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Dyslexia in a Disabling Society: A Study of Philip Schultz's *My Dyslexia*

Sadaf Shah & Pooja Kumari

Abstract

Dyslexia or reading disability is the most common learning disability in children which persists throughout life. People with dyslexia have difficulty in spelling words, reading comprehension and writing. As an invisible disability, it is widely misunderstood and various negative stereotypes or labels are attached to it. The present paper attempts to study Philip Schultz's memoir *My Dyslexia* as it provides an authentic account of dyslexia from an insider's perspective. It focuses on Schultz's dyslexia and various challenges that he faced as being dyslexic in a disabling society. The present study analyses the memoir through the social model of disability proposed by disability rights activists that views disability as a social construct. Being dyslexic, during his childhood, Schultz faced a lot of environmental, attitudinal and structural barriers that contributed in turning his impairment into disability and he felt discriminated. Further, his ignorance related to his dyslexia added to his miseries. Through the memoir, Schultz breaks the various misconceptions that are associated with dyslexia and disseminates the fact that dyslexic people are not burden but an asset to society as dyslexia is not a disability but a special ability. The paper concludes that society should support people with disabilities by removing disabling barriers so that people with dyslexia can function and participate fully in the mainstream society. It also suggests that the dyslexia should be viewed as a positive identity.

Keywords : Barriers; Dyslexia; Impairment; Learning disability; Positive identity.

Introduction

Memoir belongs to the category of creative non-fiction in which the author recounts experiences from his or her life. Memoir is categorised as a subgenre of autobiography/biography that focuses on one particular aspect of an individual's life instead of covering complete chronological events. As a literary genre, it involves degree of creativity also. It is a literary text that deals with a specific theme in which words are artfully arranged. It is a story with proper narrative structure, focus and subject matter. Thomas Larson, the critic, memoirist and essayist in his book *The Memoir and the Memoirist* relates memoir to fiction. He writes, "Memoir is related to fiction because memoir, like fiction, is a narrative art: we narrate past events; always, as we write, memory tells us stories" (25). As a literary genre, memoir is powerful medium for the marginalised people, who want to bring forth their personal experiences that are usually ignored by the mainstream literature. Thus, through their memoirs, they want to correct the various misrepresentations and misinterpretations that are associated with them. Judith Barrington, the poet and memoirist in the book titled as *Writing the Memoir* brings out the significance of memoir. She writes:

> For members of marginalized groups, speaking personally and truthfully about our lives plays a small part in erasing years of invisibility and interpretation by others. And for all of us, engaging seriously with the truth challenges our society's enormous untruthfulness—whether it comes from the family, which so often denies its own violence behind closed doors, or from the national and international powers that deny their own violence and call it "peace-keeping." (14)

Disability Memoir

In contemporary literature, memoirs have become increasingly popular over towering other genres of life writing. Memoirs have become one of the most contemporary ways to describe and represent oneself. Thomas G. Couser, a disability theorist in his book *Memoir: An Introduction* calls this phenomenon of increase in memoir writing as "memoir boom" and writes, "the memoir boom has at least coincided with, if not been impelled by, the rise of the disability memoir" (148). Disabled people mostly occupy marginalised position in society and their identity is usually constructed through the eyes of non-disabled writers. The dominant discourses on disability propagate the idea that disability is a negative identity. Through their memoirs, disabled writers challenge the preconceived notions related to disability as inherently negative. Thomas G. Couser in his another book *Signifying Bodies: Disability in Contemporary Life Writing* writes "Disability memoir should be seen, therefore, not as spontaneous self-expression but as a response—indeed a retort—to the traditional misrepresentation of disability in Western culture generally" (6-7). Through the memoir writing, disabled writers speak about their life experiences of living with a disability in order to claim positive identity. Philip Schultz in his memoir *My Dyslexia* writes about his lifelong experiences of struggle with a learning disability called as dyslexia which is very common learning disability among school going children. People with dyslexia often face discrimination in society as there are many misconceptions related to dyslexia that are circulated by traditional discourses. Schultz's memoir counters the negative images that are associated with dyslexia through his truthful account of living with dyslexia in the society where he encountered numerous disabling barriers but overcame them through his firm determination and hence, disseminating a positive dyslexic identity in the society through his success as a writer.

