

The Language of Silence: An Exploration of Beverley Brenna's *The Moon Children*

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*Disability in literature sheds light on the struggles and muted suffering of disabled individuals as they strive to find their place in society. Through literature, readers are able to gain a new perspective on the experiences of disabled individuals. Because the disabled community is a minority community, their pain and cry for help often go unheard, making them doubly marginalized. Many writers are now bringing attention to the silent suffering of disabled individuals in their works, providing a clear picture of their struggles. One such writer is Beverley Brenna, a writer and special educator, who possesses a unique insight into the emotional challenges faced by disabled individuals in an able-bodied society. Her works often focus on invisible disabilities and feature resilient protagonists. One of her notable works is *The Moon Children*, which tells the story of a young girl named Natasha who loses her voice after experiencing trauma at a young age. This paper explores how the silence of disabled individuals is used as a means to reach out to the able-bodied society and highlights the oppression they face when their voices are not heard.*

Keywords: Oppression, Silence, Stigma, Gaze, Trauma, Disablism, Existence.

Literature functions as a medium for conveying ideas and portraying reality. Numerous practices and cultural distinctions are illuminated through literary works, with writers viewing this role as a paramount undertaking to acquaint their readers with the diverse array of human practices and cultural norms within society. There is a discernible trend in literary works shifting their emphasis from the predominant societal narratives to encompass the experiences of minority communities. The hitherto marginalized voices of these groups find resonance in the literary creations of various authors. Minority communities, including but not limited to the LGBT, tribal, disabled, Dalit, Parsi, and others, assume a central thematic role in literature, thereby providing a platform for the nuanced exploration of their unique perspectives.

Minority communities frequently face marginalization and neglect, as societal priorities tend to favor an idealized image of perfection. Among these communities, the disabled face a unique crisis as they are deemed lesser humans and excluded from society. Their identity is often silenced and manipulated by those who are temporarily able-bodied, who have constructed a normative scale based on physical abilities. As stated in the World Health Organization's report on Disability Including Prevention, Management, and Rehabilitation, "Disability is not an attribute of an individual, but rather a complex collection of conditions, many of which are created by the social environment. Hence the management of the problem requires social action, and it is the collective responsibility of society at large to make the changes necessary for full participation of people with disabilities in all areas of social life" (2001, p.28).

The definition provided above implies that able-bodied individuals perceive their own bodies as flawless by highlighting perceived imperfections in disabled bodies. Disability, being perceived as deviating from the norm, is frequently laden with negative connotations. Consequently, individuals with disabilities experience dual oppression, contending with the challenges posed by their impairments while simultaneously enduring stigmatization from an ableist society, resulting in their silencing and marginalization. Despite being

fundamentally no different from their able-bodied counterparts, individuals with disabilities are often cast in a negative light.

The objective of this research essay is to shed light on the marginalized and oppressed position of the disability community in the society. It is evident that the able-bodied society constructs a norm scale based on the defects of the human body and sees disability as out of the line. Disabled individuals are considered half humans and are silenced, their identity tampered by the temporary able bodies. The essay focuses on the work of Beverley Brenna, a special educator and writer, who brings attention to the silent suffering of disabled individuals in her works, particularly children. *The Moon Children*, one of her notable works, tells the story of a young boy, Billy, and a young girl named Natasha who lose their voices after experiencing emotional abuse. They come to the realization that their words are neither valued nor heard by able-bodied society. The essay aims to highlight the importance of giving voice and recognition to the disabled community and their struggle to secure a place in the society.

Beverley Brenna, a special educator, is dedicated to depicting the experiences of disabled individuals in society, with a particular focus on disabled children who struggle to have their voices heard. In her novel *The Moon Children*, Brenna highlights the stories of Billy, who suffers from FASD, and Natasha, who loses her voice during her emigration from Romania to Canada after a traumatic incident. Natasha's experience highlights the vulnerability of disabled individuals who are often unheard by society. As a child, she is shattered by the realization that her words hold no value or weight among able-bodied individuals. The societal structure has been constructed in a way that disregards and excludes those with 'broken' or 'defective' bodies, leaving Natasha broken and marginalized. As quoted by Kinshuk Chakraborty quoted Helander in a UN Press conference,

Handicapped people remain outcasts around the world living in shame and squalor around the world among populations lacking not only in resources to help them also but also in understanding. And with their numbers growing rapidly, their plight is getting worse [...] The normal perception is that nothing can be done for the

disabled children. This has to do with prejudiced and old-fashioned thinking that this punishment comes from God, some evil spirits or magic [...] We have a catastrophic human rights solution [...] They [disabled people] are a group without power. (2020, p.3699)

Natasha's story is a heartbreaking example of the devastating effects of violence and neglect on children. Born in Romania, she experienced the trauma of abandonment by her birth mother at an early age. Her journey to find a sense of belonging and security was fraught with hardship, as she endured neglect and violence in her early years. These experiences left an indelible mark on her, causing her to feel alienated and displaced from the world around her. The emotional toll of her trauma manifested in the loss of her voice, leaving her silenced and powerless.

