

Article

Representation Of Disability in *The Oracle Code*

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Abstract: This research paper examines *The Oracle Code* by Marieke Nijkamp in the context of the Social Model of Disability, to consider how the narrative portrays disability as a social issue rather than an individual one. The narrative revolves around Barbara Gordon, a teenage hacker coming to terms with life in a wheelchair after a brutal injury. Set in the Arkham Center for Independence, the novel critiques institutional ableism by portraying the center as a place that pretends to support recovery but instead enforces conformity to non-disabled norms. Barbara's journey from despair to empowerment embodies the core of the social model, where the barriers she faces are not physical but societal attitudes and structural exclusion. The narrative actively resists stereotypical portrayals of disability as tragic or inspirational. Instead, it presents Barbara as a complex, capable individual who challenges oppressive systems and reclaims her identity. Drawing from Nijkamp's lived experience as a disabled and neurodiverse author, the novel becomes a powerful piece of resistance literature. It insists on visibility, autonomy, and dignity for people with disabilities. This chapter argues that *The Oracle Code* is not only a graphic novel about disability but also a celebration of disabled voices and agency within a world that often seeks to silence them.

Keywords: Disability; Representation; Social Model; Graphic Novel; Ableism; Resistance; Empowerment

1. Introduction

In recent years, graphic novels have emerged as a powerful form of storytelling, offering nuanced examinations of complex social issues, including identity, trauma, and disability. One example of this evolution is *The Oracle Code* by Marieke Nijkamp, illustrated by Manuel Preitano. At its core, the novel is a poignant story about a teenage girl, Barbara Gordon, who lives with a disability in a world dominated by ableism and asserts control over her narrative in the face of ableist scrutiny. Blending character development, narrative methodology, and thematic richness, this paper explores disability representation in *The Oracle Code*, analyzing it through the lens of the Social Model of Disability.

A prime example showing evidence of the stratifications of people with disabilities and their perspective would be the Social Model of Disability, which has theorists such as Mike Oliver that sought to shift the focus away from individual limitations to the social and physical barriers that segregate and alienate people with physical, mental or sensory differences from society. It is not someone's impairment that makes them disabled; it is the attitudes and structures in society that are inaccessible and prejudiced (Oliver). This research identifies the gap, a notable absence of scholarly literature addressing the portrayal of disability in *The Oracle Code*. Most existing literature either emphasizes individual disability or fails to analyze how these stories critique or challenge social attitudes. While compelling in its plot, Barbara's story gains even greater depth when explored through the narrative structure and the evolution of her character, topics examined in the following section.

2. Plot Analysis

Marieke Nijkamp's *The Oracle Code* (2020), illustrated by Manuel Preitano, begins with a crucible moment in the life of its protagonist, Barbara Gordon. A sharp-witted, tech-savvy teenager and daughter of Gotham's police commissioner, Barbara's life is turned upside down when she is shot during a crime and left paralyzed from the waist down. After her injury, she has been admitted to the Arkham Center for Independence, a facility designed to help young people heal physically and emotionally. At first glance, it seems to be a place of healing. However, as Barbara later learns, things are not what they seem. Patients begin to disappear, rules are implemented with eerie strictness, and the employees appear to be concealing something beneath their placating smiles.

However, Barbara grapples with internal and external wars as the tale unfolds. She withdraws from those around her, refuses to make friends, and resists therapy. However, despite her pain and reluctance, her sharp mind and hacker instincts will not allow her to ignore the peculiarities around her. Her investigation uncovers a horrific truth: the head of the institution, Dr. Lachlan, is conducting secret experiments on disabled teens under the guise of helping them become 'whole' again. The story culminates in a tense and empowering climax, in which Barbara comes to terms with the abuse and simultaneously reclaims her independence, sense of self, and dignity.

What is particularly meaningful about this story (from a disability studies standpoint) is how closely it fits the Social Model of Disability. First proposed by Mike Oliver, this model pushes back against the idea that disability arises from a person's physical or mental differences. It says the barriers to disabled people participating in society are found in the attitudes, environments, and structures where people do not consider the needs of those with disabilities, instead excluding and devaluing them. Oliver says it is society that disables physically impaired people (Oliver). Likewise, Tom Shakespeare criticizes the medical model, emphasizing the need to remedy the individual. He also urges us to investigate the discrimination and exclusion in the social world that defines the lives of disabled people.

In *The Oracle Code*, Barbara's biggest challenge is not her wheelchair; it is how people treat her because of it. Even the Arkham Center, which should ostensibly be a place of care, ends up representing a kind of deeper oppression. It is well-meaning, but controlling systems reflect a sort of institutional ableism in which help is available only if the disabled person alters themselves to fit a non-disabled mold.

