see disability as more of an identity rather than a deficit or an insufferable pathology. This was especially important for authors who were disabled themselves or worked with disability. Unfortunately, there is not enough of a sample size with foregrounded disability in literature to substantially evaluate the ways in which disability serves as an identity marker and a metaphor, which is why Price quotes political commentators such as Simi Linton to talk about the importance of “visibility”. According to Linton,

Disabled people...are a group only recently entering everyday civic life. A host of factors have typically screened us from public view. We have been hidden—whether in the

institutions that have confined us, the attics and basements that sheltered our family's shame, the "special" schools and classrooms designed to solve the problems we are thought to represent, or riding in segregated transportation, those "invalid" coaches, that shuttle disabled people from one of these venues to another. The public has gotten so used to these screens that as we are now emerging, upping the ante on the demands for a truly inclusive society, we disrupt the social order. (quoted in Price, 2013, p. 199)

When literature foregrounds disability as something other than a matter of "shame" or something to be hidden, it confounds social expectations of the disabled as downright self-loathing, overtly docile or "insentient fictional" characters that the public has become used to. There is a growing need for the public to stop envisaging every disabled person with a "brown lap robe" over their "withered legs" or dark glasses over (their) pale eyes" (quoted in Price, 2013, p. 199-120). The "mentally disabled" protagonists of the two novels subjected to research here are anything but self-loathing and self-victimizing. They are resourceful, unapologetic and straightforward thereby rewriting and challenging the status quo surrounding disability.

Another important tenet found in disability studies is "pride". Pride has been a dominant theme both in the works of Linton as well as other writers on disability such as Eli Clare's memoir *Exile and Pride*. The latter is based on the intersection of class, queerness and disability. Claire's memoir delves into the importance of sustaining pride in one's disability which eventually leads to recognising how even one's home sometimes cannot be a safe space for people with disability and thus it is important for disabled people to create their own safe spaces. Interestingly, this practice is starting to run parallel with other ubiquitous themes in

novels on disability (Price, 2013, p. 192). The analysis section below will showcase how our two protagonists not only engage in a reversal of the “othering” but also enjoy a visceral pleasure in creating their own safe spaces from a need to express themselves unquestioningly.

According to Price, pride is absolutely essential for the subsistence of disabled people and therefore should be foregrounded in works of literature. Without pride characters and their real-life counterparts simply accept discriminatory practices and the “daily material conditions of ableism” (Price, 2013, p. 192). Pride opens the gateway to individual and collective oppression. Disabled people and their fictional representations in the novels have often had to deal with unemployment, (both protagonists of the selected novels for this research are also unemployed), getting locked up in nursing homes against their will, violence perpetrated by caregivers (something that the protagonist Kit of *The Quarry* faces on a regular basis), poverty and segregation. According to Istabraq Muhammad Abdullah, in his article “Spatial Disparity for People with Special Needs”, disability has far-reaching consequences for not just the disabled person but also his family, acquaintances and society as a whole making the question of improving their plight extremely imperative (Abdullah, 2021, p. 1)

Challenging these norms and, more importantly, shifting our perception of disability from being seen as “deficit bodies” to “extraordinary bodies” is an arduous task and one that cannot occur without extensive visibility and reimagining disability in a more positive and constructivist light. In his seminal work, “Disability and Narrative”, Michael Bérubé speaks of how the movie *X-Men* creates a visual and innate link between exceptionality and disability. Xavier, the gifted telepath is also a

paraplegic. Xavier's school for "gifted" children acts a sanctuary for outcasts who had been shunned by society for physical and mental incongruencies (Bérubé, 2005, p. 569) who eventually learn to take pride in their divergence.

Bérubé, like Price, is of the view that positive or neutral visibility of disabled characters in literature is of extreme importance. According to Bérubé, much of the literature featuring disability mobilizes feelings of pity and horror in a moral drama, when these feelings have nothing to do with actual material experiences of real-life disabled people (Bérubé, 2005, p. 529). In her work "Pity and Fear: Images of the Disabled In Literature and the Popular Arts", Leslie A. Fiedler speaks of how literature is a medium that allows our more repressed and subconscious attitudes to come to the surface, just as they do in a dream but only in more lucid and forceful terms. This is why the images of horror, pity and self-loathing that occur in works of literature, should be a matter of grave concern since these are only an extension of our subconscious attitudes towards disability (Fiedler, 1982, p. 60)

Bérubé quotes disability critics such as David Mitchell and Sharon Snyder who argue that the lack of visibility of disabled characters in literature and therefore its unknowability is absolutely why there is a need to write stories with disability in the foreground and its material truths revealed in abject veracity. Each type of disability demands a story and therefore an underlying concern for disability narrative becomes the question of whether the disability is a character trait or the foundation of the character itself. Other questions that disability critics concern themselves with is whether the disability is perceptible or imperceptible, whether it is temporal or permanent, what are its origins and what could be its implications (Bérubé, 2005, p. 529).