Natasha's story is a poignant representation of the larger political and social issues that contribute to the suffering of children around the world. As a victim of the politics of violence, she represents the countless children whose lives are forever altered by forces beyond their control. Their struggles are often unseen and unheard, leaving them to suffer inwardly and carry the scars of their trauma for a lifetime. Natasha's journey highlights the importance of recognizing and addressing the systemic issues that perpetuate violence and neglect against children.

Billy's classmates and others use derogatory labels, causing him sadness and confusion. Similarly, Natasha faces harsh judgments, with some assuming she is mute. In reality, she can speak, but the trauma of her move from Romania to Canada due to war, separation from her family, and experiences in war camps, followed by adoption into a new and unfamiliar Canadian family, has left her unable to communicate. The shock of migration and the challenges of adapting to a new country and culture have silenced Natasha. She fears that others won't understand her due to the early trauma she endured, compounding the difficulties of expressing herself.

The significance of the episode where Billy encounters Natasha is profound. Billy's attempt to capture Natasha's attention through his usual tricks becomes an emblem of her distinctiveness, as

she remains impervious to conventional social expectations. Despite his efforts, Natasha remains immersed in what appears to be a solitary pursuit, filling the pages of a school notebook weeks after the academic term's conclusion: "He tried a few tricks, stealing glances at the girl to see if she might be watching him, but she wasn't... When he stopped and looked over at the girl, she still wasn't watching him; instead, she was writing something on some paper. He walked across the street to get a closer look. A notebook. She was writing in a school notebook when everyone knew school had been over for two weeks? 'Hey you,' he said, going up the long sidewalk towards her house. 'Whtacha doing?'" (Brenna, 2007, p.8). This intriguing revelation deepens the enigma surrounding Natasha, prompting Billy's insatiable curiosity to delve into the layers of silence enveloping her. His colloquial inquiry initiates an exploration into the aftermath of unspoken trauma in Natasha's life—a silence that resonates with Billy's own silent struggles as a child with Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder (FASD). In this poignant encounter, the unspoken connection between them begins to weave a narrative beyond spoken words, drawing them together in the shared complexities of their silent worlds (Brenna, 2007, p.8).

Billy, well-acquainted with the anguish of derisive laughter and the societal marginalization perpetuated by an ableist culture, profoundly comprehends Natasha's enigmatic conduct and her inclination toward secrecy. In a poignant encounter, he discovers her engrossed in sketching within her notebook—an artistic portrayal featuring a building and an accompanying figure. Natasha, however, veils the intricate details by splaying her fingers over the drawing, intentionally obscuring the creation from Billy's inquisitive gaze. His earnest plea to glimpse the artwork is infused with a genuine curiosity and a yearning for connection, coupled with an earnest assurance that he will neither harm nor ridicule her—an assurance grounded in his own visceral understanding of the devastating impact of scornful laughter (Brenna, 2007 p.26). This poignant interaction vividly illustrates Natasha's deliberate choice of silence and guarded secrecy, reflective of her reluctance to unveil her innermost self. Despite Natasha's initial resistance, Billy, armed with authentic empathy and understanding,

adeptly earns her trust, gradually coaxing her to share the concealed world embedded within her drawings (Brenna, 2007, p.26).

Natasha's adoption into a family belonging to the able-bodied society becomes a challenging experience for her, as she struggles to make herself heard and understood. Despite her adoptive parents' access to medical resources and organized attention, they remain unable to comprehend the depth of her trauma and suffering. Natasha's voicelessness is a profound realization for her, leading her to rely on her moon journal as a means of communication. The journal provides a platform for her to connect with others, particularly Billy, who, like her, has been broken by a society that prioritizes able-bodiedness. Through their shared experiences, they develop their own form of communication that values and respects their voices and emotions. Natasha's use of the journal to communicate extends not only to Billy but also to her adoptive parents, who unfortunately remain oblivious to her attempts to reach out.

