



Disempowering the Disabled
in Susan Nussbaum's
***Good Kings Bad Kings* (2013)**

by

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ملخص:

عدم تمكين أصحاب الهمم فى رواية الطيبون أم الأشرار (٢٠١٣) لسوزن نوسبام.

من الممكن ان يصاب الإنسان بالعجز فى أى وقت لذلك من الضروري ان نفهم معنى العجز والأسباب المسببة له وتجارب أصحاب الهمم. هناك صلة وطيدة بين دراسات حالات العجز والأدب حيث يقوم الكتاب بتصوير العجز وأصحاب الهمم فى أعمالهم الأدبية. سيتم إستخدام النموذج الثقافى لدراسة حالات العجز لتحليل المواجهة بين أصحاب الهمم وغيرهم فى رواية الطيبون أم الأشرار (٢٠١٣) لسوزن نوسبام. تعبر نوسبام وهى كاتبة من أصحاب الهمم عن استيائها من الصورة التى يتم تقديمها عن العجز وأصحاب الهمم فى الأدب لذلك تحاول إلقاء الضوء على الصعوبات التى يتعرض لها أصحاب الهمم وترتكز على أهم المشكلات التى تواجههم. هذا البحث يتناول هذه المشكلات ويدرس دور المجتمع والثقافة فى تشكيل حياة أصحاب الهمم وفي عدم تمكينهم.

Abstract

Disability can affect each and every one of us throughout our lives. Thus, it is crucial to understand disability, disablism, and the experience of the disabled. Disability studies and literature are well connected since writers portray disability and the disabled in their fictional works. The cultural model of disability is employed to analyze the confrontation between the disabled and the non-disabled in Susan Nussbaum's *Good Kings Bad Kings* (2013). Nussbaum, an American disabled writer, is dissatisfied with the representation of disability and the disabled in literature, so she attempts to highlight the predicament of the disabled, and focuses on the most important problems they face. This paper traces these problems, and examines the role of society and culture in shaping the lives of the disabled and disempowering them.

Keywords: disability, disablism, cultural model of disability, oppression

Disability can affect each and every one of us throughout our lives. So, it is crucial to understand disability, disablism, and the experience of the disabled. Disability refers to human beings' unstable and insecure condition as they are liable to transformation, degeneration, and death (Seibers, 2008) while disablism refers to "the oppressive practices of contemporary society that threaten to exclude, eradicate and neutralize those individuals, bodies, minds and community practices that fail to fit the capitalist imperative" (Goodley, 2014, p. xi). Thus, disability studies have appeared in the late twentieth century (Mullaney, 2019) as "an interdisciplinary field of inquiry that includes representation from the social sciences, the humanities, and the medical, rehabilitation, and education professions" (Berger, 2013, p. 3). In the 1970s and 1980s, the field of social sciences was the one concerned with disability, and it was represented by political and sociological organizations and publications like *The Society for Disability Studies*, and journals like *Disability Studies Quarterly* and *Disability and Society*. Then, in the late 1980s and 1990s, the humanities became engaged with disability (Davis, 1999).

Disability studies presents a social oppression point of view of disablism that stands up to the social abnormality

point of view (Goodley, 2011). Likewise, Alice Hall (2016) claims disability studies is established to confront the social marginalization of the disabled, and the academics in the humanities insist that disability is a significant and critical category in studying literature and literary theory. She believes that the role of disability theory in the humanities “is driven by a need to think in interdisciplinary ways and to continually question its own parameters and its social, cultural and political value” (p. 52).