Queries such as these ultimately lead to a shifting of what Anne Waldschmidt in her article “Disability Goes Cultural” calls “symbolic orders and institutional practices of producing normality and deviance” (Waldschmidt, 2017, p. 16). Only when these symbolic institutions responsible for constructing subjectivities, stigmatization and inclusionary and exclusionary norms are challenged can we disrupt the images of horror and pity that have disenfranchised disability representation from authentic experiences for so long.

3.0 Analyzing How Divergence Becomes the Norm in *The Quarry*

Penned by Iain Banks, the novel *The Quarry* posits not one but two types of disabilities in the foreground. The novel’s protagonist, Kit, from whose perspective we learn about the events that unfold surrounding a mystery about a certain tape, is somewhere on the autism spectrum. The second disability stems from the later stages of cancer that have left Kit’s father, Guy, completely decrepit. Banks himself died of cancer and this novel was published posthumously giving a personal weight to the conditions of Guy that, while definitely veering on pity and horror, are dealt with in new and thought-provoking light.

However, this research will first concern itself with the autistic protagonist of the novel Kit who certainly acts as a site of the cultural resilience to ideas of self-loathing and shame that Waldschmidt spoke of in her article “Disability Goes Cultural”. Kit’s characterisation surely leaves the ableist apologists in a bit of a conundrum. Upon Guy’s eventual demise Kit will have to apply for a disability welfare program but throughout the novel’s narration he has presented himself as more than capable of not just taking care of himself but others around him.

In the depiction of Kit's character, we see the abject reversal of the phenomenon of "othering" to which most disabled characters are subjected from the lens of the "normal" characters. Instead of putting the autistic character on the spectrum, the story is told from the perspective of Kit for whom the "normal" themselves seem to exist on some sort of "spectrum". It is Kit's world and we as readers are transported into it. The roles have been switched so that the deficient becomes the gifted and normalcy becomes a deviance. This allows for some unique contrasts, comparisons and perspectives that, from the lens of a conventionally normal character would be impossible.

Instead of a self-loathing disabled lathered in regret over their own deficiencies, Kit begins delineating at the outset of the novel that he could vacillate from anywhere between "highly gifted" at one end to 'nutter' at the other". This description of Kit of himself is important for two reasons. The first is that it confirms what had been the suspicions of critics such as Garland-Thomson that disability is a social construct and most people are not disabled in any universal or absolute terms but disabled in relation to something, which in Kit's case is social interactions.

The second reason why this description from Kit is important is that it calls to mind Michael Bérubé's concerns in his article "Disability and Narrative" about intellectually disabled people's struggles with self-awareness. According to Bérubé, there was a stark distinction between madness and mindlessness or damaged-mindedness in the nineteenth and twentieth century. While madness retains the potential to generate its own narrative and to evolve into various trajectories, mindlessness cannot give an account of itself. The mindless only haunts the narration and perhaps even the narrator with the possibility of a loss of meaning entirely from the world. Bérubé calls mindedness an obvious

condition for self-representation and where there is mindlessness, it is not so much a call for tragedy or pity but a possibility of narrative representation (Bérubé, 2005, p. 568-569). When Kit admits that he reserves the potential to be labelled both highly gifted as well as a nutter, he shows an acute sense of self-awareness which negates any hint of damaged-mindedness. Had this story been narrated by some other character who was not on any sort of intellectual disability spectrum, he would surely have dismissed Kit's opinions and perspectives as the whims of the damaged-minded. But since it is the narrator himself who is on the so-called "spectrum" he justifies his world view in a way that challenges the prevalent norms surrounding neurodivergence and present Kit in a more reasonable and justifiable light.

It was stated earlier that Kit's story flips the narrative about disability as a cultural model. Now that we are in Kit's world, the norm is the "other" while the "other" has become the norm. No longer do we see the normal and the able going ostensibly out of their way to "accommodate" the disabled. In fact, it is the autistic Kit who has to accommodate others and throughout the novel we see Kit engaging in this charitable act where ironically, the abled characters appear out of tune and place with what is supposed to be normal.

