

# FROM 'PASSING' TO 'COMING OUT': A STUDY OF SAMANTHA ABEEL'S MY THIRTEENTH WINTER

**Dr. Sadaf Shah, Pooja Kumari**

Sr. Assistant Professor  
Department of English  
University of Jammu  
Jammu (J&K) India  
Email id: aiz\_syed@yahoo.com

Ph.D Scholar  
Department of English  
University of Jammu  
Jammu (J&K) India  
Email id: poojakumari902@rediffmail.com

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## Abstract

*Disability is often viewed as a negative identity and stigma is attached to it. People with disabilities are seen as a liability and mostly they become the victims of people in a disabling society. In literature written by non-disabled people, they are often misrepresented and occupy peripheral position. So, people with disabilities have decided to move from the marginalised position allotted to them by the ableist society by coming forward and writing about their personal experiences and thus, countering the traditional misrepresentations related to disability. The present paper attempts to study Samantha Abeel's memoir My Thirteenth Winter in order to give an authentic account of dyscalculia, a maths related disability through Abeel's personal journey with dyscalculia. The paper discusses how she attempted to pass as non-disabled in her maths class in order to avoid the stigma attached to disability. It further analyses how Abeel moved from initial 'passing' to 'coming out' by accepting her disability identity. While discussing Abeel's 'passing' attempts and her final decision to come out, disability theorists namely Erving Goffman's book Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity (1963) and Ellen Samuels's essay "My Body, My Closet: Invisible Disability and the Limits of Coming Out" have been taken into consideration. The paper concludes that dyscalculia affected Abeel's both personal as well as academic life. It further concludes that accepting disability identity is necessary on the part of disabled people in order to break various misconceptions related to disability. The paper suggests a positive attitude towards people with disabilities on the part of society so that instead of hiding and passing they are ready to come out and accept their disability identity.*

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**Keywords:** *Memoir, Disability Identity, Stigma, Marginalised, Dyscalculia, Disabling Society, Passing, Coming Out.*

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In a disabling society, disability is often considered as a negative identity. People with disabilities are seen as a burden and often they become the victim of prejudice, discrimination and injustice in the society governed by norms. They are misunderstood and many misconceptions are attached to them. In literature written by non disabled writers, they are depicted as defective, defiant and a lesser human being. Mostly, they are shown as occupying peripheral position in dominant narratives and stigma is attached to them. As a result, disabled people have started writing their own personal narratives in the form of autobiographies, memoirs, personal essays, etc. to counter the stigma that is attached to them. Through their personal narratives, they have taken the subject position and counter the various myths or misconceptions associated with disability in a disabling society. The disability theorist Thomas G. Couser in his article titled as "Signifying Selves: Disability and Life Writing" writes: Like other marginalized groups, disabled people have much to gain from taking the means of literary production into their own hands. . . Like other minorities historically represented largely by members of dominant groups, disabled people come to literary production from within the same culture that marginalizes them; they are vulnerable to infection with the very prejudices that oppress them. Thus, disabled people come to life writing from a position of pre-inscription: they are already "known" as defective, deficient, interpellated as fundamentally alien. In life writing, their charge is to undo and/or overwrite, their prior representation: to offer compelling counter-representation. (2)

In contemporary times, memoirs have gained much attention by the readers. A memoir is a story about a particular time in someone's life or a major event that occurred. It usually deals with a specific theme, or about a part of someone's life. A memoir is a story with a proper narrative shape, focus and subject matter. In contemporary literature, memoir has become one of the most popular ways to describe and represent oneself. Samantha Abeel's memoir *My Thirteenth Winter* was published in the year 2005. It deals with her day to day struggles with a learning disability called as dyscalculia. Through her personal narrative in the memoir *My*

*Thirteen Winter*, Abeel counters the various narratives that represent disability as negative identity and claims her disability identity as a positive one.

Dyscalculia is a maths-related disability. People with dyscalculia find it difficult to do simple mathematical calculation, unable to comprehend arithmetic, find difficulty with numbers and cannot manipulate numbers. Dyscalculia is a spectrum disorder as people having it experience it differently. In her memoir *My Thirteenth Winter*, Abeel traces her difficult childhood as she was struggling with dyscalculia which prevented her from calculating time, counting money, and doing simple mathematical problems like addition, subtraction, multiplication and division.