Disability studies, as Tobin Siebers (2008) argues, does not find a solution to cure the disability, but it focuses on the “social meanings, symbols, and stigmas attached to disability identity and asks how they relate to enforced systems of exclusion and oppression, attacking the widespread belief that having an able body and mind determines whether one is a quality human being” (p. 4) besides showing the social oppression the disabled are exposed to and the positive contributions they could add to the society. Dan Goodley (2013) attributes the success of disability studies in the twentieth century to its consideration of social, cultural, economic, and political themes instead of accepting it as a person’s tragic fate, or disease or psychological trauma. In

brief, disability is a socially induced problem. In 2014, he writes, “Disability studies is not simply a reaction to the medicalization and individualization of disability but also an antidote” (p. 6). In addition, disability studies develops a distinction between impairment and disability: “impairment refers to a biological or physiological condition that entails the loss of physical, sensory, or cognitive function, and disability refers to an inability to perform a personal or socially necessary task because of that impairment or the societal reaction to it” (Berger, 2013, p. 6).

This paper is going to employ the cultural model of disability to analyze the confrontation between the disabled and the non-disabled in *Good Kings Bad Kings* (2013) by Susan Nussbaum, an American disabled writer. The novel has received the Pen/ Bellwether Prize Winner for Socially Engaged Fiction (p. 305). Nussbaum was not born with a disability but became a wheelchair- user in the late seventies. Consequently, she had to change her career from an actor to a writer, and she writes, “My transformation from shamed victim to furiously rebellious cripp (we took back the word that had oppressed us and used it in our own proud new vocabulary of defiance) was the foundation of my new identity. Still is”

(Nussbaum, 2013, p. 302). She notes how many writers of books and movies do not convey the real life and experience of the disabled because they themselves are not disabled, but she can do the job: “A genuine crip writer, writing about crips” (Nussbaum, 2013, p. 303). Literary representations of disability, according to Alice Hall (2016), tackle urgent issues of the age such as “austerity, empathy, minority status, social care and citizenship” (p. 1). *Good Kings Bad Kings* shows how society and culture disempower disabled children.

The Cultural Disability Model

Disability is established through culture; cultures of modernity are responsible for the notions and ideas about disability and ability by which the current status of disability “is ontologically felt and epistemologically rooted” (Goodley, Hughes, & Davis, 2012, p. 5). Cultural disability studies is a new and rich field related to humanities. This field does not have a specific outline yet (Waldschmidt, Berressem, & Ingwersen, 2017). Sharon Synder and David Mitchell (2006) suggest in the cultural model, disability does not refer to abnormality, but it is a means for diagnosing the culture. It explains how concepts of abnormality are formed, and this

leads to the exclusion of a huge group of people as they are called ‘biologically inferior’.

In an attempt to understand the cultural model of disability, Eleoma Joshua and Michael Schillmeier (2010) define it as “the analysis of the representations of disabled people in the cultural spaces of art, media, and literature . . . this cultural turn in Disability Studies analyzes exclusion and oppression discourses” (p.5). Another point of view by Shanimon S. and Rateesh K. (2014) states the model portrays the role of the disabled and their families; it concentrates on how the disabled and the non-disabled understand disability, and how disability is conveyed and expressed in different cultures. The main notions related to this model are “cultural responsiveness, classification, family integrity and unity, family centeredness, autonomy, liberty, and protection from harm” (p. 5). Furthermore, N. Junior and J. Schipper have explained the model focuses on cultural elements as well as on medical and social elements in addition to how different concepts of disability and non- disability are employed in a certain culture (as cited in Retief and Letšosa, 2018). Ria Cheyne (2019) says the aim of this model is to get rid of the barriers that hinder the disabled in addition to tracing the

influence of disability on texts to understand these texts and the role of disabled society.

Elaborating on the cultural model of disability, Anne Waldschmidt (2017) writes:

The cultural model of disability would not be dismissed as focalizing only symbols and meanings, but could broaden our analytical perspective to investigate the relations between symbolic (knowledge) systems, categorization and institutionalization processes, material artefacts, practices and ‘ways of doing things,’ and their consequences for persons with *and* without disabilities, their social positions, relations and ways of subjectivation. (p. 24)

She asserts this model is not like the religious or the social model; it depicts how society and culture lead to the construction of a certain class entitled ‘disability’. She concludes the cultural model of disability indicates an

essential change within the epistemological point of view because it focuses on the center of society and culture. Thus, disability studies become ‘dis/ ability studies’. The presence of the slash refers to the interaction between ‘normality’ and ‘disability.’