As readers, we first come across instances of "othering the normal" when Hol tells Kit that since he is socially awkward he must take responsibility for giving people the wrong impression instead of the right one. Kit immediately retorts with the fact that he is well aware of his responsibility of making allowances for people. In his own world, Kit is not the disabled other for whom the people must make allowances; instead, he is gifted with an incredible IQ that allows him to simplify scenarios and conduct conversations that might be considered difficult by the "normal"

people. At one point, Hol, Kit's long-time close friend who also assumes the role of his aunt tries to use her own euphemisms to tell Kit that while he may be clever in some ways, he is lacking in other forms of cleverness.

Hol sighed. 'Emotional cleverness, Kit. Empathising with others, getting on with people, intuiting what and how they think.'

'But if people would just say what they—'

I got the look again. Now it was my turn to sigh.

'That's another area where I have to make allowances, isn't it?'

'Yes, it is. Plus, people don't always know what they think themselves, Kit,'. 'Not precisely, not so they can tell you clearly and unambiguously and without contradictions.' She paused, probably waiting for me to protest that, well, people just should know what they think, and express it properly (it was certainly what I was thinking). But I didn't say it....

'So,' I said, 'what you're saying is, it's complicated.' (This is almost a joke between us. A lot of apparently simple things seem to end up being 'complicated'.) (Banks, 2013, p. 9)

From Kit's perspective, normal people morph into imperfect disorientations bordering on incapability. Kit's lack of emotional cleverness is not a deficit but a reason for his esteemed giftedness. It allows him to scrutinize people and situations with a degree of objectivity, neutrality and efficiency that is not possible for most people. This dynamic ultimately makes the normal appear handicapped.

There are times though when Kit's extreme sense of objectivity and logicity creates unorthodox effects. However, most of the time the effect is more comical than pitiful or tragic.

For example, when Hol tries to comfort Kit in the wake of Guy's cancer, Kit makes the following observation:

I put my arms round her and hug her in return. I think about patting her on the back, but she is the one trying to comfort me, so I don't. (Banks, 2013, p. 11)

Or for example when Paul, another friend of Guy, parks his vehicle outside and Hol gets up to bring the luggage from the car inside the house. Kit replies with "I'll help," I (Kit) say, *remembering to be helpful.*" (Banks, 2013, p. 17)

Throughout the story, Kit has to calculate the minutiae of social interaction down to interjecting the conversation with a smile, a hedge, a question, or a nod of agreement. The feat is relentless in the absence of an acute sense of emotional quotient and now that the reader begins assessing life through the shoes of an autistic person, his fatigue becomes that of the readers making it easier for us to not just empathize with his condition but also become aware of how the social interactions between abled and disabled are interdependent, and how the disabled have to accommodate the abled as much as is the case vice versa.

The idea that Kit is not emotionally intelligent may not be completely accurate since he does show signs of emotional awareness but it is obvious that he is far more reliant on ostensible physical cues than most people. For example, he understands that Guy's frequent outbursts and torturous rants result more from his distress and physical pain than actual cruelty when he sees him crying. Or that he must not accompany Guy from the toilet back as a way of "face-saving deception" to secure his pride before the guests.

Kit suffers exponentially at the hands of Guy his father who ungratefully and frequently refers to him with morose expletives emanating from his own frustrating and debilitating health

conditions. Guy, who was once a handsome and thriving adventurer, has been reduced to a pitiful thing. In a way Guy can be seen as a foil to Kit. While Kit wears his disability with pride, Guy has none. He is insufferably vocal about his debilitating plight and always suspicious of others's motives even when they are seemingly innocuous. He frequently refers to his circle of friends as driven by guilt, shame or loathsome pity and not genuine love or concern for his well-being when they take the pains to visit him.

Ironically, Kit, whose disability is ostensibly imperceptible, subjects Guy to the same form of "othering" that would have been the case had the story been told by a "normal" non-divergent narrator. As a character, there is barely any redeeming quality with Guy whose pathetic dependency and self-loathing triggers the very imagery of horror, pity and fear that critics of disability have warned its readers of. However, the difference lies in the self-awareness of Guy when he comes across thus. Guy easily admits that his condition makes people "piss-scared" (Banks, 2013, p. 135):

Nobody wants this to happen to them, and so they think, Well, it just won't happen to me. If they're God-botherers they think it's because their made-up God loves them and they won't get it because they don't deserve it....If they got a whiff of anything ending in "oma" they'd escape its clutches ... through the sheer power of positive thinking. So they tell you to think positively, as though that's going to help with a metastasising cancer ... (Banks, 2013, p. 135)

