

# Creative Cornucopia of a Differently Abled

**Dr. J.S. Jahangir**

Assistant Professor and Head, Department of English, Iqbal College, Peringammala,  
Thiruvananthapuram

Disability, in many ways, is an intriguing phenomenon, adding value to individual life and redefining what it means to be differently talented. Moreover, disability, as a difference, enriches society and creates a new set of powerful social bonds, responsibilities and opportunities for an individual's family and society at large. A preliminary definition of disability might be that it is partial or absence, or limitation, of competence. People usually think of disability in contrast to the normal capacity of a human being to perform particular activities and to play one's role in an accepted social life. Sickness inhibits ability, too, but we distinguish it between sickness that is temporary and disability that is perennial. In principle, the disabled cannot be cured; they can be rehabilitated. Disability herein is used to refer to limitations resulting from dysfunction of the physical body of an individual and his or her mind. However, the core meaning of disability, for most of us, is a psychosomatic one. Blindness, lameness, deafness, mental deficiency, chronic incapacitating illness are some of the prototypical disabilities.

The paper discusses the creative ability of the differently abled and the culmination of which in the form of memoirs. Memoirs deserve a prominent place in the rapidly developing discipline of Disability Studies by the same logic that has made the other studies essential. Memoirs warrant an incisive study not just because they are all first-person testimonies about disabling conditions but also as potentially powerful counter discourses on the prevailing Disability Studies. As a medium, perhaps unique in its registration of the nexus of the individual, culture, and the body, the memoir is a valuable component to courses of Disability Studies.

Memory, its applications and storage are the key factors that make human beings the most perfect creation. According to Pierre Nora, a French historian, 'We speak so much of memory because there is so little of it left' (7). Memory is a complex but fallible system of storing information (Baddeley 51). Memory is not a simple phenomenon; it is an intriguing process that involves the body and the mind. The relationship is so delicate and psychologically intricate that the study of the relationship between the two has been a subject

of scientific queries and analyses, the result of which has been way far from a conclusive answer.

However, in the light of the study of the memoir considered for this paper is too late to die young: *Nearly True from a Life* (2005) by Harriet McBryde Johnson, it has been observed that the mind, as is presumed, is not a physical entity. Quite contrary to the belief, it can be observed that physical challenges can be in different degrees. At times the differently abled people are successful in recording their experience using a concrete medium of letters. This is what strengthens the contention that physical deformity does not stifle or subjugate the ability of a person if he or she really wants to express their ideas. The thought process of and its delineation by the differently abled are the same as in the case of an ordinary person, but what makes it difficult for them is that they find it difficult to communicate a sensory organ.

The purpose of the article is to show how the physically challenged are handicapped as compared to the people with normal senses. The differently abled are capable of competing with non-disabled people, or even excel themselves in their own areas, in spite of the limitations caused by underdeveloped sensory organs. It could lead to creative output such as the memoir. To cite an example, Harriet McBryde Johnson whose memoir *Too Late to Die Young*, asserts her ability and talent in the following words:

For decades, little noticed by the larger world, the disability rights movement has been mobilizing people from the back rooms and back wards, along with more privileged people like me, to speak plainly about our needs. We make demands. We litigate. Run for office. Seize the streets. Sit through the meetings. Mark up the drafts. That kind of work has changed the world and we need to continue to do it.

But we need to do something else besides, something that may be difficult but is, I think, vital. We need to confront the life-killing stereotype that says we're all about suffering. We need to bear witness to our pleasures.

I'm talking in part the pleasures we share with nondisabled people. For me, those include social engagement of all kinds: swapping stories, arguing hard, getting and giving a listening ear. A challenging professional life. Going to movies, concerts, and exhibits. Wearing a new pair of earrings. Savoring the afternoon hit of Dove dark chocolate. I enjoy those pleasures the same way nondisabled people do. There's no impairment; disability makes no difference. (253-254)

The differently abled are capable of doing most of the mental activities the way a nondisabled person does. The sensory inputs are retained for subsequent mental and physical activities. 'Memory is thinking of things in their absence' (12) writes Warnock.

All forms of art owe their origin to life. In other words, life finds its expression through manifold genres of art. Different people interpret life and express their impressions of life using their own style and medium. Differently abled individuals have varying levels of physical deformity.

The primary reason for choosing the memoir is that these writer is capable of artistically expressing her impressions about life the way she experiences it. In spite of her physical deformities, she has established unequivocally that she is mentally and physically active and can respond to all external stimuli, whereby she creates an identity for herself. By overcoming his own difficulties, she has set an example for the posterity, demonstrating that people like him can excel themselves in many other areas of creativity. For instance, Nancy Mairs, a creative writer, diagnosed with multiple sclerosis, at age 29 details:

A reviewer once spoke of my “valiant battle against multiple sclerosis.” It was a bad review, but I hated this phrase- which I suspect he meant as a compliment-far more than the nastiness he dispensed. I hated the way he reduced the existence I have painstakingly constructed to the corpses and smoking rabble of a battle field and set me, a heroic figure, wounded but still defined in the middle of the waste.... Lest you me tempted into similar maudlin similar misreading of life with chronic illness, keep this in mind ‘I am only doing what I have to do. It’s enough. (18)

Although her disability came unexpectedly, Mairs has channelled it as a creative resource, becoming intensely aware of the work the body does in her writing.

