

Research Article

## Disability and Exclusion within Family in Harshikaa Udasi's *Kittu's Very Mad Day*

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**Abstract:** Disability is considered to be a sin and a curse in Indian cultural values. People with disabilities have been stigmatized, marginalized, and excluded from society. The notions constructed by the ableist society build a barrier to having an inclusive society for people with disabilities. The society's misconceptions and inaccessible environment lead to exclusion and denial of acceptance of disabled people. These stereotypical ideas are ingrained within the children's mindset, which prevents them from engaging with the disabled children. Children hesitate to connect with children with both physical and mental disabilities. This paper focuses on Harshikaa Udasi's novel "*Kittu's Very Mad Day*" and its protagonist, Kittu, who, because of his physical deformity, is excluded by his family members. Kittu's inability and stereotypical notions lead his family to consider him a burden for his daily needs—his exclusion from the family results in his solitude and marginalization. Udasi picturizes the state of disabled children within the family and in society. The paper aims to investigate the challenges faced by disabled children within their families to foster inclusion.

**Keywords:** Children's Literature, disability, marginalization, inclusiveness

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**Introduction**

Disability encompasses the social and environmental barriers that result from an impairment. Disability refers to a restriction on an individual's ability to participate in everyday activities or to perform tasks due to an interaction between impairment and societal factors. According to Stumbo, "disability is not just an inherited or physical attribute but a consequence of interaction among individuals and their social and physical environment, comprising a complicated mix of cultural, social, climate, political, topographic, technological, and architectural components" (115). In Indian society, disability has often been viewed as a defect resulting from moral failings or sins, which signifies the evilness of individuals and perceives them as possessing wicked abilities. It is also deeply interconnected and shaped by cultural, social, and historical features. People with disabilities are often regarded as objects of pity, charity, or burden. In particular, people with physical disabilities most often undergo these kinds of experiences. Individuals with physical deformities often face higher levels of stigma compared to those with other disability. Among sensory and mental disabilities, physical deformities are easily identifiable due to their visibility, whereas sensory impairments are less visible, which can reduce society's immediate judgment. According to Jones's systematic review, "there is clear evidence that shows children with physical disabilities are twice as likely to be targets of violence as non-disabled children" (899). Individuals with physical deformities undergo unfair discrimination on their appearances, which affects their mental health and social integration.

People with disabilities have been struggling with social stigma and stereotypes since ancient times. The ableist society excludes and marginalizes them. Marginalization is the primary level of resistance to the inclusion of disabled people. The result of marginalization is social exclusion, which involves more than just physical barriers; it also inflicts serious emotional damage from being ignored, causing individuals to resist connecting with society. The experience of social exclusion makes disabled individuals feel isolated and helpless, which pushes them to the margins of society and leads them to seek help from their family members and caregivers. Social Exclusion is a complex and multi-dimensional process. It involves the lack or denial of resources, rights, goods, and services, and the inability to participate in the normal relationships and activities available to most people in a society, whether in economic, social, cultural, or political arenas. It affects both individuals' quality of life and the equity and cohesion of society as a whole. (Levitas 9)

Non-disabled people hesitate to address and interact with disabled people, which depicts the ingrained cultural notions and negative attitudes in society. Social exclusion will cause long-term damage to education, living conditions, and social and economic participation. Disabled individuals need support from their families and communities, particularly when they face social and environmental barriers. This support can be hindered by a lack of resources as well as families' concern over discrimination and stigma constructed by society.

Disability in literature offers a window into the experiences and challenges of people with disabilities, providing a unique perspective on their lives. In literature from

epics to contemporary books to children's books, characters with disabilities are often portrayed as different from other characters. The portrayal of disability has not always been positive; stigma, stereotypes, and societal attitudes frequently shape it. Children's literature depicts characters with disabilities, helping children develop a positive understanding of disability. Representation of disability in these books can help children acknowledge and understand their experiences and interact with disabled children from different perspectives. At the same time, these books show how the characters try to conform to societal norms while developing the means to escape social discrimination. The disabled characters seek to normalize their disability as per the norms of the ableist society.