While growing up, Abeel was like any normal child. She was always enthusiastic, curious and interested in knowing about everything. As a student in school, she wanted to be recognized by her teachers for her intelligence and desired to stand out in the class. She always tried her utmost to come up with the most creative answer to the questions that her teachers used to ask in the class and felt greatly proud at being the 'smart kid' in her class. But things began to change soon for Abeel. One day, Abeel's teachers told her mother that Abeel was behaving quite differently at school. The teachers informed her mother that Abeel was quiet, shy, withdrawn and very reserved. She was very slow at picking up new tasks. In third grade, she even struggled with learning to read. Initially, she started out in one of the more advanced reading groups but quickly moved to one of the slower groups as she began to feel difficulty in mastering the skills. Besides, reading problem, she also struggled with the concept of fractions in her first grade. Being a child with dyscalculia, however hard she tried but she never understood the concept of fractions in the class. Abeel recalls that every day, she faced difficulty in solving mathematical problems. She could not tell time on watch. In second grade, when her teacher used to ask students about time by manipulating time with the help of her hands, Abeel would get confused and could not understand anything. Abeel recalls that once her math teacher gave a test to the whole class. It was a "timed exercise" and they were allotted two minutes time to complete the test. Abeel felt nervous because during the timed exercise, every student was able to read the clock and had the sense of time that she lacked completely. She knew that she had very less time to complete the paper but could not make out how much time still left for her paper:

If they are done, how much more time do we have? How much time did it take them? My eyes shift from my paper up to the big, black-rimmed, circular face of the clock that loom as over the classroom from its perch above the door. It tells me nothing. I can name the numbers I see, and I know the hands that stretch of from its center are supposed to give me the answer I am looking for, but for me the direction that they point to doesn't mean anything. (13)

After finishing her paper, Abeel went to the teacher to get her paper corrected. In the paper she did many mistakes. Some questions she had added while the sign said subtract and other she had subtracted which she was supposed to add. The teacher pointed out the errors in her answers and asked her to go and make necessary corrections and she felt humiliated at making so many mistakes in her paper.

Abeel was not ready to accept her identity as a child with a difference. In order to maintain her identity as a 'smart kid,' she became expert in concealing her math related disability from others. Abeel was not ready to accept her disability identity because she was aware of the stigma attached to people with disabilities. The normal society treats them as inferior and lesser human beings. So, such negative attitudes towards people with disabilities are responsible for Abeel's decision to choose 'passing.' Erving Goffman, the disability scholar in his book *Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identities* also maintains that normal society's attitude towards people with disabilities is not positive and stigma is attached to them. As stigmatised individuals, people with disabilities are seen as non-human which ultimately reduce their life opportunities. He writes, "... we believe the person with a stigma is not quite human. On this assumption we exercise varieties of discrimination, through which we effectively, if often un-thinkingly, reduce his life chances" (14). In the class, she was always careful not to let anybody knew about her problem. She decided that she should pretend that she was comprehending the concepts that were being taught in the maths class and hence, succeeded in passing as non-disabled in class. She writes, "I felt anxious of maintaining my identity. I felt very strongly that I did not want anyone to know I didn't get it, and that I should pretend I did. Everyone thought I was smart and I didn't want them thinking otherwise; I didn't want to think otherwise" (11). She was expert in hiding her disability related to math from her teachers as well as her classmates and they had no idea about how much far behind she was in understanding the maths concepts. She writes, "However, no one knew just how really far behind I was. I had become such a master at masking and covering for what I didn't know that my teacher had no idea I couldn't tell time" (33). So, she indulges in what Erving Goffman, calls 'passing,' a strategy employed by disabled people to pass as non-disabled individuals. In his book *Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity* (1963) Goffman describes passing as "management of undisclosed discrediting information about self" (57). He further writes that the stigmatised person attempts to use 'passing' as a strategy to conceal his or her differences or failures to falsely identify themselves as a part of the normal group. The strategy is mostly applied when an individual's differences are not apparent and he or she chooses to not disclose discrediting information about himself or herself. Abeel's disability was an invisible one, so instead of claiming disability, she preferred to pass off as non disabled in order to avoid the stigma attached to disability.

In her math class, she pretended as if she understood every concept taught by the teacher in the class. She did not want that her teachers and peers should think that she had not understood anything. This everyday passing

saved her from the discrimination, humiliation and injustice that many disabled children have to face in school but inwardly, she also felt guilty for hiding her real identity from others. Passing as non disabled in class provided Abeel the privilege of being a normal child but it also led to 'internal dissonance' in her. Ellen Samuels, in her essay titled as "My Body, My Closet: Invisible Disability and the Limits of Coming Out" aptly writes "... the option of passing as nondisabled provides both a certain level of privilege and a profound sense of misrecognition and internal dissonance" (321). In case of Abeel, passing proved self-detrimental because she had to hide a part of her real identity and presented herself as normal individual. Gradually, due to everyday passing, Abeel experienced psychological crises also. She began to suffer from mental health problems like anxiety, panic attacks, stomach-aches, fear and depression. These mental health issues were faced by Abeel because she was not ready to accept her disability identity. Abeel's decision to pass as non-disabled in class also points to the fact that people with disabilities are seen in lesser terms in the ableist society. Further, stigma is attached to people with disabilities and normal people do not easily accept them.