In the memoir, too late to die young, the chapter titled “Honk if you Hate Telethons,” discusses an altercation Harriet had with a policeman over the issue of conducting a telethon for Muscular Dystrophy Association. She writes:

None of this is what he wants to discuss. “What I want to know is: What’s your cause? What’s your issue? What are you protesting?”

Oh well, we do not want the police to be happy. “I’m protesting the Muscular Dystrophy Association telethon.”

“You’re promoting the telethon?”

“No, I’m protesting it.”

“Why?”

“Does the reason matter?”

I’d think so. I’m sure you must have a reason or you wouldn’t be protesting.”

He has a point. “I don’t like the way the telethon depicts people with disabilities, including muscles diseases like I have. It’s all about stirring up pity, when we don’t want pity. And

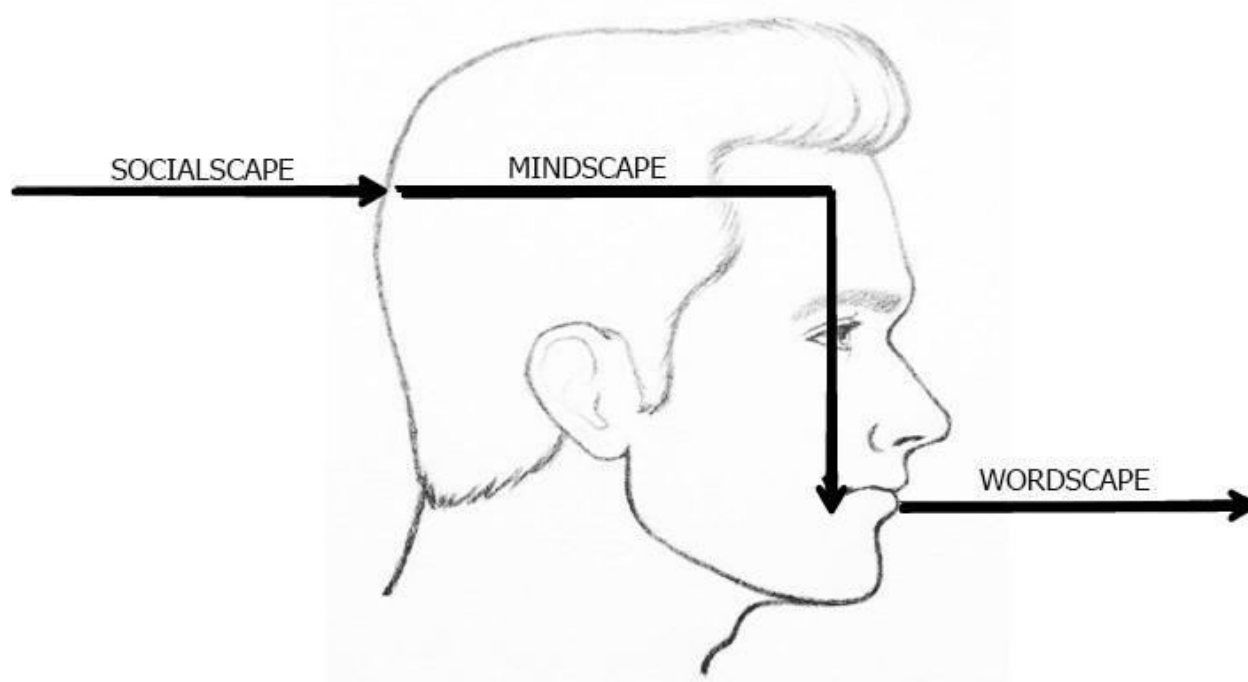
Jerry Lewis ought to be fired. He actually called people in wheelchairs ‘half persons.’ When this year’s telethon is on the air, I want to be out there. You know, I’m not Jerry’s Kid! Never was.” (48)

It can be surmised from the discussions above that what the differently abled people desire is not a sympathetic consolation but a reassuring recognition of their manifold innovative capabilities.

Physical deformity is not the cul de sac of one’s creative life. On the contrary, it could open up yet another opportunity for a person to identify other inherent abilities to supplement the one that is dormant. In many cases, it has been observed that the differently abled have successfully overcome their infirmities by using the hitherto unused organs and mechanisms to find an expression of their own creative urge; in doing so, many have become substantially proficient in their own chosen areas.

Like other members of their society, the differently abled people are also vulnerable to the same social pressures, which may be termed as the ‘socialscape.’ It is the ‘socialscape’ that provides them with the required raw material for an artistic adventure. What transmutes them into ideas that are capable of rendering flesh and blood to their imagination is the ‘mindscape.’ Finally, it is the ‘wordscape’ that brings forth the offspring of their ‘mindscape.’ To put it more precisely, the body, as described, is a combination of the society, the mind and the words that the people choose to carve out a niche for themselves.