Extremely abasing and self-recriminating passages such as the one above are rampant throughout the novel and can definitely make for an arduous read if not punctuated with Kit's often comically objective observations. However, what is particularly redeeming about Guy's self-loathing rant is that it comes from a place of self-

awareness and self-representation rather than a condition imposed upon him by an outside character. It is not a moral drama where a virtue-signalling, ostentatiously upright character points his finger at a decrepit body making a case for why the latter is symbolic of God's menace, and relates with some from a higher meaning. In fact, Guy's self-rebuke positions itself as a mockery of such a depiction of disability. Sometimes, there are no lessons to learn from a disabled person's condition and the images of horror and pity are just that... a fact of life one must come to terms with.

This self-awareness from Guy about his condition and the way society perceives him at his worst is another way in which Iain Banks flips the "othering" of the disabled. Guy's rant makes it very clear to the readers that he is no freak show for the world to see. He is no spectacle to be mused at for the world's entertainment and there are no lessons to be had at his expense. In fact, he is the one who has learnt a lesson.

Guy's last invective towards the end of the novel becomes the pinnacle moment where Banks flips the narrative of the disabled other. A younger-looking Guy, who has recently discovered his malady and learnt about his impending death, records a monologue on the forbidden lost tape. In his final "perfect invective" (Banks, 2013, p. 234) Guy describes how his death is much appreciated since it will rid him of "this island's pathetic, grovelling population of celebrity-obsessed, superficiality fixated wankers", "institutionalized servility" of the royals, "bunch of useless, vapid, anti-intellectual pillocks", and "the hounding of the poor and disabled and the cossetting of the rich and privileged," (Banks, 2013, p. 230).

Guy's penultimate tirade turns the spectators into the spectacle and the spectacle into spectators who have, albeit not via their own accord, opted out of the onerous show that is life. Guy

blatantly reminds the happily abled that in spite of what they may think, in a parallel universe, they are equally “pathetic” and “useless” with their abject insistence on grovelling to superficial celebrity culture, wealth worship and institutionalized servility. It is a powerful moment in the novel and for students of disability literature a reminder of the importance of visibility and allowing disabled characters to become their own mouthpiece.

3.1 Neurodivergence in *A Room Called Earth*

Penned in 2023 by Madeleine Ryan, *A Room Called Earth* is a social commentary with the twist once again being the intellectual disposition of our protagonist. Just as with *The Quarry*, the character’s intellectual divergence has autobiographical elements since the author Madeleine Ryan herself was neurodivergent.

It must be noted that unlike the novel *The Quarry*, where the protagonist accepts the societal condition of disability imposed upon him, the novel *A Room Called Earth* posits a more direct challenge to the social construct of disability since she never refers to herself as disabled or divergent. The reader can only pick it up in bits and pieces that she is perhaps somewhere on the spectrum.

Reviewer Allison Wall makes an apt observation when she compares Ryan’s work with another novel debuting an autistic protagonist whose autism is made known in the very first chapter by the non-neurodivergent writer. One can clearly see the contrast when writers who are “able” according to societal standards write of disability compared with the works of actual “differently-abled” writers.

Perhaps due to the writer’s own neurodivergent status, the character’s neurodiversity is treated as the norm and the social

“norm” surrounding her is treated as the spectacle instead. Wall accurately observes how unlike our expectation of novels featuring disability, the unnamed protagonist’s autism is not the point of the novel, it is not the cause of the novel’s main conflict, it is neither an obstacle nor contributes to a story of inspiration. It is solely there to give the power of representation back to where it belongs for the disabled: Nothing about us without us! (Wall, 2023).

Just like Banks’s *The Quarry*, this novel, written from the perspective of an autistic person, gives a chance to the author to flip the narrative of “othering the disabled” on its head.

The novel that takes place over the course of a single night is a rich and deeply philosophical mesh of thoughts of our neurodivergent protagonist as she prepares to attend a party. These thoughts range from the chakras and crystals of her garden to the social dilemma of modern women as well as the colonization of the aboriginals and its possible ramifications. Wall notes how wittily Ryan juxtaposes her protagonist’s rich and insightful retrospect with the curt, vapid and almost meaningless social interactions she has at the party she is attending. I would like to further suggest that it is in the depiction of these very curt and futile social interactions that we see the phenomenon of “othering the norm”.

As readers we are transported to the world of the neurodivergent and as such the normal and the divergent have switched roles. The spectacle is not our autistic protagonist but the normal people around her and Ryan does an apt job of accentuating the individual idiosyncracies of normal people to the point where they begin to feel like mutations of their own.