Finally in her seventh grade, Abeel was diagnosed with a learning disability called as dyscalculia. She felt relieved when she was diagnosed with a learning disability because she finally got the reason behind her problems related to mathematics. Initially, her teachers were not ready to accept that she was disabled when her mother approached the school authorities to secure special services for her. They accused her mother for putting in her daughter's head that she was disabled in learning mathematics. They also hold the view that her mother was supporting her daughter's laziness. This might be the reason that she preferred 'passing' initially because she was fearing that society would not accept her with her disability. In this regard, Tobin Siebers, a disability theorist in his book *Disability Theory* (2010) writes, "The human ego does not easily accept the disabled body" (60). Finally, she was put in special class. Her mother was very happy as she had secured special services for Abeel. After the decision had been taken by the school authorities to put Abeel in the special class, one of her teachers approached her and asked her whether she would be happy to study in special class. Abeel's teacher was worried because students who studied in special class were usually seen as inferior by the mainstream society. Abeel was really happy to be in special class. In special class, she need not to hide her disability. So, she told her teacher that she would be happy to study in special class because there she could learn maths at her own pace. She writes:

I felt relieved and excited. We finally had an answer that was official! It was not my fault that I didn't understand math. I have a learning disability. At least now I could explain what was wrong. At least now I could explain what was wrong and I didn't have to sit in a classroom where everyone else understood the material and I didn't. . . I am bad at math because my brain just wasn't wired to do it, not because I am dumb or failure. (94)

Abeel's decision to study in special class instead of attending regular class shows her acceptance of her disability identity. She no longer worried about what her peers and teachers would think about her. Her diagnosis of learning disability provided her with a definite answer to her problems. Finally, she accepted it and instead of 'passing,' she preferred 'coming out' because she came to realise that if she had to progress in her life, she had to come out and accept her disability identity. In her essay "My Body, My Closet: Invisible Disability and the Limits of Coming Out" Ellen Samuels defines 'coming out' as:

A process of redefinition of one's personal identity through rejecting the tyranny of the *normate*, positive recognition of impairment and embracing disability as a valid social identity. Having come out, the disabled person no longer regards disability as a reason for self-disgust, or as something to be denied or hidden but rather as an imposed oppressive social category to be challenged and broken down. (319)

As Abeel progressed in her grade, she also approached her teachers to inform them about her disability so that she could get extra help and time in maths class. Abeel was actually a twice-exceptional child. She had a learning disability called dyscalculia but she did exceptionally well in other areas of learning like language and writing skills. Although she was weak in math yet she possessed great imaginative and creative powers. She possessed creative writing skills. Abeel's seventh grade writing teacher Mrs. Williams played a great role in making her realise the power of her writing skills and English class proved to be a place where she could grow. She paid great attention to Abeel and looked over her spelling and grammar mistakes for the real content and ideas in her writing that made a lasting difference to her. Her teacher made her feel special by appreciating her writing talent and it was really important in her life when she was struggling with her dyscalculia and did not like coming to school. After that, she kept on writing poems and finally published her collections of poems in a book form titled as *Reach for the Moon*. Her book dealt with her experiences with her learning disability. After the publication of her book, she was invited by various organisations to talk about her learning disability. The positive response that her book received made her realise the importance of sharing her disability experiences with others and finally she began to boldly speak about her disability without any fear, shame or regret.

Through her experience of 'passing' and 'coming out' Abeel disseminates the view that people with disabilities should avoid 'passing' because it will not provide the real solution to their problems. Passing can save them from humiliating and embarrassing moments for some time but in the long run can prove detrimental for their well-being. So instead of 'passing' they should come out and accept their disability identity and should view it as a positive one. They possess gifts and if those gifts receive proper attention, they can excel in their lives.

## CONCLUSION

Abeel's memoir provides an authentic account of dyscalculia through her day to day struggle with it. Desperate to maintain her identity as a brilliant child among her teachers and peers, initially Abeel chose to hide her disability from her peers as well as teachers because she was very well aware about the stigma attached to learning disabilities. She used different strategies, so that neither her teachers nor her peers would be able to find out how much far behind she was in grasping math concepts. Passing provided her relief because she had the privilege of being considered normal. Finally, she realized if she had to live a happy and successful life, she had to come out and accept her disability identity. She understood that everyday passing would not help to fight stigma attached to disability. It would reinforce stigma instead of erasing it. So, she suggests that in order to counter the stigma attached to people with disabilities, they should come out as disabled. Further, Abeel's acceptance of her disability identity points to the fact it is necessary that disabled people should come out and accept their disability identity because disability as an identity is a positive one.

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