Author's Biography

Philip Schultz, an American poet was born on January 6, 1945 in Rochester, New York. He is also the founder and director of 'The Writers Studio,' a private school for fiction and poetry writing situated in New York City. He has written seven collections of poetry and among them, the most famous are *Like Wings* (1978) and *Failure* (2007). He has been awarded several awards like Pulitzer Prize for Poetry, Guggenheim Fellowship, Lamont Poetry Selection, American Poetry & Institute of Arts and Letters Award, National Book Award Nomination and so on. Now, Schultz lives in East Hampton, New York with his wife, sculptor Monica Banks and two sons named Elias Schultz and August Schultz. Schultz memoir *My Dyslexia*, published in 2011 is considered as one of his notable works. In the memoir, he talks about his struggles and challenges that he faced and still faces as a dyslexic.

Dyslexia

The word 'dyslexia' is derived from the Latin word 'dys' meaning 'difficult' and 'lexia' comes from the Greek word which means "words." So, dyslexia means 'difficulty with words.' Dyslexia is a reading disorder. People with dyslexia find difficulty in spelling words, reading quickly, writing words, pronouncing words and understanding when one reads. They have difficulty in processing as well as manipulating the sounds in a spoken language. They have problem in reading comprehension and even their vocabulary is poor. It is also called as reading disability. It affects areas of the brain that process language. As dyslexia is a brain related condition, it is also called as invisible disability and many people remain unaware that they have dyslexia during their lifetime. International Dyslexic Association (IDA) defines dyslexia as:

> Dyslexia is a specific learning disability that is neurological in origin. It is characterized by difficulties with accurate and/ or fluent word recognition and by poor spelling and decoding abilities. These difficulties typically result from a deficit in the phonological component of language that is often unexpected in relation to other cognitive abilities and the provision of effective classroom instruction. Secondary consequences may include problems in reading comprehension and reduced reading experience that can impede the growth of vocabulary and background knowledge. (*Dyslexia in the Classroom* 2)

Philip Schultz's Journey with Dyslexia

Schultz was never officially diagnosed with dyslexia and he was not aware that he had dyslexia until he was fifty eight years old. When his elder son, Elias Schultz was diagnosed with dyslexia in second grade, then he realised that he had been suffering from the same reading disability. After getting the Pulitzer prize for his poetry collection *Failure*, whenever he went for any interview, the first question asked was about his learning disability called dyslexia. Initially, he decided that he would not talk about his dyslexia in any interview. Finally, it was his son's dyslexia that prompted Schultz to talk about this issue as he was concerned about his son who hated going to school. Soon, he was invited by various organisations to talk about his dyslexia and gradually, everyone around him seemed to be interested in Schultz's dyslexic journey rather than his poetry. So, Schultz felt compelled to write about his dyslexia.

In the memoir, Schultz writes that both, he and his son share same symptoms of dyslexia, "we shared many of the same symptoms, like delayed processing problems, terrible handwriting, misnaming items, low frustration tolerance for reading and most homework assignments involving writing, to name a few" (15-16). He writes about his struggle with reading and admits that even after living the life of a professional writer for so many years, he does not enjoy the reading process. It is still difficult for him to read anything with ease. He can never just sit down and start reading. Before reading anything, he has to trick himself into different things like playing different games on his computer, reheating his tea or taking a walk with his dog, Penelope. But once, he actually sits down for reading, he has to convince himself again and again that it is in his best interest to engage in the reading process, which is actually not at all easy for him due to his reading disability. He feels hesitant at the beginning of every new thought and sentence. Many a times, he has to convince himself that whatever he is reading is so fascinating and informative that it is worth the effort. At regular intervals, he has to remind himself that to continuously read sentences will ultimately benefit him as a writer. He has a problem with retrieval of words and common concepts. Often, he forgets the meaning of the words that he has used so many times and frequently, he has to consult a thesaurus while writing to make sure that he has selected the right word. He congratulates himself on the completion of each sentence, each paragraph and chapter.

Being dyslexic, it is hard for Schultz to read which is not well written and interesting. That is why, he chose to be a poet because poetry is so compressed and often beautifully written. He loves books and feels happy to arrange them in proper and respective places in the book shelves. He adds that he loves everything about books except actually reading them. Reading was always and still a problem for him as his mind is different from the minds of other people and it takes time for him to process information. He writes:

> The act of translating what for me are the mysterious symbols of communication into actual comprehension has always been a hardship for me. I often read a sentence two or three times before I truly understand it; must restructure its syntax and sound out its syllables before I can begin to absorb its meaning and move onto the next sentence. (26)