Good Kings Bad Kings portrays a group of children with disabilities in a nursing institution facing oppression and exclusion. It is narrated by seven characters, three disabled children, a disabled employee, two caregivers, and a recruiter. This narrative technique recalls Mikhail Bakhtin’s ‘polyphony,’ a term which he used in describing the novels of Dostoevsky. He says Dostoevsky employed:

A plurality of independent and unmerged voices and consciousnesses, a genuine polyphony of fully valid voices is in fact the chief characteristic of Dostoevsky’s novels. What unfolds in his works . . . a plurality of consciousnesses, with equal rights and each with its own world. (p. 6)

Nussbaum gives each character a distinctive voice; she does not control them. They are free and independent. All voices are equal which adds richness to the story. For example, there is Joanne Madsen, the disabled employee, who observes what happens in the institution and uncounsciously empowers one of the disabled children, Yessina Lopez, to protest to change the miserable conditions in the institution. Yessina is an independent girl who does not believe her disability to be a problem. Other voices include Mia Oviedo, another disabled girl, who is isolated due to her bad experiences, and Teddy Dobbs, a disabled boy, whose dream was to have an independent life but loses his life due to negligence. There are also the voices of the caregivers, Ricky Hernandez and Jimmie Kendrick, who support and protect the disabled children. In addition, Nussbaum presents the voice of Michelle Volkmann, a recruiter for the company that runs the nursing institution, who changes from an obedient employee to a person suspecting the intentions of her employer. There are different perspectives in the story to highlight the problems facing the disabled.

Nussbaum's choice of focusing on the lives of the disabled in a nursing institution is probably because, as Synder

and Mitchell (2006) argue, the disabled found out they are no longer the responsibility of their families and community, and their lives are run by institutions and state and federal agencies. According to the society, the disabled are unable to take care of themselves, so they are sent to institutions (Hughes, 2012). Nussbaum tackles different issues facing the disabled such as misuse of terms, dependency, psycho-emotional disablism, power and oppression, negligence, double-consciousness and misunderstanding, and stigma and identity.

Misuse of Terms

Nussbaum (2013) portrays the confusion in terms referring to the disabled. Ricky Hernandez, one of the caregivers, refers to this confusion, and that Illinois Learning and Life Skills Center (ILLC), a state-run nursing facility for adolescent youth, does not care to use the suitable or right term: “My mom’s sister. She was retarded which now they’re supposed to say ‘intellectually disabled’ but nobody here uses it much” (p. 17). Also, Joanne Madsen, a crippled employee at ILLC, refers to the confusion of using the right term in a meeting held by the company that runs ILLC. The members

struggle to use the right word: “they use the word ‘handicapped.’ Or sometimes they’ll say ‘handicapped or disabled’ together. As if they personally prefer using ‘handicapped,’ but they realize there are some newfangled notions out there about saying ‘disability,’ so they’re covering their bases” (Nussbaum, 2013, p. 85).

Joanne elaborates on how she prefers being called ‘crip,’ and that it gives her power and strength:

Some crips think using “crip” should be retired for good, because it reveals a deep lack of self-esteem, besides sending the wrong message to the noncrip majority. I disagree. I still find “disabled” pejorative. Why not take back the king of all pejoratives, “cripple,” and re-empower it by giving it the crip imprimatur? (Nussbaum, 2013, p. 85)

To use ‘Cripple’ when referring to the disabled is insensitive, but the term is sometimes used to suggest power. It is also used to designate people with a variety of disabilities though it

should only refer to people who have problems with movement (Linton, 2006). ‘Cripple’ has appeared once again in disability circles who call themselves ‘crips’ or ‘cripples’. The disabled are proud to use this word to empower themselves and solidify their identity (Shapiro, 1993).

