

## Affirming Differences: A Critical Analysis of Sonia Sotomayor's *Just Ask: Be Different, Be Brave, Be You*

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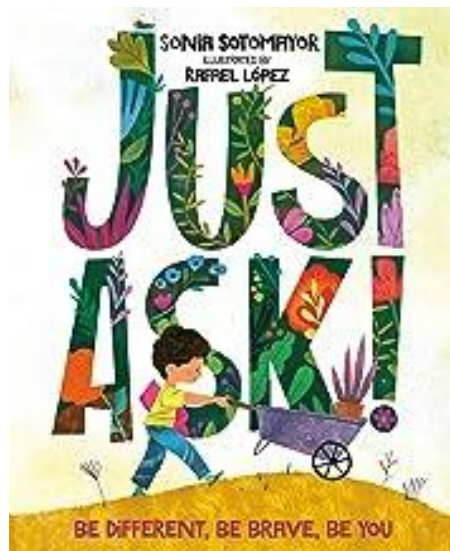
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### Abstract

Disability Studies is a multi-disciplinary area of academic study that examines the representation of differently abled individuals in literary narratives. Picture books hold significant sway in children's literary narratives by combining visual elements with textual content. The paper offers an analysis of the picture book, *Just Ask: Be Different, Be Brave, Be You* authored by US Supreme Court Justice, Sonia Sotomayor from the standpoint of the critical theory, Disability Studies. It delves into the Affirmation model of disability, which perceives physical and mental impairments as mere differences and advocates for treating differently abled individuals as part of the norm.

**Keywords:** *Just Ask: Be Different. Be Brave. Be You*, Sonia Sotomayor, Disability, The Affirmation model, Difference, Normalcy, Acceptance.

Disability studies has undergone various changes in its definition and treatment of disability with each new model that was developed to address various facets of disability. The Affirmation model of disability introduced by John Swain and Sally French in their theoretical essay, “Towards an Affirmation Model of Disability”, stands out as a non-tragic perspective on disability and impairment. It champions positive social identities, both individual and collective, for disabled individuals, grounded in the unique life experiences associated with impairment and disability. In this model, Swain and French describe “impairment” (“Affirmation Model of Disability”) as a physical, sensory, and intellectual difference to be acknowledged and respected on its own terms in a diverse society. Unlike previous models of disability, The Affirmation model places emphasis on the positive aspects of disability and even encourages differently abled individuals to take pride in their own physical or mental impairment.

The oldest model of disability, **The Moral or Religious model**, views disability as an act of God and often associates it with the sins of individuals or their ancestors in their former births. This viewpoint has potentially destructive consequences since it could cause the impaired person’s entire family to be excluded from social interactions. With advancements in the medical sector during the 1800s, The Moral Model was supplanted by **The Medical Model**. The Medical model treats disability as a disease and portrays it negatively, characterising it as a tragic and pitiable condition. This model also positions the disabled individuals as inferior to their normal able-bodied counterparts.

The limitations of the earlier Medical model paved the way for the **Social Model of Disability** in the 1960s and 1970s. The Social model examines how society mistreats individuals with impairment and critiques the concept of disability itself. Subsequent models include the Identity model, which treats disability as an identity, the Human rights Model, which treats disability as a human rights issue, and the Cultural model, which treats disability as a cultural aspect. In contrast to the earlier models of disability, The Affirmation model challenges these negative connotations and stereotypes associated with disability emphasising the need for a positive self-image among disabled individuals. Advocates of the Affirmative model claim that disabled people’s beliefs and feelings about themselves, their impaired bodies, and their lives can affirm the value of their unique experiences.

Lennard. J. Davis, an American specialist in disability studies highlights in his theoretical work, *The Disability Studies Reader*, the unfortunate practice of ranking children in school, “Our Children are ranked in school and tested to determine where they fit into a normal curve of learning, or intelligence”(1). This early pruning of differences in children aims to conform them to the society’s norms and moreover, they are expected to think, learn,

and act in a certain way as dictated by the society as normal. Rarely are children taught to embrace and respect both their own and others' differences.

*Just Ask: Be Different. Be Brave, Be You* is a picture book of 25 pages that celebrates the lives of children with disabilities. The author of the book, Sonia Sotomayor, reflects on her own experiences as a child with differences in her Letter to Readers. When she was diagnosed with diabetes as a child and had to give herself needle shots of insulin, her classmates would often give her curious stares. These stares made her feel different, and as if she were doing something wrong. Throughout her picture book, Sonia Sotomayor exhorts children to 'just ask' when they encounter children with differences. On a positive note, the author refrains from using terms like 'disabled children' or 'handicapped children' or even 'differently abled children' in her book but just refers to them as children with differences.