In the memoir *My Dyslexia*, Schultz is revisiting his past experiences of living with dyslexia in a disabling society. He describes about his childhood struggle with dyslexia which affected his life both inside and outside school. While focusing on his early life, he also brings to light the various environmental, structural and attitudinal barriers as propounded by social model of disability that he encountered and which really made him feel disabled. The social model of disability first appeared in the United Kingdom in the 1970s through the efforts of an early disability rights organisation called 'The Union of Physically Impaired Against Segregation' (UPIAS), followed by disability rights activists namely Vic Finkelstein, Colin Barns and Mike Oliver who laid its foundations at the academic level during the 1980s. Tom Shakespeare, an English Sociologist in his essay, "The Social Model of Disability" writes, "The social model is distinguished from the medical or individual model. Whereas the former defines disability as a social creation—a relationship between people with impairment and a disabling society—the latter defines disability in terms of individual deficit" (98). According to the social model of disability, impairment is not the prime cause of exclusion of disabled people but the way the society reacts to impaired people. Mike Oliver, the disability rights activist in his essay, "Social Model in Action" writes, "It (social model of disability) is an attempt to switch the focus away from the functional limitations of individuals with an impairment on to the problems caused by disabling environments, barriers and cultures" (21). The social model of disability is a reaction to the medical model of disability which views that problem is with the disabled individual and it needs to be corrected. In the social model, the greater emphasis is on the environment and not the individual as is the case with the medical model of disability. The social model of disability deals with all forms of exclusion of the disabled individual from physical barriers to attitudes and beliefs on disability.

In the memoir, Schultz describes his various encounters with the disabling society that turned his impairment into disability. Schultz painfully recalls the attitudinal barriers that he faced due to his dyslexia. When he was in the fifth grade, he, for the first time conceived the idea of being a writer. As he had difficulty in reading, so his parents hired a reading tutor for him. Frustrated with him, his reading tutor, a retired school principal asked him what he wanted to do in life. Suddenly, he replied that he wanted to be a writer. After listening to his answer, his tutor laughed at him as he was poor in reading. Schultz had never expected such a negative attitude from such a sensible man who instead of encouraging and motivating him, discouraged him through his laughing when he told him of his desire to be a writer. His tutor laughed because there is a conception related to dyslexia that if one cannot read, he or she cannot write. According to many cognitive models of writing development, reading is the central component of writing. If one is good in reading, he is good in writing too and vice versa. Louis Spear-Swerling, an expert in the field of Learning disabilities in the article titled "Components of Effective Writing Instruction" (2006) writes:

> Good written expression draws upon a wide array of underlying component abilities. . . However, learning disabilities may impact writing in numerous ways and may make tasks involving written expression particularly arduous. Children with reading disabilities often have serious difficulties with spelling that adversely affect writing. (Web)

Schultz's tutor too harbored the same belief that due to his reading disability he could never write. But Schultz was determined to prove him wrong as he says to himself. "The fact I couldn't read didn't mean that I never would, I thought. I always assumed I would one day, and what difference would it then make?" (29). Schultz further encountered disabling attitudinal barrier when at his father's sister's house, being youngest he was asked to read Haggadah (Jewish text) in Hebrew. He was not able to read because he did not know Hebrew. Being dyslexic, it was very difficult for him to learn Hebrew. And his father's niece deliberately insulted him and teased him by saying that he was in dummy class. He felt insulted and dejected. Being a Jew, he felt that he should know Hebrew but his dyslexia hindered in his learning of Hebrew, even when he seriously tried for it. Later, he worked on it and he learnt much of it. Through the incident, Schultz is pointing that the society through the disabling barriers turned his impairment into disability.

Schultz also encountered structural barriers in school when his school instead of providing support to him for his differentness, blamed him for his behaviour. In the memoir, he is critical of structural barriers, which further created problem for him and really disabled him. His teachers totally ignored him because he could not perform well in studies due to his dyslexia. Instead of working on his problems, they used to find fault with him when he did not fit into the norms of the school. His teachers did not pay any attention to him in the class and focused on the bright children with whom they did not have to work hard. His teachers' attitude towards him was negative and disabling. They treated him as if he did not exist in the class at all. His classmates bullied him and teased him by saying that he could not learn anything. Sally Shaywitz and Bennett Shaywitz, co-directors of 'The Yale Center of Dyslexia and Creativity' in their article titled "Dyslexia and Bullying" write:

> Bullying intersects with dyslexia particularly in school settings where far too often dyslexia is not identified, the word, dyslexia, not used, and the associated symptoms not addressed. As a consequence, dyslexic children when asked to read aloud in class are shamed and embarrassed. This frequently leads to bullying. (Web)