It has been agreed in general speech, as Simi Linton (2006) in “Reassigning Meaning” explains, that ‘disability’ points to physical or psychological symptoms which medicine considers significant. However, the term is used inconsistently by confused people and even specialists who claim their right to define such phenomenon. On the other hand, disability studies and the disability right movement have assigned a meaning that is related to sociopolitical analysis of disability. In general, the term refers to a broad category, but it actually refers to a specific minority class. Thus, as ‘disability’ is considered a social or political classification, then people who have disabilities are called ‘people with disabilities’ or ‘disabled people,’ a group who are connected together as they socially and politically experience the same things. These new labels strengthen the position and identity of the disabled and could help them proceed with their political activism. The term “disabled has become a marker of the identity that the

individual and group wish to highlight and call attention to” (p. 163).

Another example of the misuse of terms regarding disability is when Teddy Dobbs, a disabled teenager, thinks about the label:

They told my dad I'm retarded. They told him first at regular school and then when I moved in here. My dad said that's just a word they use that means I got a different way of learning stuff. That's the way I think of it because I sure don't feel retarded. My friend Ryan's retarded and I asked him if he feels retarded and he said no. So I guess I am but I don't notice it. (Nussbaum, 2013, p.38)

Some terms referring to the disabled like “cripple, vegetable, dumb, deformed, retard, and gimp” (Linton, 2006, p. 164) are no longer used in public because they are insulting and rude; however, they are heard in informal settings. Teddy is called “retarded little shit” (Nussbaum, 2013, p. 107) by one of the caregivers, Louie, who takes him to the time- out room and

threatens him, “I can be a good king or I can be a bad king” (Nussbaum, 2013, p. 107). This brings one to the title of the novel which shows the non- disabled know they have authority and power over the disabled children.

Dependency

People who have a disability are called ‘dependent’, according to Synder and Mitchell (2006), because of lack of employment, and they compare the disabled’s position to slaves and unpaid servants. Similarly, James Charlton (2006) mentions the disabled “are outcasts” (p. 218). Joanne explains how difficult it is to get employed because of having quadriplegia besides the employers’ reaction to her disability:

There is such a thing as job discrimination. People will see me coming through the door, wheelchair awhir, and momentarily freeze. Then they will marshal their resources and nervously reach out to shake my gimpy hand and smile enthusiastically while they mentally feed my résumé to the shredder. (Nussbaum, 2013, p. 10)

Joanne gets a job at ILLC because it is an institution for disabled children: “I think I got a job *because* of my disability. It’s well known in crip circles that the best place for a crip to get a job is a place that’s swarming with other crips” (Nussbaum, 2013, p. 11). She is completely aware of the discrimination. Even families of the disabled believe in their children’s dependency. Yessenia Lopez, one of the disabled children, hears her grandmother saying, “Who going to do that when I’m gone?” and that made me feel mad because even Tía Nene never seen me for myself. Even she thought somebody always gots to take care of me” (Nussbaum, 2013, p. 32). This status of dependency contributes to the marginalization of the disabled.

Psycho- emotional Disablism

Disabled people feel their presence is not welcomed in typical places. Therefore, they have problems concerning their sense of belonging which influences their well- being (Goodley, 2014). Joanne refuses Rickey’s invitation to his nephew’s birthday: “Where there’s a birthday party, there is family, and you never know how someone’s family is going to react. To the disability” (Nussbaum, 2013, p. 58). She is also worried about how Ricky’s parents are going to accept this relationship: “I’m just worried they’ll think I’m an “invalid,”

or poor childbearing material, or the worst imaginable choice for their son, brother, et cetera” (Nussbaum, 2013, p. 213). People believe the disabled are different, so the non- disabled have hard feelings for them. (Beauchamp, Chung, & Mogilner, 2010). Joanne experiences these negative emotions when she goes out with Ricky: “The waitress comes by and asks Ricky if everything is okay. I realize that not only am I invisible, but she’s flirting with him. It’s a double- invisibility whammy” (Nussbaum, 2013, p. 66). In everyday situations and communication, many disabled feel their presence is either invisible or detestable (Titchkosky & Michalko, 2012).

