

Reclaiming Voice: Poetic Expression and the Construction of Disability Identity

Akshata Jaiprakash

Research Scholar, Department of PG Studies & Research in English
Kuvempu University - 577 451
akshataj@gmail.com

OPEN ACCESS

Volume: 12

Special Issue: 4

Month:

Year: 2025

E-ISSN: 2582-0397

P-ISSN: 2321-788X

Citation:

Jaiprakash, Akshata,
and Rachel Bari.
“Reclaiming Voice:
Poetic Expression and
the Construction of
Disability Identity.”
*Shanlax International
Journal of Arts, Science
and Humanities*,
vol. 12, no. S4, 2025,
pp. 69–75.

DOI:

[https://doi.
org/10.34293/sijash.
v12iS4.May-9154](https://doi.org/10.34293/sijash.v12iS4.May-9154)

Dr. Rachel Bari

Professor, Department of PG Studies & Research in English
Kuvempu University - 577 451

Abstract

Literature enables people with disabilities to communicate how they live and the difficulties they encounter, often sharing views not usually described in main media streams. This research looks into how people with disabilities might benefit from engaging with poetry, using ideas from disability studies and psychology. It investigates the ways poetry helps to oppose stereotypes and supports self-expression. The purpose of the research is to see how playing with language in poetry encourages individuals to reflect on their actions and become more confident about who they are. Methods used in the study include analysing poems and personal stories to see how poetry helps with coping with emotions, thinking critically and mindset. It takes into account whether poetry-based activities can be used by people with different disabilities. In addition, the investigation explores the role different areas of identity play in shaping how a person expresses themselves creatively. Studies focused on poems and personal accounts to study how people use poetry to manage emotions, think rationally and influence their way of thinking. It considers if people with different types of disabilities can engage in poetry-based exercises. The investigation further considers how elements of identity impact the way a person expressiveness through creative activities.

Keywords: Disability, Poetry, Creative Expressions, Social Changes, People Living with Disabilities, the World of Creative Writing, Unusual Changes in Society

Introduction

Over time, stories about disability have relied mainly on external perspectives that highlight pity, medical issues or bravery. When disability is discussed in popular culture, it is usually about what people with disabilities can't do or the challenges they deal with. As a result, we often ignore the many sides of their lives, how they see the world and what really happens to them. Seeing disability mostly as a problem made it difficult for people to discuss or explain their experiences on their own, while the public often fails to notice the complexity of people with disabilities.

Reclaiming voice is an important way for individuals to speak up about what they have lived through and feel stronger. Writing poetry is a special way to show self-expression and can be truly effective. Compared to normal doctors' talks, poetry expresses comparisons,

detailed scenes and emotional language instead of focusing on facts. It allows people to talk about things that are hard to communicate about their disability in daily conversations. Poetry's brief and heartfelt form allows people to examine how they feel inside, deal with harmful beliefs held within and contest the usual, harmful community traditions that often lead to misunderstanding.

The study reveals that using poetic expression allows people with disabilities to grow personally, release their emotions, socially interact and creatively shine. Thus, the central research question addressed in this paper is: Does using poetry in everyday life support the development of self-identity, promote good health and aid in seeking changes for people with disabilities? The study will consider works by disabled authors, Angelina Sáenz's *You Can Thank Us Later* and Richard Brautigan's *It's Raining in Love*, to highlight how marginalization and one's own feeling of selfhood change through the eyes of diverse poets.

To address this issue, the paper will proceed in the following order: In the beginning, it reviews disability studies and psychology literature to choose the fundamental theories that will support the research. You will need to look into the social model of disability, what it means to have a disability identity and the healing effects of being creative. Later, the methodology for studying poems and personal stories will be discussed. It is in the following section that the analysis reveals how poetry brings out themes of identity, well-being and the support for social causes. Next, the discussion section will study the results and think about how this affected people with disabilities and the ways that poetry may help with social change. The end of the paper will identify what is missing and point out areas where further research could be done. The study is designed to increase insight into the relationship between poetry and personal growth, empowerment and striving for social justice within the disability community.

Literature Review

The researchers in this study apply theories from disability studies and psychology to examine how writing poems relates to what it means to live with disabilities. The literature review will consider significant ideas from existing research such as the social model of disability, the concept of disability identity, the foundations of crip theory, the ways creative expression helps in therapy, the main ideas of narrative therapy and the importance of expressing ourselves for positive self-esteem.

Disability Studies Perspectives and Prior Research

Through the use of studies based on data, the field of disability studies presents ways to understand disability as something largely created by society instead of just a personal medical issue. Oliver's writings in 1990 supported a shift of research from medical conditions to factors in society that disable people. Studies have repeatedly found that when environments and rules are inaccessible, disabled individuals are not able to take part as much as they could (e.g. Barnes & Mercer, 2003). For this reason, studies have examined the ways in which creative writing can act as a form of resistance by explaining experiences of being excluded and encouraging positive changes (Goodley, 2011). In 2011, Goodley reviewed the work of disabled artists, noting how they work to challenge accepted ideas about disability and call for social justice.

