

# Education: A Right or a Limitation – The Voice of the Differently-Abled

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## Abstract

The research paper focuses on the learning disability of Samantha Abeel and the physical disability of Helen Keller concerning their Life Writings, *My Thirteenth Winter* and *The Story of My Life* respectively. It brings to limelight the struggles faced by a person with learning differences and how they and their family are blamed for various reasons. It also throws light on how they are seen as an outcast and are discriminated in the so-called normal society. It seeks to bring forth how learning disabilities are seen as a taboo even in the modern world. On the other hand, Helen Keller was accused of Cryptomnesia for unknowingly plagiarizing a story of Margaret T Canby. Unlike Samantha Abeel, Helen was given acceptance from people but, the examination system was highly challenging for her due to the varieties of Braille available. This was inhuman on the organisation's part to have made her appear for her exam without any human assistance to help her deafness and blindness. The research article tries to bring out how these sufferings of both the writers stand as the voice of the differently-abled and how it calls for a collective plea and collective identity in the field of education. It brings forth to establish that the method of learning and the pace of it are different, but that does not make them any less of a person in having equal rights to acquire knowledge and to possess an identity they wish to have. The disability theory of Alice Hall with reference to *Literature and Disability* is incorporated.

**Keywords:** Dyscalculia, Coming Out Narrative, Cryptomnesia, Collective Identity, Disability Rights.

Education is one of the primary rights that is given to every individual across the world. In a modern world like this, Education has become a base to all occupations and it has become a need for survival. However, the method and the process of gaining knowledge may vary according to the needs and capability of the individual. Even though one side of the world is convinced with special education, the other side has its own preconceived notions towards it. In a country such as India, Disabilities are often seen as a curse or a taboo and are not readily accepted. Disability studies take its origin from the 1990 passage of the Americans with Disabilities Act. In Literature, it takes its root from Post Colonialism and Queer theory. The Key texts taken for research are the Life Writings of Samantha Abeel and Helen Keller, who have reached great heights by getting themselves educated despite their disabilities and the prejudices attached to it.

Samantha Abeel, who got diagnosed with dyscalculia found it very hard to accept her identity as a person with a cognitive difference. In her work, *My Thirteenth Winter: A Memoir*, she gives instances from her second grade on how it was extremely difficult for her to calculate the time which her classmates did with much ease. “I can name the numbers I see, and I know the hands that stretch out from its center are supposed to give me the answer I am looking for, but for me the direction they point to doesn’t mean anything.” (Abeel 13)

She went to an extreme to conceal her identity in order to suit the mask of a “Smart Kid”. She was a prodigy in all her creative writing classes but she felt strained on the subjects that demanded mathematical applications and sequential processing. Even though she was well versed in many aspects of education, she always felt a need to mask her disability from others in order to escape the prejudices that were attached to it. In one instance, where her mother explains her basic subtraction application, “Come on Sam, You know you can get this... It makes sense...” “I can’t” I say through broken sobs. “I don’t know.” My mom begins to cry as well, er calm exterior broken.” (Abeel 18)

Unlike Samantha Abeel, Helen Keller was cognitively intelligent but physically disabled. This was extremely difficult for her when she appeared for her examinations at her Radcliffe. She expresses her bitterness on the management for treating her that way in her autobiography, *The Story of My Life*. Being in the world of darkness, her only light was gaining knowledge from various sources. Education at school level was not difficult because Ms. Anne Sullivan taught her realistically. In fact, She says, Teaching was not like teaching, it was more like gaining knowledge through various means. It was against the traditional method of teaching as it cannot be used to a person who is visual and hearing impaired.

When she entered college, it became arduous for her to listen to the lecture and take notes in her Braille. Although Ms. Anne Sullivan helped her by pronouncing each word on her hand, it was difficult for her also to tirelessly utter each word in Keller’s hand. As Helen Keller was an avid reader, she spent most of her time in reading books which made her to master German, English Literature and many other fields in Education.

When Samantha Abeel’s mother understood about having a learning disability from an online article, she became aware that the traditional method of learning will not be of any help to her daughter and hence she decided to put her in a classroom that is for special kids which would be of help to Samantha Abeel. This paved the way to a variety of judgments and accusations on Samantha’s Mother. She was seen as a mother who is standing up for her daughter’s laziness and was accused of discouraging her own daughter. The teacher who was in charge of the special students went to an extent of telling that, “Do you have any idea what you will be doing to your daughter by placing her in a room with those kinds of kids?” (Abeel 93)

Being fully aware that continuing in the same class with other normal students would kill Samantha's self-esteem to nothing, she was persistent in her views in making her daughter enrol herself in the special education class where she need not mask her disability and where she need not pretend as if she knew everything.

In *Literature and Disability*, Alice Hall brings out, how a Life Writing can be called an "Activism" where the disabled fight for their equal rights in all spheres of life and they work for a collective identity. "These accounts often shift the focus from a view of auto/biography as an individualistic endeavour, as "the acme of independent, liberal, individual self-expression in Literature" (Coogan 42). As Helen Keller is the first deaf-blind woman to receive education and to graduate from college. The Life Writing acts as a source of which others can follow her footsteps. Similarly, Abeel's Memoir also brings out the unuttered sufferings of a person with a cognitive difference. They both had a different way of gaining knowledge and that becomes a paradigm of the Marginalized.

Both the Life writing seek right for their collective identity which Simi Linton mentions in her *Claiming Disability*, where she explains how disability can be of many types and yet come under one umbrella with an identity as disabled or differently-abled, as they are all marginalized in the same way from the other so-called normal people.

The Life Writing stands as a "Coming out Narrative" where the authors bring to limelight the need to come out and to cherish life as the others do. Alice Hall says, "...Yet it can also be viewed in both cases as an empowering act of celebration, of proudly naming and claiming a positive identity that counters histories of enforced silence." (Hall 134)

Thus, through the Life Writings, both the authors have provided a paradigm that the process of gaining knowledge may vary according to the capability of the individual. It is a right and never a limitation as it can be well received irrespective of the disability they possess and the social status they come from.

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