This paper examines the work of the Indian children's novel, *Kittu's Very Mad Day* (2017), by Harshikaa Udasi. The novel subtly highlights how a disabled child can sense the unintentional exclusion within the family, mirroring the broader social marginalization they undergo in society. Udasi narrates the life of ten-year-old boy Kittu, who, with one leg, lives in an extended family he calls "Most Chaotic Family in the World." He has strong opinions about every member of the family and is not afraid of criticizing them. Kittu is fond only of his mother and the youngest member of the family, Chinmee, a three-year-old who adorably misspells his name, calls him Tittu, and loves him regardless of his disability. Every other member of the family neglects Kittu and ignores his presence. "In examining how disability is socially constructed in literature, readers might look at how disability is defined, how a disability affects the characters' interaction with family members and the wider community, how people with disabilities are treated, and problems that these characters face" (Adomat 2009). The stereotypical notions held by his family members force Kittu to live in isolation. Kittu's disability and his need for assistance with his accessibility distance him from connecting with the family. Pappa did not seem interested in his son's life and had no expectations of him. Kittu was quick to pick up on that. His Cousins found Kittu strange and were not very interested in him. On his part, Kittu was glad to be ignored. For the trip, he planned to take a seat as far away from them as possible. (Udasi 9-11)

The entrenched social exclusion affects not only individuals but also families. The familial exclusion often stems from cultural beliefs, lack of awareness, and societal humiliation. The families with disabled individuals experience shame as the families feel pressured to confront the perceived moral implications of society. Kittu's physical deformities are considered a burden by his family. They fail to fulfil his emotional and physical needs, which leads to his domestic isolation. The family's acceptance becomes a major concern for Kittu. There is a growing rift between Kittu and his cousins because of his deformity. The non-disabled children play together, leaving him isolated and longing to be included. Children often hesitate to interact with disabled children due to perceived differences and view them as "others," which inadvertently creates a pathway towards social exclusion. Kittu's self-acceptance becomes evident when he chooses to embrace his body and physical abilities rather than to connect with his cousins.

Kittu has been accidentally left behind at the Rain Basera Dhaba during a chaotic trip with his family to Pana. There, he meets an ice-cream wala named Madhav

and moves in with his family, eventually learning how to skate despite his crippled leg. The abandonment of Kittu highlights the pitiable state of disabled children within the family. Family members overlook him amid the commotion due to his slow pace and reliance on crutches. In society, a disabled child was unfairly perceived through a lens of utility. A common issue faced by individuals with disabilities is that they are often viewed as anomalies requiring constant, exhausting care. The relentless demands of specialized care can cause family members to become emotionally disconnected.

The ingrained societal notion of otherness and perceived differences in the minds of the young children lead to discrimination and social exclusion. The children in the village discriminate against Kittu because of his appearance and his interest in learning to skateboard. Kittu becomes the subject of laughter among the children when he falls off the skateboard. Kittu is eager to learn to skate despite his fall, which demonstrates his ability to train his body with one leg. As Garland Thomas (2002) contends, "Supercrip stories are a genre that authorizes pity and amazement of the experience of disabled adventure" (Garland Thomas 2002). The narratives of individuals who are incapacitated and have embarked on an adventure, successfully challenging societal ideologies, serve as evidence that social norms are false assumptions perpetuated by society. Kittu's adventurous journey to learn to skateboard builds his confidence and also confronts ableist societal norms. When Kittu started skating, it was not just about his own enjoyment; it also brought his family closer together. Everyone in the family is delighted and impressed by his skating skills, which create shared moments of joy and pride. By shattering stereotypical notions of disability, Kittu fosters inclusivity and connects with his family.

Children's books serve as a mirror, fostering inclusivity, empathy, and understanding among young readers by exploring characters grappling with disabilities. Books with disabled characters are not only important for children with disabilities but also for non-disabled children and adolescents to be aware of their disabled peers and accept their disabilities. Udasi, through her narrative, represents the attitudes of the family members of having a disabled child. Due to societal stigma associated with disability, parents sometimes reject their children, perceiving them as a shameful burden rather than attempting to accept and care for them. The Kittu family's ignorance of his disability and lack of attention to him reflect the challenging reality of living as a disabled child. Lavanya Naidu clearly illustrated Kittu's experiences, helping young readers understand the challenges these disabled children face. The protagonist, Kittu, shatters society's misconception about disability through his skating skills. Kittu challenges societal norms to establish inclusivity within his family. The acceptance of their family indicates the acceptance of society, where people with disabilities should not be viewed as different.

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