The author, Sonia Sotomayor, employs a simple yet thought-provoking style of writing in her picture book. She skilfully strikes a balance between conveying profound messages about diversity, disability, and inclusion while writing in a language that resonates with the experiences of the children. The questions at the end of each account encourage young readers to reflect on the experiences and perspectives of the characters, fostering empathy and critical thinking. By incorporating this interactive element, Sotomayor creates a participative reading experience effectively conveying the book's central message of understanding and embracing differences.

At the beginning of the book *Just Ask! Be Different. Be Brave. Be You*, Sotomayor brings in the symbol of a garden to illustrate the world of different children, she says "Hi I am Sonia. My friends and I are planting a garden. Gardens are magical places. Thousands of plants bloom together, but every flower, every body, and every leaf is different" (Sotomayor). This analogy of the garden emphasises that just as thousands of plants bloom simultaneously with different smells, different flowers, different leaves, berries, and different colours, each different child will flourish with their unique happiness and success in their own time.

Sotomayor extends this idea beyond differently-abled people, highlighting that all of us possess differences in our own ways. She also notes that while some differences are easily noticeable, others may be more challenging to identify. She encourages her young readers to just ask if they have any questions or doubts about the differences they observe in other children. This message reinforces the idea that a kid will remain different and mysterious to us only until we gather up the courage to inquire about how and why they are different.

Anyhow, Sonia Sotomayor acknowledges that not everyone will be comfortable answering questions about themselves or sharing personal information. However, considering the author's own experience as a different child, it becomes apparent to the readers that Sotomayor might have had an easier time if any of her inquisitive classmates had inquired about the additional doses of insulin that she needed.

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Before the end of each chapter, Sotomayor poses a question to her readers. After describing about how she too had to take her medications, she asks the reader, “Do you need to take medicine to be healthy?” (Sotomayor) This question posed to the readers also serves as a connecting thread between the author’s descriptions of each of her character’s impairments. From her narration about her own difference as a child, she transitions to recount the story of a boy named Raphael who is dealing with asthma. The book’s adopts a first-person narrative style characters’ for each of its characters’ stories, fostering a sense of intimacy and affinity between young readers and the characters. This approach enables children to better comprehend and relate to the differences in the characters.

Rafael, the second character in the book, relies on an inhaler with medication to manage his breathing difficulties. Similar to Sonia Sotomayor’s own narrative, this account about Rafael also concludes with a thought-provoking question, “My inhaler is like a tool to help my body. Do you use it tool to help your body?” (Sotomayor). Contrary to the Medical model of disability, which often perceives practices like taking medication to maintain health and using tools to assist the body as signs of weakness or disability, Sotomayor argues that these are entirely normal aspects of life that anyone, regardless of ability, may occasionally require. She emphasises that differently-abled individuals should not be seen as victims or tragedies solely because of their medical difference.

The accompanying illustration of Rafael using an inhaler while sitting on a flower symbolises the idea that Rafael, like all other children in the garden that Sonia planted, has the same potential for growth and flourishing despite his differences. This reinforces the notion that, despite their unique characteristics, all children have the same potential for development.

The third different character that Sotomayor brings in her book is a boy named Anthony who uses his wheelchair to move around. Anthony shares “I’m Anthony and I use a wheelchair to get around. Even though I can’t run with my legs. I can go super-fast” (Sotomayor). Instead of depicting Anthony as an unhappy child in his wheelchair, Sotomayor provides an illustration where Anthony is portrayed as speeding in his wheelchair alongside his friend. Through this illustration, Sotomayor urges her readers to recognise the normalcy of children with different abilities rather than seeking to elicit sympathy toward them. Additionally, an illustration of a bird is included to symbolise the freedom of mobility that Anthony enjoys. This chapter also ends with a question directed to the readers, “How do you get from place to place?” (Sotomayor).