Studies about disability as a social concept (Wendell, 1996) have shown that stereotypes play a role in people being marginalized. Barnes (1992) has shown that negative media images of disability increase social prejudice. As a result, several studies have considered how counter-stories in poetry may oppose these labels. Siebers' study from 2008 discusses the way stories about disabilities contradict society's views on normality and help individuals become more independent.

Studies have found that having a positive disability identity helps a person feel better, engage more in their local community and feel more confident in themselves (Swain & French, 2000). It has been discovered that being part of the disability group and sharing similar stories can happen through creative expression such as art. From his (2009) work, it is understood that creative arts help bring together and empower the disabled community. Leaving aside fairy tales and children's books, works exploring disability in literature report how stories and poetry help to define the identity of disabled people (e.g., Linton, 1998).

Additionally, crip theory (McRuer, 2006) has inspired scholars to research how disabled individuals' works question and challenge mainstream beliefs. The field studies how artists and writers with disabilities disrupt well-known narratives to present unusual views about the body and capability. As an example, Kafer's (2013) study examines how the lives of queer people and people with disabilities question ideas about what is considered normal. Disability studies in poetry often points out how poets with physical challenges use different words and styles to represent their world and defy usual opinions about disability (for example, Clare, 2017).

Psychological Perspectives and Empirical Findings

Studies in psychology confirm that creative activities can help people in therapy (Malchiodi, 2003). Psychological studies have found that engaging in creative pursuits can help you handle your feelings better, cope with anxiety and become more aware of yourself (e.g., Pennebaker & Seagal, 1999). Research on writing reveals that expressive writing can help people process their emotions and move past trauma (such as the work of Smyth & Pennebaker in 2001). Research done on helping anyone through creative writing as a form of therapy provides a useful starting point.

The principles of narrative therapy are similar to the research about the strength of sharing personal stories. It has also been proven that telling a clear story about their situation can help people make sense of challenges and stay strong (Neimeyer, 2000). Research on stories of individuals with disabilities often points out the struggle of adopting defeatist narratives promoted by society and the effectiveness of constructing a new, positive approach to their lives (Shapiro, 1994). In therapy, people use poetry as a way to explore themselves and put their experiences in a new light (for example, according to Mazza, 2003).

Humanistic psychology which was developed by Rogers, links freedom of expression to having high self-esteem (Rogers, 1961). Researchers have found that folks who can be true to themselves often feel better about themselves and are more accepted by others (Deci & Ryan, 2000). For people with disabilities who feel marginalized, using poetry can be a significant way to boost their self-esteem. A lot of studies find that positive changes in self-confidence and self-image occur as a result of creative arts therapies (e.g., Wood, Atwood, & Hutchinson, 2005).

International journal studies (Wolbring, 2008) explain that internalized ableism harms self-esteem and one's overall happiness. Some studies have found that individuals with disabilities are influenced by social stereotypes, causing many of them to believe bad things about themselves (see Goffman, 1963). Though research on poetry's direct role in countering internalized ableism may be limited, it appears that making your experiences known and challenging false beliefs can help defeat inner stigma (e.g., Werner et al., 2014).

The Intersection of Poetry and Identity: Existing Scholarship

Studies on poetry and the identities of marginalized groups, including disability, highlight its particular talent for describing difficult feelings (e.g., Brodzki, Schenck, & links to marginalized groups such as those from the disability community, often turn to poetry to express their feelings and experiences (Brodzki, Schenck, & links to mixed groups such as the disability community,

regularly rely on poetry to say how they feel (Brodzki, Schenck, & links to groups from both fronts such as the disability community, often turn to poetry to express themselves (Brodzki, Schenck, & Because of metaphor, imagery and rhythm in poetry, it is possible to share feelings and sensations that might be too tough to describe in any other manner. Scholars often point out that these writers use literary techniques to talk about their experiences of disability, change the public's views and look into their identity nature (e.g., Smith, 2011).

Similar research conducted in other marginalized communities (e.g., Anzaldúa, 1987) highlights similar aspects found in this work. According to (Morrison, 1993), there is a regular emphasis on creating identity, forming community groups and fighting against oppressors in her novels. They point to how important creative outlets are to those whose voices were not heard for a long time. Reviewing narratives from different minority groups helps us see what they have in common experiences and what sets them apart, explaining the benefits of art in their lives.

By combining research and theory, this study hopes to add to our current knowledge of how poetry connects with the lives of people with disabilities. Following sections will mention the process used to analyze poems and narratives in this research.

