



Disability Representations in High School English Curriculum

*This essay explores the common misconceptions of disability, why disability representation is important, and provides an example of disability studies application through the novel *The Kite Runner* by Khaled Hosseini (2003).*

Introduction

Educating for Personal Excellence. This phrase is plastered throughout my hometown to remind people what my school district is trying to do for all students. It is the first result online if you search my school district; you can find it in big letters on the fancy, electronic sign outside the middle school. I was reminded of this phrase throughout some of my classes in high school. My school district has spent a lot of time and money investing in the seven schools that students in the district attend. During my time in high school, I was able to take dance, self-defense, forensics, and child psychology, all which I know are courses not regularly offered in high schools. While I do think that my high school education provided me with knowledge valuable to someone who continued their education in college, I cannot help but notice where my education failed me. Out of twenty-one pieces of literature I recall reading in high school English classes, over two-thirds were written by white, able-bodied males. Upon reflection, I realize that this English curriculum appears to only value the voices of white, able-bodied males. This

list lacks diversity and stories about and by people with other identities. Further reflection made me realize my entire pre-college educational career lacked the inclusion of disability as a social identity, disability history, and disability studies. From the knowledge I've gained throughout college, I can see how problematic it is for students to not learn about disability. As a Women & Gender Studies major and a Disability Studies minor, I believe this lack of disability inclusion is problematic and needs to change. In response, this paper presents my research on the common misconceptions of disability and why disability representation is important. I provide an example of disability studies application through the novel *The Kite Runner* by Khaled Hosseini (2003).

High School Context

I spent most of my life living in Rockland County, which is about 45 minutes north of New York City. The high school I went to had 1,496 students enrolled my senior year, with 47 percent of that number recorded as being male, and the other 53 percent recorded as being female. This school has a very high white population, with 71% identifying as such this same year. Thirteen percent of students identified as Hispanic or Latino, 8 percent identified as Asian or

Native Hawaiian/ Other Pacific Islander, 5 percent identified as Black or African American, and the rest identified as American Indian, Alaska Native, or Multiracial. One hundred and eighty-nine students were identified as students with disabilities, while only eighteen were identified as English Language Learners. (NYSED Student Information Repository System, 2015).

Defining Disability

What is disability? The Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 (as amended, 2009) defines disability as “(A) a physical or mental impairment that substantially limits one or more major life activities of such individual; (B) a record of such an impairment; or (C) being regarded as having such an impairment” (sec. 12102). This definition of disability differs greatly from the American perception of disability. When you and I may think of someone who is physically disabled, we may imagine someone who needs a wheelchair to move around, but not a grandparent with a cane. We may imagine someone who has a vision impairment as using a walking cane, but not someone with glasses. These are a few simple examples of disability and not representative of the broad spectrum disability lies across, however, it provides a reference as to how often we

see types of disability. Throughout their lifetime, most people will personally experience disability, either temporarily or permanently. The World Health Organization (2021) shares that about 15 percent of the world's population will experience disability, which is equivalent to over one billion people ("Overview"). The National Center on Birth Defects and Development Disabilities (2020) state that in the United States, 61 million adults live with a disability. Although the number of people who will experience disability is high, disability is a topic that is not properly represented and many misconceptions need to be discussed and changed.

Misconceptions of Disability

One of the most common, generalized misconceptions of disability is that disability is "bad." As disability is a social identity, this idea that disability is bad is like the idea that being gay is bad or the idea that being Black is bad. However, unlike the efforts of LGBTQ+ and Black activists, the message of disability activists has not reached the general population. We often hear messages that are ableist and anti-disability reinforced in everyday life, and we see this in movies, novels, TV shows, and everyday language. A few examples of ableist everyday talk include:

"What's wrong with them?" or "I think there's something wrong with them," in reference to someone who is neurodivergent or has a physical disability, but it is not evident what that is exactly. "I'd rather kill myself than be in a wheelchair" or "they are confined to a wheelchair," suggests that life is not worth living with a physical disability and that having a physical disability is burdensome. "That's r*tarded" is a word that has often been used as a replacement for "stupid" and has become known as a slur, however it is still often used in everyday talk.

These examples are only a few of many, and often are used without realizing the harmful message people reinforce by using these. In addition to the reinforcement that disability is bad through everyday talk, we also see disability depicted as a symbol for bad, evil, or something else to that effect. Sometimes, this idea gets translated to being a significant part of a character's identity in a movie, TV show, play, or novel. One example for why this concept is repeated is explained by Longmore (2003), stating that

[G]iving disabilities to villainous characters reflects and reinforces, albeit in exaggerated fashion, three common prejudices against handicapped people: disability is a punishment for evil;

disabled people are embittered by their 'fate': disabled people resent the nondisabled and would, if they could, destroy them (p. 134).

One well-known place we see repeated use of this trope in media is in Disney films. For example, Captain Hook from Peter Pan is a Disney villain character with a disability, and the disability can be interpreted to symbolize the evilness of his character. In a Tumblr post, Li (n.d.) explains this example:

First, his hand was eaten by the crocodile and can be inferred to symbolically represent punishment for being evil. Second, Captain Hook seems to be cognitively affected by the trauma of losing his hand and the handicap and disadvantage of having a hook is subtly hinted at when he fights with Peter Pan. Lastly, Captain Hook seeks to get revenge on Peter Pan and seems to be belligerent toward anyone in his way (para. 4).