This question serves as a bridge connecting the account of Anthony to the story of a blind boy, Madison, who relies on his guide dog for safe travel. Madison mentions his yet another blind friend, Artura, who uses a cane to move around. The author introduces two distinct types of visually impaired characters, highlighting the difference within the

differently-abled community. Madison further mentions, “Even though we can’t see, we strengthen our other senses and notice lots of details others may miss; we can hear with our ears, smell with our noses, and feel with our hands” (Sotomayor). Rather than characterising visual impairment as a disability, Madison describes it as a sort of superpower that enables them to hear, smell and feel things with a level of detail that even a person without visual impairment might overlook. Moreover, it empowers them to harness their senses more effectively. The description underscores the positive aspect of having a different ability and hints at the enhanced sensory perception it offers.

Sotomayor then introduces a child character who experiences hearing loss, saying, “I am Vijay. I learn about the world differently because I can see, but I can’t hear - I’m deaf” (Sotomayor). Vijay’s disability is also portrayed as a tool that enables him to perceive the world uniquely. Being deaf, he communicates with his friends through sign language, and he does not seek sympathy but instead finds it “cool to know another language” (Sotomayor). Through a question that is put to the readers, “I also love reading and writing. What about you?” (*Just ask*) Sotomayor moves on to an account of Bianca, a child with Dyslexia, a learning disorder that causes difficulty in reading and interpreting words. The author maintains a positive perspective on Bianca’s impairment stating from the point of view of Bianca, “I love learning by doing things. My imagination is full of ideas, and I’m very good at making art from the pictures I see in my mind” (Sotomayor). Disability is not presented as a hindrance but rather as an advantage.

Sotomayor also includes characters with Tourette’s syndrome and Hyperactivity Disorder in her book. Because of her Tourette’s syndrome, Julia is unable to control her recurring wiggles and inappropriate sounds. Through Julia’s story, the book sheds light on how society perceives disability and children with special needs. While the Social Model is considerate about how the differently abled people are ill-treated in a society it falls short of acknowledging their normalcy. The Affirmation Model, conceals this limitation of the Social model by encouraging disabled individuals to embrace their differences and to love their impaired bodies rather than viewing their bodies as obstacles to their dreams.

Julia discusses how she is mocked by the society for being different, “People may look at me funny because they think I am not paying attention or just acting out. But it’s not true; I am listening” (Sotomayor). Even though explaining herself to people can be frustrating, she believes that it might help if she explains to people how her body reacts differently. This portrayal underscores the idea that differences in the body should be treated as something normal and natural, and thus it challenges societal misconceptions about disability.

Manuel is a character who suffers from Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder. He says, “I can get frustrated, when I really feel the need to move around even though I am supposed to sit still. When my teachers and friends are patient with me if I forget something



or get distracted, I can get myself back on track”(Sotomayor). Sotomayor tells about how our patience while dealing with disabled children can actually get them back on track. Nolan, a character who is allergic to certain food items is also brought in the book. He has to regularly explain to people about his food allergy and inquire about food ingredients to ensure his well-being and health.

Sonia Sotomayor’s book also addresses Down syndrome through the character of Grace. Grace begins with an entry that reflects her love for singing, talking, making new friends, and desiring inclusion, “I love to sing and I love to talk. I love to make new friends and be included” (Sotomayor). This highlights that children with Down syndrome share common desires for social interaction and inclusion. However, they are often discriminated against and mocked even in their own friend circle. Grace says, “I can do anything any kid can do, though learning new things can take some time” (Sotomayor). She confidently asserts her capabilities, yet society often labels her as a disabled and abnormal child for being a slow learner.

*"Just Ask: Be Different. Be Brave. Be You"* by Sonia Sotomayor serves as a powerful and affirming testament to the diverse and unique lives of children with disabilities. Through a cast of characters representing various conditions and abilities, the book embraces the Affirmation model of disability, emphasizing that differences should be celebrated rather than pitied. Sotomayor's narrative not only challenges societal misconceptions and biases but also encourages readers, young and old alike, to embrace diversity and engage in open dialogue about differences. The characters in the book show that disability is just one facet of their identities and that they possess talents, strengths, and aspirations that are just as valid as anyone else's.

The situation for disabled individuals in India remains complex, marked by both progress and persistent challenges. The country has made strides in enacting legislation and policies aimed at safeguarding their rights and promoting inclusion. The Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act, 2016, marked a landmark development in this regard. However, challenges such as limited access to quality education, healthcare, employment opportunities, and social stigma continue to hinder the full integration of disabled individuals into mainstream society. The need for continued efforts to bridge these gaps and promote a more inclusive and equitable environment for disabled individuals in India remains a critical concern.

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