This is powerfully demonstrated in a key scene when Dr. Lachlan says to Barbara, "What we do here is important. For us. For the greater good of all. That no child should suffer for being anything less than whole" (Nijkamp 175). His words reflect the medical model's mentality, in which disability is a defect to correct. Rather than accepting his ableist view, Barbara resists the narrative of brokenness. As Marieke Nijkamp affirms in her interview, *Q&A with Marieke Nijkamp*, "It is healing only in the understanding that we do not have to be flawless, we do not have to be abled to be whole" (6). Far more than a personal act of rebellion, her defiance is political, resonating with Oliver and Shakespeare's arguments that real change begins with transforming how a culture thinks about and incorporates its members.

Further, Barbara's arc in the story reflects this perspective emotionally. In the beginning, she says, "You cannot fix me. It is pointless. I know exactly who I was, but everything has shattered" (Nijkamp 19). Here, she expresses a deep sense of loss, internalizing the cultural belief that the injuries she has endured have made her less than. However, her attitude changes as she learns the truth and fights it. When she adds, "Losing is only permanent if you stop trying" (Nijkamp 95), it is a sign of an even more profound transformation from despair to resilience, from shame to pride.

Nijkamp was deliberate about this character arc. She recounted her frustrations with standard disability narratives in an interview: "For the longest time, books taught me that the only worthwhile ways to be disabled were: as an inspiration to abled folk, cured by the end of the story, or dead... I have spent too many hours arguing that we must be human" (*Q&A with Marieke Nijkamp* 4). That conviction is central to *The Oracle Code*. Barbara is not framed as a tragic figure or a superhero. She is a multidimensional teenager, intelligent, stubborn, brave, scared, just trying to find her way in a world that does not believe she can.

The Arkham Center's setting is more than a backdrop; it serves as a metaphorical commentary regarding how disabled individuals are often treated by society. It

professes to provide support when what it does is constrain freedom, challenge competence, and reconstruct disability as something that needs to be repaired. Tom Shakespeare warns against this in his critique of 'professionalized care models' that take autonomy from people in the name of help. Barbara's rejection of this model is a declaration of independence, not just for her, but for anyone who has been told they need to be different to be accepted.

Barbara's journey, from injury to empowerment, is what disability scholars have always said: The goal is not necessarily to be 'normal,' but to upend narrow definitions of living a whole life. As Nijkamp so eloquently puts it, "It is healing only in the understanding that we do not have to be flawless, we do not have to be able to be whole" (Q&A with Marieke Nijkamp 6). This message is central to *The Oracle Code*. Barbara's story, while powerful in plot, takes on a deeper meaning through the development of her character over time, which the next section explores.

3. Narrative Structure and Character Development

Barbara Gordon's character arc across *The Oracle Code* is a much-needed, richly transformative journey from internalized ableism and emotional resistance toward self-acceptance, empowerment, and activism. More than a physical change, it relates to the social dimensions that characterize and limit the experience of disability. In the narrative, Barbara is trying to adjust after a gunshot injury to her spinal cord. Her transition into the Arkham Center for Independence (ACI) reveals a space ostensibly meant to 'rehabilitate' disabled bodies and minds, but underneath its surface is a profoundly ableist structure in which disability is framed as a problem that must be fixed.

Initially, Barbara evokes feelings of grief and dislocation. Her emotional crisis reflects not just trauma, but the burden of societal expectations placed on disabled individuals. As Marieke Nijkamp states, "For the longest time, books taught me that the only worthwhile ways to be disabled were: as an inspiration to abled folk, cured by the end of the story, or dead" (Q&A with Marieke Nijkamp 4). This encapsulates the condition of her shattered self-esteem, called so after society molded a narrative of disability as a natural catastrophe demolishing one's potential.

This framing reflects what disability theorist Tom Shakespeare refers to as the 'tragedy model' of disability, in which the individual's life is regarded as lessened due to impairment (Shakespeare). However, as the story progresses, Barbara begins to confront these ingrained stories. This is a crucial distinction because her narrative arc is not about obtaining a medical cure, but rather about changing how she sees herself and the system around her. A critical juncture for her evolution is when she resolutely states, "I get it now, I think. I am who I have always been" (Nijkamp 188). This is not a story about disability it is a reclamation of both individual and collective identity and the continuity that weaves through the here and now, aligned with the Social Model of Disability, which posits that disabled people are not disabled by their impairments, but by the structural barriers and attitudes that marginalize them (Oliver).