What Joanne experiences is called psycho- emotional disablism, “forms of social oppression which undermine the psycho- emotional well- being of people with impairments” (Thomas, 2007, p. 73) like making fun, staring, humiliating a person because of his/ her impairment. In addition, there is internalized oppression which occurs when one incorporates negative ideas about the disabled in the society such as when a disabled person believes he/ she could not be a parent because of the image that he/ she is not interested in having a relationship, and he/ she needs help (Goodley, Hughes, & Davis, 2012). Joanne also experiences structural disablism, “forms of social oppression which restrict the *activities* of people with impairments” (as cited in Goodley, Hughes, &

Davis, 2012, p.333) like barriers put by society, lack of job opportunities, isolation in special schools, and discrimination.

Power and Oppression

At ILLC, the teachers and caregivers are dominant, superior, and powerful while the disabled are subordinate, inferior, and powerless. Charlton (2006) argues the issues of ideology and power have a strong connection with disability; he defines oppression as:

A phenomenon of power in which relations between people and between groups are experienced in terms of domination and subordination, superiority and inferiority. At the center of this phenomenon is control. Those with power control; those without power lack control. Power presupposes political, economic, and social hierarchies, structured relations of groups of people, and a system or regime of power. This system, the existing power structure, encompasses the thousands of ways some groups and individuals impose control over others. (p. 222)

When students show they have disability, they are categorized and put on a different path. Those who are professional and have authority label students with terms like LD, ED EMH, etc. These terms have different meanings, but they all symbolize inferiority. Moreover, after being diagnosed, these students receive instructions and orders that must be followed.

Unfortunately, some teachers at ILLC are mean and aggressive with the children. Mrs. Schmidt orders Ricky to take Pierre, a disabled teenager, to time-out room in addition to “always saying negative stuff about a kid right in front of him and everybody” (Nussbaum, 2013, p. 68). Pierre faces aggression more than once by Louie who prevents Pierre from having his meals because he took off his shirt and refused to listen to Louie’s order. Yessina comments, “He slams Pierre so hard that Pierre’s feet go right out from under him and it look like he’s just hanging in the air for a second till all of a sudden he goes *down*” (Nussbaum, 2013, p. 164). Louie used to be a prison guard; he is dealing with these disabled children as if they are dangerous prisoners. Though he gets fired from ILLC, he is appointed in “group home for boys with psychiatric disabilities” (Nussbaum, 2013, p.212). Another teacher called Mrs. Velasquez sends a girl called Cleo to the

time- out room because she refuses to participate in the gym class. She is not causing any trouble, so Ricky is astonished by Mrs. Velasquez's decision: "Cleo is sitting by herself, she's a chair person so she's in her chair, not acting out, not making trouble, just sitting" (Nussbaum, 2013, p. 143).

Yessenia hints at the issue of power and how the non-disabled are afraid of the disabled: "At Hoover they didn't keep no mirrors in the bathroom, or at Juvie. That's because they afraid us children will break them up and stab each other or the teachers or ourselves. They afraid of their own children" (Nussbaum, 2013, p. 30). She recalls an incident of oppression when her teacher duct- taped her schoolmate's hands then whole body because "he had a brain challenge and he had a loose tooth and he kept wiggling and wiggling" (Nussbaum, 2013, p. 187). The position of the carer and cared can weaken the relationship between the disabled and the staff in group-home. Things such as harmony, sympathy, or coming to agreements are not going to be achieved easily in a culture similar to prison, where the disabled have to obey the caregivers. Places like group- home influence the behaviors of both the staff and people with disabilities (Nunkoosing & Haydon-Laurelut, 2012).