This example of Disney's use of disability to represent the villain is a way in popular culture that we reinforce the idea that disability is bad. Captain Hook is an example of (negative) disability representation, but one that is popular and viewed by many children. This type of representation is important to discuss because it seems like it would be harmless, but all representations are important because each influences the

way we think and leaves a lasting impression.

Importance of Representation

In my personal schooling experience, there was no discussion or representation of disability in literature or course curriculum. I imagine this is the experience of most students in America's educational system, both disabled and able-bodied. However, research has shown that representation of different identities is important for both students with and without those identities. Representation in literature matters because it allows for students to identify with the characters. For example, a study has shown that young, white girls use texts about relationships, social memberships, and sexuality as a guide (Koonce, 2014). For young Black females, reading stories with characters they share the same racial identity with has led to engagement with the text and a personal positive identity development (Koonce, 2014). As most people will either experience disability or know someone with a disability, this representation allows them to see disability in literature and develop their understanding of how disability functions as a social identity in the world.

The Kite Runner

In high school, *The Kite Runner* by Khaled Hosseini (2003) was one of the assigned readings. My class read this book during my sophomore year, and this was one of my favorites. In college, I picked up the book one Friday night to reread it and realized this novel had included disability. Further thought has allowed me to dissect this novel and provide examples of how this novel can be connected to a disability studies framework. I am glad that I was able to read this novel in high school and believe it was a good inclusion within my English high school curriculum, which is why I would urge educators to include this novel as part of the coursework. Hower (2003), in a New York Times Book Review, describes *The Kite Runner* by Khaled Hosseini (2003) as a book that:

tells a story of fierce cruelty and fierce yet redeeming love. Both transform the life of Amir, Khaled Hosseini's privileged young narrator, who comes of age during the last peaceful days of the monarchy, just before [Afghanistan's] revolution and its invasion by Russian forces. But political events, even as dramatic as the ones that are presented in *The Kite Runner*, are only a part of this story (paras. 1-2).

Hower (2003) continues,

In *The Kite Runner*, Hosseini gives us a vivid and engaging story that reminds us how long his people have been struggling to triumph over the forces of violence -- forces that continue to threaten them even today (para. 9).

In this novel, Amir is the main character and narrative voice. He lives with his father, Baba, and his father's friend is often around Rahim Khan. Amir and Baba have two servants, Ali and his son Hassan, who have been connected to the family since Baba and Ali were children. Amir and Hassan grow up closely as friends despite the power dynamic, and life-altering events shift their friendship and eventually leads them to change paths. Although many of the characters in the novel experience a type of disability, one of the disabilities with the most metaphorical meaning and that gives the novel narrative prosthesis is Hassan, who was born with a cleft lip.

The first part of narrative prosthesis is when "a deviance or marked difference is exposed to a reader" (Mitchell & Snyder, 2000, p. 209). In *The Kite Runner*, this deviance takes the form of a physical difference, being that Hassan is born with a cleft lip. The first description the reader gets of Hassan describes his

...tiny low-set ears and pointed stub of a chin, a meaty appendage that looked like it was added as a mere afterthought.

And the cleft lip, just left of midline, where the Chinese doll maker's instrument may have slipped, or perhaps he had simply grown tired and careless (Hosseini, 2003, p. 4).

Amir also shares what he has heard about Hassan's birth, that "Sanaubar [Hassan's mother] had taken one glance at the baby in Ali's arms, seen the cleft lip, and barked a bitter laughter" (Hosseini, 2003, p. 13). Hassan's cleft lip was a noticeable feature of his face, and something that was deviant from the appearances of other characters such as Amir and Baba.

The second factor of narrative prothesis is when the "narrative consolidates the need for its own existence by calling for an explanation of the deviation's origins and formative consequences" (Mitchell & Snyder, 2000, p. 209). The reader can conclude that the metaphorical reasoning Hosseini gave Hassan a cleft lip is that it originally acts as symbol for Baba's sin and guilt and later develops to Baba and Amir's sins and guilt. Rahim Khan tells an adult Amir that Baba is the father to both Amir and Hassan, and that the two are half-brothers. Baba feels guilty because he is the father of Ali's child, someone who has given his life to him and he has now betrayed. To make up for his sin, Baba made sure to love and

treat Hassan as much like a son as he could without drawing attention from society.

Rahim Khan describes Baba's feelings to Amir by saying that "your father was a man torn between two halves, Amir jan: you and Hassan. He loved you both, but he could not love Hassan the way he longed to, openly, and as a father" (Hosseini, 2003, p. 386). When Amir finds out that Hassan is his brother, he thinks about all the testaments of Baba's love for Hassan that Amir witnessed throughout his childhood. He remembers

Baba hiring Dr. Kumar to fix Hassan's harelip. Baba never missing Hassan's birthday. [He] remember[s] the day we were planting tulips, when [he] had asked Baba if he'd ever consider getting new servants. *Hassan's not going anywhere, he'd barked. He's staying right here with us, where he belongs. This is his home and we're his family.* He had wept, *wept*, when Ali announced he and Hassan were leaving" (p. 288).