In the memoir, Schultz narrates that the environment of the school was disabling even when he was working hard on his reading exercises. When he was in third grade, Schultz's teacher told his mother that he never followed instructions and paid no attention in the class. The teacher further told his mother that Schultz was unable to follow the simplest directions and fought with other boys in the school. But, he was surprised when the school principal and teacher did not tell his mother how those boys used to bully him. The principal told her that they had no other option than to expel him from the school. As he was disabled in learning so the whole blame of the fighting incident was put on him. Actually those boys teased him by calling him "dummy" and Schultz retaliated by hitting them hard, "But why didn't they tell her what those kids had done? They had mimicked my stuttering—why weren't their mothers called to school" (32). Though the memoir, Schultz subverts such attitudes which contributed in disabling him. Instead of addressing his problems, the school principal and the teachers were keener on finding his faults and contributed in turning his impairment into disability.

In the memoir, Schultz recalls the time when he felt invisible in school due to his teachers who did not pay any attention to him in the class. They totally ignored him in favour of bright and intelligent students and he felt rejected, excluded, discriminated and marginalised in the school. Once, Schultz had to appear before his school principal along with his mother. When they appeared before the school principal, he looked and talked to his mother only as if Schultz was not there. As Schultz was disabled in learning, the school principal totally ignored him as if he did not exist at all. He writes, "He (the school principal) looked and spoke only to her, as if I weren't there standing next to her, as if I were invisible. It was the way I felt in school, listening to the teacher talk only to the other children, as if she didn't think I would understand what she was saying, as if it was waste of time talking to me" (32). Susannah B. Mintz, the disability rights activist in her article "Invisibility" writes about the invisibility of the disabled people in the mainstream society as a result of their disability which is actually discriminating. She further writes that invisibility "refer to the range of exclusions that reinforce the marginalizing of disability" (113).

Whenever his schoolmates teased him, he felt ashamed and embarrassed and reacted by striking them. Being dyslexic, he was not able to answer back as his mind took time in processing information and answering back so, he had no other option left but to respond by striking the bullies. Schultz suffered more as a dyslexic child because he was not aware that his problems were due to dyslexia as he was never officially diagnosed with it. Seeing his learning difficulties, he was taken away from the regular class and put in special class which is usually meant to provide full support, care and guidance to special children but Schultz further encountered the structural barrier in the special class too along with two other children who had learning disabilities. At that time very little was known about dyslexia and teachers had no training and they were almost fed up with the non-learners. In school, the lack of trained teachers contributed in disabling him. The special class only aggravated his problem rather than pacifying it. Teachers ignored him and other non-learners as if they were unworthy to be addressed and they were left on their own. The school teachers did not want to burden themselves by giving extra attention to such children. Schultz found the school environment disabling as it did not provide any support when he was struggling to read. If he had been given proper attention and guidance at school, he would have overcome his problems. He narrates an incident when his special class teacher asked him to pretend to be reading. The experience was shocking for him and he could not believe the words of his teachers whose attitude was discriminating and disabling towards him. Schultz writes:

> We—the non-learners were pretty much left to ourselves. I have a memory from that time in which a book was placed in my hands by our teacher. "Here look at the pictures, just sit there pretending you're reading it," she said. Did she really say this? Would any self-respecting teacher actually say something like this to a child in her class? (60)

As Schultz's disability was invisible, his teachers, peers and relatives were not ready to accept that he had some disability and as a result, he was misunderstood. For his problems, his teachers blamed him and his difficulties in academic subjects were viewed as a result of laziness and inattentiveness. It was difficult for him to convince others that he was not lazy but he really had some problem called as dyslexia of which he was unaware himself and hence suffered more. As a child, he really wanted to excel in class and make friends. He wanted to read efficiently but he did not know the reason behind his problem. If he had been diagnosed with dyslexia at the right time, he would have defended himself against the label "stupid" and "dummy" that were used against him by the society. Even, the psychologist who tested him blamed Schultz for his problems as she informed his mother that Schultz himself was not interested in his studies. None of his classmates wanted to sit with him. They made fun of him when he sat alone in the class. Schultz was also held back for a year in his third grade and thrown out of the school after finishing his fourth grade. Invisible nature of his disability made him feel more and more discriminated in school as nobody was able to recognise his problem. Cal Montogomery, a writer, activist and speaker on disability issues in his article titled "A Hard Look at Invisible Disabilities" brings out the fact that people with invisible disabilities suffer more as society fails to acknowledge their disability. He writes:

> When nondisabled people look at "the disabled," they see wheelchairs and picture-boards. They see helmets and hearing aids and white canes. With a few exceptions, they don't pick up on how individuals differ from one another; they notice the tools we use. And these tools, to the general public, equal "disability." Venture out without a well-known tool, and your disability is "invisible" or "hidden." (Web)

In the memoir, Schultz further recalls the challenges that he had to face due to his impairment i.e. dyslexia during his school and college years. Being dyslexic, he had to ask people to repeat things several times before he managed to hear them. Anything said in whisper use to become in his mind a "mumble-fumble of bargain-basement gibberish" (39). He further writes that he was never able to take lecture notes or read his own handwriting as dyslexia affects one's handwriting too. Like other dyslexics, Schultz also had difficult in learning a foreign language. As a college student, he skipped his linguistics classes. In his high school, he failed in Latin twice and passed two years of college French with 'C' grade. He was interested in taking French classes because he loved the French poetry that was recited by the professors in the class. As far as Schultz was concerned, French was a foreign language for him and it required more and more efforts on the part of Schultz. He writes, "Listening to someone speak French on a language tape was a torture to me. This is why I couldn't hear a single word or identify phrases, and why I could never under any circumstances understand or apply grammatical rules or recognize spelling patterns" (73). Despite his learning disability, Schultz finally decided to take French classes and kept on motivating himself that he could do it.

Schultz was a sensitive and hard working child who really wanted to achieve something in his life. Gradually, he started reading by himself and realised that if he can read, he can write too. Also, his mind started responding to actions that were not put to action or in many cases even imagined and felt that thinking was compensation for his dyslexia. By the time he reached high school, he was able to pass most of his classes with B's and C's. He developed his interest in reading short stories and novels which he read in English class. He tried to impress his teachers with verbal comprehension and was able to retain well what he read. Then, he discovered that he had an interest in writing papers and spent a lot of time in getting the grammar and syntax of each sentence correct which was a very difficult task for him due to his dyslexia. As Schultz's mother was uneducated so she wanted that her son should learn and go to school. Seeing his mother's faith in him, Schultz too was determined to make his mother proud. His mother was very supportive. Sometimes, she hired neighborhood boys to do his chores so that he could get more time to study. He was very happy that his mother had full faith in him despite his reading disability. He worked very hard and became a famous cartoonist. He also started writing articles in literary magazines. Finally, through his hard work he became an acknowledged poet of America.

In his memoir, Schultz truthfully presents his struggle with dyslexia even after becoming an eminent poet of America as dyslexia is a lifelong condition. Being dyslexic, he is still poor in pronouncing words. He narrates an incident when in a poetry recitation program, he was stuck when trying to pronounce the word "arthritic" while reading his poem "The Magic Kingdom." He forgot the correct pronunciation of the word and in panic he pronounced it "arthuritis." For the fear of dyslexia, he even refused to read his work in public for a long time. On other occasion, while reading his poetry, Schultz lost track of one of his poems that he had to recite and ended with the line of a different poem. Schultz further writes that in order to lessen such embarrassing moments, he use to prepare himself well before every poetry recitation program. Usually, whenever he has to introduce some other poet in his poetry, he makes notes of it in advance.

Through his personal narrative, Schultz also propagates that dyslexia has nothing to do with intelligence, the stereotype mostly associated with dyslexia. Besides, he also admits that dyslexia is his gift as well as a positive identity. If he had not been a dyslexic, he would never be a poet. He regards his thinking process as compensation for his dyslexia which has made him a successful poet of America. His thinking process is his strategy for survival and suggests that every dyslexic should devise his own strategy to survive in the society governed by norms.

Conclusion

Schultz's memoir *My Dyslexic* is a truthful account of what it likes to be dyslexic in a disabling society. Through the memoir, Schultz shatters the various myths that are associated with dyslexia like dyslexics are unintelligent and they can never succeed in life. His memoir circulates the view that dyslexics are not "stupid" and "dummy," the labels that are mostly used for them. He is informing that dyslexics can succeed if parents, teachers and society support them. In the memoir, he criticises the various societal barriers that actually disabled him and suggests the removal of such barriers that can hinder the progress of people with disabilities. Through his dyslexic journey, Schultz spreads the view that disability identity is positive and society needs to change its attitude towards learning disabilities. He further suggests that dyslexics should be given proper support so that they can overcome their limitations. His memoir also suggests that other dyslexics too can formulate their own strategies to survive and function efficiently in the society.

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