Mia Oviedo, one of the disabled children, faces more than one kind of oppression. She is raped over and over again; first by her father, and then by one of the care givers, Jerry. She narrates her painful experience at ILLC:

The first time he came I was sleeping. . . .
He put something like a towel in there real hard and held his hand over my mouth and the thing he put in there, in my mouth, it pushed in my throat and I can't breathe.
(Nussbaum, 2013, p. 53)

Residents, who are defenseless, in institutions are exposed to the abuse of staff during the night due to the lack of staff on duty at that time (Fiala & Lewis, 2008). Mia is traumatized, and Joanne notices there is something wrong with her: "It's like she's trying to make herself invisible. Not that invisibility is hard to achieve when you're a crip. We're minor characters in someone else's story" (Nussbaum, 2013, p. 84). Mia wishes to disappear from the whole world, which, according to Joanne, is easily achieved when one is a disabled person.

Mia is also oppressed when she is prevented from her right to have an electric wheelchair because it is against the

rules. Teddy says, “She didn’t even have the manual chair and they made her lie in her bed all day” (Nussbaum, 2013, p. 37). Joanne comes to the conclusion that the nursing home does not want to empower the disabled kids: “The reason Mrs. Phoebe won’t give out power chairs is because power chairs would give the children more autonomy. Keeping them immobile makes it easier on the staff,” (Nussbaum, 2013, p. 41) and, later on, she expresses her anger that eighteen and nineteen years old are not allowed to cross the streets alone: “Kids like this are trained to stay helpless. So they have to stay institutionalized. There’s no other way to explain it” (Nussbaum, 2013, p. 82). Linton (2006) comments on how institutions know the importance of wheelchairs to the disabled but choose to cripple them: “It is that type of manipulation and control, along with architectural and attitudinal barriers, that confine people. It is not wheelchairs” (P. 170). Synder and Mitchell (2006) observe one of the main oppressions the disabled are exposed to is they are violated whether in public or private; their disability subjects them to any interference. This oppression takes place because they are always considered an object of research. Similarly, G. Thomas Couser (2006) comments, “One of the social burdens of disability, then, is that it exposes affected individuals to

inspection, interrogation, interpretation, and violation of privacy” (p. 400).

Some of the caregivers believe the children to be evil monsters they should not be deceived by, and they are the poor victims not the children. Candy, one of the caregivers, says, “Children will manipulate you if you give them a chance. They’ll play you off against each other, they’ll lie. And these ones’ll do worse than that because they know off the bat you’re gonna feel sorry for them” (Nussbaum, 2013, p. 160). Hughes (2012) states the non-disabled consider disability a sign of “impairment, unreason, sickness, monstrosity, abjection and death, all the ‘repulsive’ embodied characteristics that civilization” wishes to get rid of (p. 25). The society is responsible for making a connection between these vicious characteristics and disability since the past, and they have a lasting impact which causes the suffering of the disabled. Unfortunately, an important issue concerning the oppression of the disabled is they are evaluated according to the criteria of the ideal individual, so they lose (Goodley, 2013).

In contrast to these malevolent teachers and caregivers, there are caring and supportive caregivers such as Ricky and

Jimmie. Ricky refuses to quit his job despite the stress; he is kind and caring: “Yeah, this is the best job I ever had. I like helping people. I like being a part of the solution” (Nussbaum, 2013, p. 39) while Jimmie knows the importance of being attentive to the children’s needs: “I don’t care who the kid is, he or she is going to want to talk about their day, ask you questions about any- and everything. . . You have to be there, be present” (Nussbaum, 2013, p. 124). These caregivers are the ones who help the disabled children to bear the hardships at ILLC.