As remembered by Amir, one year, for Hassan's birthday, Baba chose to get Hassan surgery to fix the cleft lip. After it healed, Hassan was left with a "pink jagged line running up from his lip" (p. 60). This scar was left as a permanent but faint reminder of Baba's guilt and attempt to repent for his sin. The scar

becomes a symbol of Amir's guilt, because of an event Amir did not stop that happened "the winter that Hassan stopped smiling" (p. 60).

A large part of Afghani culture is kite flying and running, and during the big tournament of the year, Amir won the competition for kite flying, and Hassan went to "run" the last kite Amir had cut down. Having the physical kite was a prized possession in this culture, and when Hassan got the kite and was on his way back to Amir, the town bully Assef had him held down and raped him. Amir had gone off to find him, and instead of stepping in to help Hassan, who loved and protected him, Amir ran and did not save his friend. Amir held this onto this guilt, and the scar on Hassan's lip reminded him of how his friend was no longer willing to smile.

The third factor of narrative prosthesis is that "deviance is brought from the periphery of concerns to the center of the story to come" (Mitchell & Snyder, 2000, p. 209). Amir is reminded of Hassan and this cleft lip when he receives a call from Rahim Kahn to leave California and come back for a visit, and the memories coming flooding back to Amir. When the two men are reunited, Rahim Khan gives Amir a polaroid picture of Hassan and his son Sohrab, which serves as a physical reminder of

this deviance to Amir. Amir is reminded of his sin and guilt, and he feels responsible to make up for this, as Rahim Khan's final, dying wish.

The final and fourth factor of narrative prosthesis is "the remainder of the story rehabilitates or fixes the deviance in some manner" (Mitchell & Snyder, 2000, p. 209). This process begins when Rahim Khan sends Amir back to Afghanistan to retrieve Sohrab from an orphanage. Amir acknowledges this by noting "that Rahim Khan had summoned me here to atone not just for my sins, but for Baba's too" (Hosseini, 2003, p. 289). Amir has to go through multiple struggles to retrieve Sohrab, one of them coming face-to-face with Assef, the one who raped Hassan. During this physical fight, Amir experienced serious bodily damage. He had seven broken ribs, a cracked orbital frame, swallowed his teeth, and other damage. After some medical care, the doctor told him that "the impact had cut your upper lip in two...clean down the middle" (p. 381). Amir reflects about this and realizes that it is "[c]lean down the middle. Like a harelip" (p. 381). During this moment, Amir feels like he has received some closure for both his and Baba's sins and guilt. At the end of the novel, Amir adopts Sohrab and brings him back to California for a better life. Throughout

the novel of *The Kite Runner*, Hassan's disability is used as a metaphor for guilt and sin and Hosseini uses narrative prosthesis throughout the novel to convey this.

Conclusion

In this essay, I have discussed the importance of disability representation, dissected the common misconception that disability is bad, and effectively weaved discussion of these ideas with disability studies using *The Kite Runner* by

Khaled Hosseini (2003) as an example. From my work, I hope you leave with an increased understanding of how it is imperative that disability and disability studies are taught in the classroom, and that this can be done using novels that are already included in high school English curriculum. This provides an opportunity for teachers and schools to be truly *educating for personal excellence*, as my high school has strived to do, and will foster a more inclusive and intersectional future.

References

Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990, as Amended 42 U.S.C. § 12101 et seq. (2009).

<https://www.ada.gov/pubs/adastatute08.htm>

Hosseini, K. (2003). *The kite runner*. Seal Books.

Hower, E. (2003, August 3). The servant [Review of the book *The kite runner*, by K. Hosseini]. *New York Times Book Review*, 108, 4.

Koonce, J. B. (2014). The caged birds sing: Highlighting the voices of Black adolescent females on their language and literacy practices—three qualitative investigations. Michigan State University Libraries Digital Repository.

<https://d.lib.msu.edu/etd/3039>

Li, R. (n.d.). Why do many villains possess disabilities? *Tumblr*.

<https://r2j2.tumblr.com/post/3928038632/why-do-many-villains-possess-disabilities>

Longmore, P. (2003). *Why I burned my book, and other essays on disability*. Temple University Press.

- Mitchell, P.D. & Snyder, S. L. (2000). *Narrative prosthesis: Disability and the dependencies of discourse*. University of Michigan Press.
- National Center on Birth Defects and Development Disabilities. (2020). *Disability impacts all of us* [Infographic]. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. <https://www.cdc.gov/ncbddd/disabilityandhealth/infographic-disability-impacts-all.html>
- NYSED Student Information Repository System. (2015). *Suffern Senior High School enrollment (2014-15)* [Infographic]. New York State Education Department. <https://data.nysed.gov/enrollment.php?year=2015&instid=800000039139>
- World Health Organization. (2021). *Disability*. https://www.who.int/health-topics/disability#tab=tab_1