Natasha's Shock Syndrome poses a challenge for her adoptive parents who, despite being aware of her condition, assume control over her life as a personal mission. In response, Natasha adopts silence as a means of safeguarding her emotions from prying eyes. Though able-bodied individuals may attempt to help her recover her voice, their efforts often fall short of providing her with the level of comfort she needs due to a lack of understanding of her specific impairment. This common thread of misunderstanding is what draws Billy and Natasha together, as they are able to relate to one another's experiences in a way that able-bodied individuals cannot, "the failure of mainstreaming to effectively address disability can be attributed to the lack of commitment and execution in adopting it as a cross-cutting issue" (Chakraborty, 2020, p. 3700).

Shared experiences of pain often create a profound bond, enabling individuals to offer mutual support during times of need. This empathetic connection is exemplified in the novel through Mrs. Schmidt, who extends her compassion to her husband's battle against cancer and provides solace to children facing oppression at a young age. Her kindness extends to Billy, and she encourages him to be

understanding and supportive of Natasha, recognizing that she has only him as a friend. Having personally confronted the stigma associated with cancer patients, Mrs. Schmidt possesses a deep understanding of the pain both Billy and Natasha endure. As the sole confidante to whom Billy opens up about his feelings for Natasha, Mrs. Schmidt refrains from passing judgment, focusing solely on their positive qualities. She even provides insight into Natasha's loss of voice, explaining:

‘Well, you know those children from the orphanages can have lot’s of troubles. I heard about it on TV,’ ... ‘This program I watched said that kids were never given enough to eat, and when they came to Canada many of them have a hard time eating. Doesn’t make sense, does it? You’d think that people who were starved would eat too much when they got a chance, wouldn’t you? Poor motherless kids’... ‘There must have been a big sadness’... ‘A big sadness came and wrapped itself around her voice, like a blanket. Her voice is still there, but it’s just muffled up.’ (Brenna, 2007, p.86-105)

Mrs. Schmidt's wisdom not only provides a contextual understanding of Natasha's struggles but also reveals the pervasive impact of past traumas on the children from orphanages. Her empathetic approach and insightful explanation create a supportive environment that encourages Billy to navigate the complexities of his relationship with Natasha with sensitivity and understanding. Mrs. Schmidt becomes a beacon of compassion, fostering connections between characters and demonstrating the power of shared empathy in overcoming adversity.

Natasha's migration to Canada isn't a voluntary choice, and her encounter with it is anything but pleasant. In Romania, numerous children find themselves abandoned at shelters, a desperate attempt by parents to ensure their offspring have access to sustenance and a fighting chance at survival. Even at a tender age, Natasha has already borne witness to considerable hardship and suffering. Her voice symbolizes not just her will and freedom but also mirrors the struggles of countless oppressed individuals who find themselves stripped of

their voice. The psychological toll of the formidable challenges she has encountered compels her into self-imposed silence, a conviction that expressing herself won't alter her circumstances.

Billy exhibits a heightened sensitivity to the trauma endured by Natasha and its consequential impact, expressing, "I guess Natasha must have left her voice over there" (Brenna , 2007, p.87). This characterization of Billy serves as a symbolic representation of Natasha's voicelessness and disempowerment. The challenge extends beyond linguistic barriers, considering Natasha's Romanian heritage and her English adoptive parents, to encompass the pervasive influence of an ableist society that fails to grasp her struggles in articulating pain and loss. As an immigrant who has confronted profound trauma at a young age, Natasha has been rendered mute. Moreover, Billy astutely recognizes the paucity of sincere efforts by individuals to truly comprehend Natasha in the profound manner that he has undertaken.

Natasha's encounter with trauma, compounded by adverse societal attitudes toward immigrants, compels her to endure her grief privately. Faced with the stigma that identifies her as a victim of brutality, she hesitates to reveal any perceived vulnerability. Consequently, Natasha resorts exclusively to her moon journal as a mode of communication, employing drawings intelligible only to her and Billy. United by a shared experience of stigma, they communicate in ways that elude comprehension by others. Psychological trauma, marked by events causing emotional or physical distress, can lead to impaired functioning or life-threatening circumstances. Natasha's reliance on the moon journal as a coping mechanism exemplifies this phenomenon. Furthermore, an individual's vulnerability can stem from factors like dependence on others, limited expressive regulation skills, and cognitive impairment, all of which can detrimentally affect their functional capacity.

Natasha's moon journal is emblematic of her distinct voice, one that deviates from the conventional and remains elusive to universal understanding. This singular mode of expression finds resonance solely with Billy, who, in parallel, articulates his own voice through his yo-

yo. Within the moon journal, intricate diagrams and images encapsulate Natasha's unspoken expressions and inarticulate utterances.