Negligence

Negligence is another important issue Nussbaum deals with, and is associated with nursing homes and institutions. Concerning these institutions, Synder and Mitchell (2006) write, “Today’s nursing homes, sheltered workshops, and twenty-four- hour- care facilities all function in a way that we might associate with a more *barbaric* historical moment of treatment for bodies deemed excessively aberrant” (p. 135). Joanne is astonished to find a huge number of children admitted to the hospital: “Thirty-two out of roughly eighty kids were admitted to St. Theresa’s in a seven-month period”

(Nussbaum, 2013, p. 59). Moreover, Teddy loses his life because of the negligence in the nursing home. Vicky, one of the caregivers, takes Teddy to give him a shower; she opens the water and goes outside to call her husband. The water is so hot: “It feels like there’s fire coming outta the shower top. I keep screaming for someone to come get me.. . . There’s some blood going down the drain” (Nussbaum, 2013, pp. 190- 191).

Another example of negligence of institutions is when a girl, at another institution called IMD, was found dead in front of the TV and the reasons of her death were not known. Michelle Volkmann, a recruiter in the company that runs ILLC, says, “They found her sitting in front of the TV like six hours after she died and by then she had rigor mortis” (Nussbaum, 2013, p. 147). Negligence is one of the main causes of the huge number of deaths in institutions. Unfortunately, the staff working in institutions are unqualified and are not trained to take care of the disabled children in addition to being extremely negligent. What makes the institutions think it is not a big deal is the staff’s belief these children will not be able to lead a long life because of their disabilities; thus, the death of these children goes unnoticed (Rechel, 2008).

Double- consciousness and Misunderstanding

People with disabilities have what DuBois called double- consciousness. First, according to biomedicine, their disability is a problem if there is something wrong with their body, mind, sense, and emotions. So, they know they have a problem. Second, they see themselves through the eyes of the non- disabled, and witness their existence as a problem for them (Titchkosky & Michalko, 2012). Joanne displays this double-consciousness. She has experienced an unhealthy relationship which resulted in her loss of confidence. Her ex-boyfriend demeaned her: “He also criticized the way I pronounced words, my taste in music, my clothes, and, to add insult to injury, my body. . . he had pretty well strip-mined my self- confidence” (Nussbaum, 2013, p. 81). To dehumanize the disabled via language has a huge impact on their consciousness. Similar to other oppressed people, they are forced to submit to the ideas of the dominant culture because of the current ideological power (Charlton, 2006).

Nussbaum also depicts the misunderstanding that could occur between the disabled and the non- disabled. For example, when Ricky wants to help Joanne to put on her coat, he gives the matter a thought: “I want to ask her does she need

help with that, but who knows, you know, maybe she could take that the wrong way” (Nussbaum, 2013, p. 39). Another example of misunderstanding when Michelle compliments Joanne on her typing skills despite her disability, and Joanne stares at her “and then she says, “Thanks.” I guess I was supposed to feel all “I’m this horrible person” because I mentioned her handicap or disability or whatever. So she hates my guts now” (Nussbaum, 2013, p.102).

Stigma and Identity

Families resort to institutions because of poverty and negative social attitudes towards the disabled children besides the unavailability of services and options for them. These attitudes result in stigma for both the children and their families, and hinder their integration into the society (Rechel, 2008). Stigma is “the most pervasive attitude toward disability in modern Western society” while stigmatization is the society’s response to those who do not measure up to the expected norms concerning appearance or behavior. Stigma is associated with culture and is formed according to the beliefs and standards of the dominant group (Darling, 2013). Yessenia sympathizes with her roommate, Cheri, who wants to return to her family, but they do not want her back: “But

they said for her to stay put here, maybe this place do something with her. They wash up their hands of their own child. I feel bad for her. I really do” (Nussbaum, 2013, p. 30). Unfortunately, despite the changes in societies’ reactions towards disability, stigma and injustice continue to exist (Darling, 2013).