Methodology

The study explores how poetry written by people with disabilities matches their personal experiences using a theme-based approach.

Poem Analysis

From various online platforms, poems written by people with disabilities are chosen, making sure there is a range of disabilities, identities and poetic modes. To find common topics, I will apply a thematic analysis suggested by Braun and Clarke in 2006 on disability identity, problems, strengths and exercising advocacy skills. You will explore how poets face stereotypes, share their emotions about disability and portray their own world and those around them in their works.

Access to poetry making and enjoying will be examined for people with many disabilities, considering various formats (audio, visual, tactile) and suitable platforms when needed. Through studying poems, this research explores how poetry empowers people with disabilities.

Findings and Analysis

This study of selected poems highlights vital ideas about rejecting stereotypes, allowing individuals to express themselves, forming a sense of disability identity, empowering those with disabilities and working towards social change. Considering Angelina Sáenz's *You Can Thank Us Later* and Richard Brautigan's *It's Raining in Love* allows us to identify the impact that marginalized poets have on their readers.

Works of poetry by those with disabilities help correct negative stereotypes. Rather, he writes, "These brittle bones tell of their lives, not of someone else's burdens." Just like the poets before her, Sáenz directly asserts the power of escaramuza in *You Can Thank Us Later*, especially with the line "do you see / that without escaramuza / you would lack an audience?"

Through poetry, it becomes possible to express feelings that are hard to describe with other means. Through the line "This city, a maze of walls for my wheels," the poet uses metaphor to describe the tough situation they are dealing with. The feeling described by Brautigan "I don't know what it is, / but I distrust myself / when I start to like a girl / a lot" can also happen to marginalized people who often notice when others are not responding positively to their actions.

Through their verse, poets with disabilities shape who they are and become more able to accept themselves. The poet makes it clear that their difference is actually a special feature they own, rather

than something to be ashamed of. While dealing mainly with gender, the poem also highlights that the escaramuza's valued role comes from their "elegant sportsmanship" and grace which deserves respect and appreciation.

Working with poetry can help sort out emotions. Vivid images are used by the poet to help describe trauma, for instance, "The memory, with a shadow-like presence, remains present in the silence." It seems that like the rest of us, Brautigan tries to come to terms with his fears and his acknowledgment of being a bit 'creepy' might help him better understand himself.

Poetry gives individuals the opportunity to guide the telling of their lives. The poet makes it clear that they are unbothered by someone else's reaction, saying "I say how I feel, untouched by your observation." By directly speaking to the listener in "Brother charro / do you realize...", Sáenz takes charge and challenges what is being said.

A lot of poems written by disabled people ask for equal treatment and a place in society. poet expresses the issues by introducing, "The system keeps me from these things." Sáenz's statements and the "do you realize...?" line help give exposure to the escaramuza and spark a challenge to the powerful figures in charrería.

Discussion

We learn from the analysis that poetic expression is very helpful for global voices, more specifically those with disabilities. When sharing personal experiences, these poems oppose the exclusions in history and aim to change deficit-based descriptions (Oliver, 1990). Taking back our words helps challenge internalized ableism (Wolbring, 2008) and form better feelings about who we are (Swain & French, 2000), as it allows poets to challenge fixed images and identify themselves.

Poetry is also a valuable aid for well-being, as it follows theories in psychology about creative activities and narratives (Malchiodi, 2003; Morgan, 2000). Because the poems are so emotional, they can show us how to work through challenging feelings, even with examples such as frustration or trauma. In "It's Raining in Love," Brautigan explores how social anxiety is something everyone relates to, mainly in the way marginalized people deal with increased self-consciousness.

It is important for disabled poets to have access to this empowering way of communication. Both platforms and formats must be inclusive to let everyone involved, regardless of their needs. In addition, more research should focus on how disability connects with other identities to learn more about the way poetry plays a role in the community.

The analysis emphasizes the role of poetry in provoking positive social change. Like Sáenz in his poem, these poets stand up against assumptions and support advocating for rights. They use their verses to inform and encourage people to think differently about disabilities.

Conclusion

According to this study, poetry greatly helps individuals with disabilities tell their own stories, build positive images for themselves and support important changes in society. It is found that through poetry, people can accept themselves, share their feelings, understand their identity and become empowered to stand up for social issues. It is very important to acknowledge and nurture the original works of disabled people. By making us think and encouraging empathy, poetry can help create a fairer and more diverse world. When we cherish all these different voices, more stories can be shared and everyone can benefit from that.