Likewise, Billy's voice remains unheard amidst his peers and community, where he is unfortunately stigmatized as a child with intellectual disabilities. Undeterred by these perceptions, he endeavours to garner recognition and amplify his presence by actively participating in the school talent program. Motivated by a desire to validate his capabilities to others, Billy opts to showcase his proficiency in yo-yo tricks, an area where he exudes considerable confidence. For Billy, these yo-yo tricks serve as both a vocalization of his abilities and a means to enhance his visibility. The deliberate choice to participate in the talent program reflects his determination to transcend the limitations imposed by societal perceptions and establish a platform where his unique voice can be both heard and acknowledged.

In an effort to shield her daughter from the brutality she faced, Natasha's mother abandons her, inadvertently exposing her child to danger. The violence Natasha endured during her formative years compels her to relinquish typical childhood desires. Natasha's mother's abandonment has a profound impact, leading her to forge her own method of reaching out through art, recognizing its unique power to convey messages on various levels. The absence of love and care has diverse effects on children, who, at a young age, require nurturing and supervision. Without these, children may mature more quickly than their peers. Unlike other children her age who share daily routines with their parents, Natasha, through her moon journal, discloses her deepest secrets, unnoticed by her adoptive parents. Despite yearning for assistance, Natasha, shaped by her struggles in Romania, has learned that words hold little value. Consequently, she turns to painting as a means of communication, a pivotal role in her life from an early age when spoken language would typically suffice.

Labels like 'mentally disabled,' 'retard,' and 'crazy' have a profound impact on individuals, as public stigma influences decision-making. Despite their ability to cope, these labels hinder individuals from breaking out of their shells. In *The Moon Children*, Natasha is portrayed as a special needs child in need of help rather than being

recognized for her unique abilities. Labeling her as mute or someone with shock syndrome masks her identity, overlooking the fact that she is, indeed, a child. Society views her as a disabled individual stigmatized for her inability to speak. Unfortunately, the labeling of disabled individuals by able-bodied individuals often creates additional barriers, making it more challenging to provide effective support.

The essay also discusses the impact of labelling on disabled individuals, which further reinforces their marginalized status in society. The labels such as ‘mentally disabled,’ ‘retard,’ or ‘crazy’ are often used to stigmatize and limit the potential of disabled individuals. This paper argues that the labelling of disabled individuals is not only unjust but also creates additional barriers for them, making it harder for them to integrate into society. *The Moon Children* portrays the devastating effects of labelling on disabled individuals through the character of Natasha, who is seen by the society as a mute and a shock syndrome person, instead of a child who needs help. The novel also highlights the importance of creating a more inclusive and accepting society that values the voices and experiences of disabled individuals.

Moreover, this essay explores the repercussions of war and violence on children, using Natasha as a focal point for examining the harsh realities of such brutality. The trauma and violence inflicted upon Natasha during her formative years not only silenced her voice but also impeded her ability to communicate effectively with those in her vicinity. The added layer of maternal abandonment compounded Natasha’s emotional turmoil, leaving her with feelings of isolation and helplessness. Brenna’s portrayal of Natasha’s experiences serves as a poignant illustration of the profound and enduring impact of war and violence on children, revealing them as silent victims of such harrowing events. Through Natasha’s narrative, readers gain insights into the imperative of establishing safe and nurturing environments, particularly for children who have undergone trauma and violence.

In conclusion, literature serves as a powerful tool for illuminating the challenges faced by disabled individuals like Billy and Natasha, who are victims of an ableist society. Beverley Brenna’s *The Moon Children* provides a poignant portrayal of a young girl’s

struggles, navigating the world with an invisible disability and coping with the aftermath of trauma and violence.

While both characters eventually find ways to express themselves, the journey is fraught with difficulties. Billy, subjected to derogatory labels, attempts to reclaim his voice through resilience and self-expression, yet the ableist attitudes prevalent in society make it challenging for him to be heard. On the other hand, Natasha, silenced by the traumatic experiences of war and migration, faces the struggle of articulating her thoughts amid the societal perception that she is mute.

The narrative underscores how disabled individuals employ various means of communication, including silence, and how societal stigma exacerbates their challenges. Despite their efforts, both Billy and Natasha encounter obstacles in making their voices heard by society at large. The prevailing ableism hinders the understanding of their unique experiences and perpetuates the marginalization of this community.

By shedding light on these narratives, this paper aims to increase awareness and foster a deeper understanding of the difficulties faced by disabled individuals. It is our hope that through enhanced awareness, society can move towards becoming more inclusive and empathetic, providing a platform for individuals like Billy and Natasha to share their stories and be heard.

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