Identity formation is a lifetime process as one faces new circumstances (Darling, 2013). Yessenia is not an activist; she is just a strong independent teenager who does not consider her disability a problem. She criticizes the rules of ILLC, “They think you’re too stupid to even walk out the door on your own. . . .I think I know how to walk outside a damn door” (Nussbaum, 2013, p. 67). What makes her protest is the loss of Teddy. Rosalyn Darling (2013) suggests when people experience new situations, they form new relationships that take the lead. She quotes A. Strauss’ (1962) ‘turning point’ which refers to a certain period of time in a person’s life when he/ she meets new people and establishes a relationship influencing his/ her identity (p. 9). The death of Teddy is the turning point for Yessenia. She is fed up with the nursing institution, so she wraps herself around a tree and holds up a sign saying, “THIS PLACE ABUSE AND KILL CHILDREN” (Nussbaum, 2013, p. 196). She manages to attract the attention of media and expose ILLC.

It has never occurred to Yessenia to publicly stand up to disablism until Teddy's death. Self- concept and identity are internalized, but they surface when a person has a role to play. "Behavior, or role playing, is the external manifestation of identity and the means by which others become aware of a person's identities and self- concept" (Darling, 2013, p.9). The manager of ILLC tries to stop Yessenia from protesting, but Yessenia insists to continue her protest for Teddy's sake. Despite the problems the protest stirred for the institution, nothing of considerable importance has been done to improve the conditions of these disabled children.

The idea of favoring the able bodied and excluding the disabled could be understood through Michel Foucault's analyses in *Discipline and Punish* and *Madness and Civilization*. Foucault explains in *Discipline and Punish* that interest in the body exists since the classical age which "discovered the body as object and target of power. It is easy to find signs of the attention then paid to the body — that is manipulated, shaped, trained, which obeys, responds, becomes skilfull and increases its forces" (1995, p. 136). A person was valued for his/ her efficiency and ability to contribute to the welfare of society. Foucault depicts the history of how nursing institutions came into existence. In the seventeenth century

the insane and those who committed offenses were confined to prison and later sent to hospitals, but were not well-equipped for treatment; they were like poorhouses or institutions. The upper and middle classes established these institutions to get rid of those people who were not productive. The goal was to have a body that works like a machine, and this set the norm of differentiating between healthy and sick bodies (*Madness and Civilization*, 1988). Rosemarie Garland Thomson (2017) writes Foucault did not mention the disabled in his works though some of the poor had physical disabilities, but she believes his ideas shaped the identity of the disabled in modern times. Thus, one could say disability is subconsciously considered a defect that needs to be cured to serve the best interest of the society, and this explains why the disabled are marginalized.

Conclusion

Many people are going to experience disability at some point during their lives. Unfortunately, the disabled, most of the time, are looked upon as people deserving sympathy and pity, so Nussbaum tackles this issue. *Good Kings Bad Kings* depicts the interaction between the disabled and the non-disabled, challenges the stereotypical representation of the

disabled in addition to uncovering the hidden reality of their lives. Though it is her first novel, Nussbaum manages to present a group of disabled children who have their own narrative purpose; they are not there as a tool to contribute to the interest of the non- disabled. They are not minor characters who are evil and monstrous and whose disability needs to be cured or removed; they are characters full of life. Nussbaum's use of Bakhtin's polyphony presents several voices without her judgment. Different ideas are there for the reader to understand the life of the disabled children. Terms such as 'disability' or 'impairment' are meaningless for the disabled children. They do not feel they are unhealthy, according to the perspective of the non- disabled, or they have a problem that needs to be cured. It is the society that puts these criteria: those who are dominant, powerful, superior and believe they are working for the best interest of the disabled. As it has been shown, disability is a cultural and social construction. Therefore, the disabled children are disempowered to lead their own independent lives.

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