References

1. Anzaldúa, Gloria. *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*. Aunt Lute Books, 1987.
2. Barnes, Colin. *Disabling Imagery: Reflecting on TV Portrayals of Disabled People*. British Council of Organisations of Disabled People, 1992.
3. Barnes, Colin, and Geof Mercer. *Disability*. Polity Press, 2003.
4. Braun, Virginia, and Victoria Clarke. "Using Thematic Analysis in Psychology." *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, vol. 3, no. 2, 2006, pp. 77–101.
5. Brautigan, Richard. "It's Raining in Love." Poetry Foundation, Poetry Foundation, Mar. 2025, www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/1665864/its-raining-in-love.
6. Brodzki, Bella, Celeste M. Schenck, and складывается Miriam. *Life/Lines: Theorizing Women's Autobiography*. Cornell University Press, 1994.
7. Campbell, Fiona Kumari. *Contours of Ableism: The Production of Disability and Abledness*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2009.
8. Clare, Eli. *Brilliant Imperfection: Grappling with Cure*. Duke University Press, 2017.
9. Deci, Edward L., and Richard M. Ryan. "The 'What' and 'Why' of Goal Pursuits: Human Needs and the Self-Determination of Behaviour." *Psychological Inquiry*, vol. 11, no. 4, 2000, pp. 227–68.
10. Freire, Paulo. *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. Continuum, 1970.
11. Goffman, Erving. *Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity*. Prentice-Hall, 1963.
12. Goodley, Dan. *Disability and Social Theory: Towards a Materialist Understanding of Disablement*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2011.
13. Kafer, Alison. *Feminist, Queer, Crip*. Indiana University Press, 2013.
14. Linton, Simi. *Claiming Disability: Knowledge and Identity*. New York University Press, 1998.
15. Malchiodi, Cathy A., editor. *Handbook of Art Therapy*. Guilford Press, 2003.
16. Mazza, Nicholas. *Poetry Therapy: Theory and Practice*. Brunner-Routledge, 2003.
17. McRuer, Robert. *Crip Theory: Cultural Signs of Queerness and Disability*. New York University Press, 2006.
18. Morgan, Alice. *What Is Narrative Therapy? :An Easy-to-Read Introduction*. Dulwich Centre Publications, 2000.
19. Morrison, Toni. *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination*. Vintage, 1993.
20. Neimeyer, Robert A. "Narrative Strategies in Bereavement Therapy." *Omega—Journal of Death and Dying*, vol. 41, no. 2, 2000, pp. 157–73.
21. Oliver, Michael. *The Politics of Disablement*. Macmillan Education UK, 1990.
22. Pennebaker, James W., and Caryn L. Seagal. "Forming a Story: The Health Benefits of Narrative." *Journal of Clinical Psychology*, vol. 55, no. 10, 1999, pp. 1243–54.
23. Riessman, Catherine Kohler. *Narrative Analysis*. Sage Publications, 2000.
24. Riessman, Catherine Kohler. *Narrative Methods for the Human Sciences*. Sage Publications, 2008.
25. Rogers, Carl R. *On Becoming a Person: A Therapist's View of Psychotherapy*. Houghton Mifflin, 1961.
26. Sáenz, Angelina. "You Can Thank Us Later." Poetry Foundation, Feb. 2025, www.poetryfoundation.org/poetrymagazine/poems/1661232/you-can-thank-us-late.
27. Shapiro, Joseph P. *No Pity: People with Disabilities Forging a New Civil Rights Movement*. Bantam Books, 1994.
28. Siebers, Tobin. *Disability Theory*. University of Michigan Press, 2008.
29. Smith, Jim Ferris. "Poetry and Disability: The Aesthetics of Access." *The Oxford Handbook of Disability Studies*, edited by Gary L. Albrecht, et al., Oxford University Press, 2011, pp. 644–61.

30. Smyth, Joshua M., and James W. Pennebaker. "What Are the Links Between Expressive Writing and Health?" *Clinical Psychology Review*, vol. 21, no. 5, 2001, pp. 727–58.
31. Swain, John, and Sally French. "Towards a Psychology of Disability." *The Disability Reader: Social Science Perspectives*, edited by Tom Shakespeare, Cassell, 2000, pp. 32-40.
32. Wendell, Susan. *The Rejected Body: Feminist Philosophical Reflections on Disability*. Routledge, 1996.
33. Werner, Tamar, et al. "Combating Internalized Stigma: The Effects of a Group Intervention for People With Mental Illnesses." *Psychiatric Rehabilitation Journal*, vol. 37, no. 1, 2014, pp. 31–38.
34. Wolbring, Gregor. "The Politics of Ableism." *Development*, vol. 51, no. 2, 2008, pp. 252–58.
35. Wood, Margaret M., Heidi L. Atwood, and Lori A. Hutchinson. "Braided Selves: Narrative Therapy With Women Who Have Experienced Disability." *Family Process*, vol. 44, no. 3, 2005, pp. 359–74.