In interviews, Marieke Nijkamp supports this narrative intent, claiming *The Oracle Code* is not about 'overcoming' disability; it is about fully understanding, accepting, and embracing disability as part of one's identity and resisting the narrative thrust by society at large that disability is something to be pitied or cured. Disability is not something to be overcome, she states. It is just part of who you are. The damaging thing is how society treats disabled people as lesser (*Disability Visibility Project*). This belief runs through Barbara's journey, transforming from isolation and resistance to connection and agency.

Barbara's growth is reflected in her relationships with other ACI residents, notably Yeong and Issy, whose lives with disabilities are marked by resistance, intellect, emotion, and strength. The friendships she makes are key in changing her outlook on life. They aid her in understanding that the issue is not her body but what institutions and ideologies do to disabled people.

Her increasing awareness of these hidden abuses at ACI, particularly the unethical experiments disguised as care, further symbolizes how society often masks control and coercion in a rehabilitative setting. This institutional betrayal catalyzes her transformation from a passive recipient of care to an active agent of resistance. Her confrontation with Dr. Lachlan, "We are whole! We will not let you do this" (Nijkamp 175), is a symbolic rejection of ableist definitions of wholeness. Her emotional journey is not just personal; it reflects larger themes about social systems, which are discussed in the next section.

4. Disability as a Social Construct and Thematic Interplay

The Oracle Code articulately expresses that the disability does not lie in the individual, but is a social, institutional, and cultural construction. Via the story of Barbara Gordon, the graphic novel disrupts conventional, medicalized portrayals of disability. It shows how systemic expectations network limitations that prove a much greater oppression than physical impairment alone. This reading is underpinned by a social model of disability, pioneered by theorists such as Mike Oliver. This model suggests that 'disability' is not in the experience of physical or mental impairment but in social barriers, physical and attitudinal, that stigmatize, exclude, and marginalize people with impairment (Oliver).

This construct is vividly illustrated in *The Oracle Code* by the Arkham Center for Independence (ACI) setting. ACI has all the appearances of a supportive environment for people learning to live with disability. However, the institution slowly lays bare its actual role as an oppressive system, one that imposes an ableist ideology of normalcy and 'fixing' on its residents. This is especially clear in Dr. Lachlan's declaration: "What we do here is important. For us. For the greater good of all. So that no child should have to suffer being less than whole" (Nijkamp 175). His language is clear that disability is a break from the rightful state of good health, and only those who might be deemed disabled can be whole if only they are 'cured' (Oliver).

This thematic shift parallels what Marieke Nijkamp herself has highlighted in interviews. She explains that *The Oracle Code* is not a story of triumph over disability,

but of finding new meanings of strength and wholeness in a world that frequently conflates value with physical perfection. The point was never that Barbara gets better, Nijkamp says. It was to show her understanding that she is precisely the way she is and that society's pressure to fix disabled people is what is broken (Disability Visibility Project).

The theme is reiterated in the institutional voice of Dr. Harland Maxwell, stating, "We understand that learning to live with disability is a long and emotional road" (Nijkamp 15). This sounds compassionate, but under it runs the belief that disability should be emotionally painful and that it is something to adjust to instead of something to accept as a form of valid existence. Later, when he proclaims, "Our flawed science has failed you... Like Clara, you deserve to be healed," Barbara and others respond, "We deserve to be human" (Nijkamp 186). This exchange encapsulates the book's central theme: the dehumanizing treatment of disabled people, both through the mass and university-implemented institutional efforts and scientific attempts to 'fix' them, and through acts of resistance that allow people to reclaim their dignity.

This thematic structure also involves an interplay between fear, identity, and agency. Barbara's journey is not about escaping fear but understanding it. "It is fear that keeps us sharp, that keeps us going, that keeps us figuring out the unknown" (Nijkamp 190). This revisited concept of fear calls into question the assumption that strength is fearlessness. Instead, it bears out that courage often walks hand in hand with fear, especially in a world made to make disabled people feel unsafe, unseen, or less.

Additionally, the refrain "stop trying to fix us" (Nijkamp 183) becomes a thematic motif that encapsulates the novel's rejection of the medical model of disability, while reasserting the right to exist without continually having to conform to social norms.

Ultimately, the resolution to the narrative's thematic crux is encapsulated in Barbara's statement, "I am who I have always been" (Nijkamp 188). This means that the most radical change is not physical but in the psychological and social landscape. She does not regain use of her legs, nor does she desire to. Instead, she takes ownership of her identity on her terms, defying the narrative that disability is potentially lost.