Thus the first woman who cuts our protagonist’s stream of consciousness short with her uninvited exuberance and eventual

rejection becomes a spectacle of sorts; a case in point. Either wittingly or unwittingly Ryan engages in what can be deemed as a rather severe case of “othering” where this woman is described objectively as “cute and blond and manipulative” (Ryan, 2020, p. 47). Later something about this woman drives our protagonist to assume that “she must be very hot, temperature wise” (Ryan, 2020, p. 48). The spectacle of the woman continues to develop:

She wants to seem sure of herself, and she’s not. While the outfit and the lack of makeup appear to be making a statement of simplicity and ease, she’s getting no pleasure out of it. Her body language is so constricted and tense. Her elbows are locked against her torso, and her jaw is tight, and her eyes are squinty, and every movement she makes is speedy, and small, and calculated. Although she desperately wants to be seen, she doesn’t want to take up space. She doesn’t know who she is. She can barely concentrate on the people in front of her, because she’s so overcome with a desire to take who they are from them. (Ryan, 2020, p. 48).

The acutely honest objectivity and comfortable insight of our protagonist has allowed her to posit a barrage of commentary at the expense of a seemingly “normal” woman to the point where everything about her from body language to intentions seems questionable. This, once again is a powerful example of how “normality” is subjective or in other words a social construct. Passages like these subconsciously challenge the status quo on what is supposed to be the norm and what is socially divergent, defective and disabled.

Her other meetings are equally full of caricature. She runs into her ex who, through our protagonist’s eyes at least, appears painfully needy and unsure of the decisions he has made in life. She encounters her friend from a few years ago whose relentless

chatter is so comically exaggerated that she almost appears to be a case study in neurodivergence herself. She continues to witness and unmask, in her head, other characters in the party: a beautiful woman hyper-aware of her charms and the attention she is drawing to herself as well as her interlocutor who is equally aware of this attention; a group of people tanned to perfection and who are wearing variations on the same theme; a group of people clad in what she describes as the “bondage” vibe (Ryan, 2020, p. 77). sweaty guys in “oversized band T-shirts” (Ryan, 2020, p. 77). a “cute, and innocuous, and self-effacing, and hospitable” (Ryan, 2020, p. 80) man who, our protagonist is sure, secretly believes is the most charming, witty and attractive character wherever he goes.

The unnamed protagonist’s social commentary this way continues to provide powerful moments in which concepts of normal and standard are completely flipped upside down making the neurodivergent protagonist appear as the standard vantage point for social commentary on others instead of being the spectacle herself.

Conclusion

This research set out to explore the manner in which the disabled flip the phenomenon of othering by taking up the narrative reins of their lives and becoming their own spokesmen and spokeswomen. Thus we see how the extremely objective and literal assessment of the male protagonist, Kit, in *The Quarry* and the unnamed female protagonist in *A Room Called Earth* present the habits and actions of their socially normal counterparts as almost questionable. In many instances, the reader almost feels convinced of the anomalies of what we as a society have come to accept as the norm now that they are narrativized from the

perspective of whom we traditionally cast as the “disabled other”. For example, Hol’s insistence that Kit must learn to pick up on subtle hints in human interaction instead of always relying on clear communication inevitably casts Hol and other normal individuals, instead of Kit, as the vocally disabled. Similar instances such as these have served as not just a way of flipping the narrative around disability but also questioning what we socially and collectively have come to agree as the norm.

It also suggests, while simultaneously answering the second problem posited in the research, that disabled characters do not necessarily see themselves as “the other” so much as they are reminded of it and made to believe the same. Both Kit from *The Quarry* and the unnamed female protagonist from *A Room Called Earth* have several encounters where they hear themselves being called different, weird or even mentally challenged. However, the analysis shows that the characters are more concerned with how the others are different from them than with how they are different from the others.

Finally, while both of the protagonists’ social commentaries might sound harsh and crude, even obnoxious to some, they make an interesting case of reversing the roles as well as challenging the socially constructed ideas of the standard and the normal. Once the power of representation is taken away from those who are accepted as the standard normal, the readers see how easily this facade of the “standard normal” crumbles; how normality is also a social construct and may change depending on who gets to have the power of representation and visibility. It can be seen that both Banks and Ryan destabilize this myth by changing and foregrounding the storied quality of the lived experiences of neurodivergent characters in a world where the disabled are no longer the spectacle but, for once, the spectators.

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