5. Resistance through Community and Narrative Agency

One of the most powerful aspects of *The Oracle Code* is how it embeds community and storytelling as a part of resistance. Barbara Gordon's rehabilitation is not a solitary odyssey of empowerment. However, it is empowered by her increasing relationships with different disabled characters within the Arkham Center for Independence (ACI). Together, these individuals create a community of resistance against institutional control and the reappropriation of their right to tell their stories in their voice and on their terms.

Michael Oliver describes the Social Model of Disability as saying that disability should not be seen as an individual deficiency but as a social construction that makes people with impairments second-class citizens within a social system that is designed in a way that excludes them. This narrative framework is evident in *The Oracle Code* by the representation of the ACI. While the center is framed as a rehabilitation site, it

becomes a space of control and coercion in service of the medical model's imperative to 'fix' disabled people. Dr. Lachlan's insistence "What we do here is important ... so that no child should have to suffer being less than whole" (Nijkamp 175) exposes the underlying belief system that disabled bodies need fixing, not respect. Barbara's answer, "We are whole!" (175), is a deliberate act of ideological resistance rooted in the Social Model. It argues that disabled people are not simply broken creatures to be made whole with medicine; they are whole.

Such resistance is empowered by community solidarity. Characters like Yeong, Issa, and the memory of Clara all contribute to Barbara's metamorphosis. These friendships are more than supportive relationships; they are political alliances. As Jenny Morris explains, the shared experience of oppression is a basis for collective resistance, and this insight informs *The Oracle Code*, which illustrates how Barbara grows stronger through mutual trust and shared defiance. Instead of defining themselves as patients, the ACI young people become investigators, seekers of truth, and whistleblowers.

Furthermore, the narrative agency is key to this resistance. Barbara's background as a coder and detective signifies her capability to deconstruct digital and societal narratives and reconstruct them through her gaze. Her increasing unwillingness to embrace the ACI's false narratives of who and what it means to be disabled is an act of symbolic resistance. Nijkamp writes in her interview, "I have spent too many hours arguing that we simply get to be human, too" (Q&A with Marieke Nijkamp 4). In the words of Tom Shakespeare, resistance to dominant narratives about disability begins when people assert control over their interpretation of their lives. Barbara's new ability to write, decode, and confront is a stand-in for this process.

Barbara's face-off with the institution is personal and a broader commentary on institutionalized ableism. Dr. Harland's remark that "Our flawed science has failed you... too many of you... too often" (Nijkamp 186) is an unusual instance of admission. However, the children's reply that "We deserve to be human" (Nijkamp 186) clarifies that the priority is dignity, not repair. This line captures a key claim that the social model pursues: that the absolute artifice comes not in the forms of impairment, but rather in a brutalizing regime that asks people how they can be cured, or fixed.

In other words, one narrates as a form of empowerment. Barbara's "I get it now, I think. I am who I have always been," she offers (Nijkamp 188), is not merely a personal epiphany, but a political one. By claiming agency over her story, not defined by pity, heroism, or tragedy, but by truth, she and others break down the narratives forced on them. The disability theorist Rosemarie Garland-Thomson has observed that Narrative authority is pivotal for restructuring the cultural scripts of disability. Barbara's evolution from subject to narrator embodies this reclamation of voice.

Thus, *The Oracle Code* recounts the story of an individual discovering strength, collective resistance, resilience, the ethics of care, solidarity, and self-authorship. The social model enables us to view this narrative not as transcending disability, but of transcending systemic oppression using community, voice, and resistance.

6. Limitations

This study focuses on a single graphic novel, *The Oracle Code*, and applies the Social Model of Disability as its primary theoretical framework. While this allows for a focused and in-depth analysis, it also presents limitations. The paper does not include a visual panel analysis, which could have added another dimension to understanding how disability is represented through artwork. Additionally, it does not compare *The Oracle Code* with other disability-related graphic novels, which could have highlighted its uniqueness more strongly. These aspects are beyond the current scope but present meaningful directions for future research.

7. Conclusion

In conclusion, *The Oracle Code* by Marieke Nijkamp is a powerful reimagining of disability representation in graphic literature. It shifts the narrative away from stereotypical portrayals of disabled individuals as tragic, inspirational, or in need of a cure, and instead presents a nuanced and empowering story grounded in the Social Model of Disability. Barbara Gordon's journey from trauma and isolation to self-acceptance and resistance highlights the systemic nature of ableism, where institutions like the Arkham Center for Independence attempt to control and 'fix' disabled people rather than support them as they are. This novel challenges these institutional and societal narratives by showing that barriers lie not in the body but in societal attitudes, physical inaccessibility, and cultural expectations. Barbara's assertion of her identity through resistance, community solidarity, and narrative agency emphasizes that disability is a valid form of human existence.

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