The three scapes of the creative realm are dealt as:



**Fig 4: Creativescape**

### **The Socialscape**

The socialscape delivers the most essential energy for them to spur their imagination. All creative processes take their seminal ideas from the society and people, disabled or nondisabled, interact with the animate or inanimate objects of nature bringing forth various literary or other art forms. The impulses a physically disabled person receives may not always find their expressions in literary forms, but the social pressures one undergoes result not only in producing socially useful things but also in creating finer literary works of considerable aesthetic value. William Wordsworth in his poem *The Tables Turned* published in the *Lyrical Ballads* wrote:

One impulse from a vernal wood  
May teach you more of man,  
Of moral evil and of good,  
Than all sages can. (Wordsworth 64)

The social elements and civic life of Harriet McBryde Johnson makes her memoir unique in itself. She narrates:

I offer here a collection of tales as I tell them in my van. These are the tales I most enjoy telling. They have a mix of themes and characters and incidents sufficient to get the van from downtown Charleston all the way to Pinopolis at least, and maybe to Manning. (152)

The mind, which is a crucible for the amalgamation of the 'scapes,' transmutes her unique experience into memorable memoir.

### **The Mindscape**

The processing unit of the mind is the mindscape, which is the canvas for the disabled to conjure up their own version of life. In the memoir, too late to die young, Harriet McBryde Johnson describes how a personal experience can undergo a seachange. In the final chapter of the memoir titled "Good Morning –An Ending," Harriet observes:

How is it possible that nondisabled people tend to feel sorry for me? It still takes me by surprise. Peter Singer couldn't imagine a disabled child enjoying a day at the beach and he's hardly alone. The widespread assumptions that disability means suffering feeds a fear of difference and a social order that doesn't know what to do with us if it can't make us fit its idea of normal. When we seek what we need to live good lives as we are, we come against that wall. Why bother? The thinking runs; all they can do suffer. When nondisabled people start learning about disability, what seems most startling, most difficult to accept, is the possibility of pleasure. (253)

Harriet's narrative sufficiently bears testimony to the strikingly harrowing mental agony that has been unilaterally imposed upon the differently abled by a set of rigid societal norms. This could possibly be the outcome of the mindset internalised perhaps by the non-disabled people.

### **The Wordscape**

While thoughts and society play their parts in establishing an identity for the differently abled people, their expression, without words, will linger on their minds as distant dreams. This difficulty, however, is overcome by the 'wordscape' a communicative mechanism which the differently abled forge for themselves. As Nancy Mairs puts it: 'No body, no voice; no voice, no body' (61).

The traditional neglect of the society to accept the creative response of the differently abled, compels Harriet McBryde Johnson to mention the misconception of the society towards body in her memoir, too late to die young:

Throughout my life, the nondisabled world has told me my pleasures must be only mental, never physical. Thinking to help me, it has said my body is unimportant. I respectfully disagree. For me, the body-imperfect, impermanent, falling apart-is all there is. Through this body that need the help of hands and machines to move, that is weird to sense and perceive, comes all pleasures, all life. My brain is only one among many body parts, all of which work through one another and cooperate as best they can.

Some people, disabled and otherwise, conceptualize a self distinct and apart from the body. I may at one time have done so. I'm not sure. I know it is somehow possible for me to talk about me and my body as though separate, even though my mind and heart say we are one. At this stage in my life, my body constantly makes its presence known as needed, telling me with an urgent pain to deal with wrinkle under my seat belt, or reminding me with a tremble or ache or flutter of its desire for food or rest or some other pleasure. Now the body I live in doesn't only affect me. It is me. (255)

Yet again, Harriet vehemently refutes a misconception of the society that the disabled are inert and dormant and that they are naturally deprived of the pleasures of life. The only creative arena is their brain where the seeds of all actions germinate first. Harriet emphatically refutes to admit that a weak physique can render a person virtually imperfect and inactive. This conviction of the disabled is what the differently abled are persistently trying to disprove by venturing into areas that may be absolutely unconventional. It is their undying verve that wins them an identity of their own. Nancy Mairs writes:

The bodies we inhabit and the lives those bodies carry on need not be perfect to have value. Bad things do happen, we know- to bad and good people alike- but so do good things. Life's curse, like life's blessings, are always mixed. (130)

The quote reminds the opening lines of Nancy L. Eiesland in the book *The Disabled God: Towards the Liberatory Theology of Disability*:

Living with a disability is difficult. Acknowledging this difficulty is not a defeat. I have learned, but a hard-won accomplishment in learning to live a life that is not disabled. The difficulty for people with disabilities has two parts really- living our ordinary, but difficult lives, and changing structures, beliefs, and attitudes that prevent us from living ordinary. (13)

From now on, the emphasis is given to the identity of the differently abled people. Their identity is the oneness of the three scapes. The identity is a gift for the differently abled which explains what they have in them. It is to this end that Harriet McBryde Johnson in her memoir recalls:

For me, living a real life has meant resisting those formulaic narratives. Instead of letting the world turn me into a disability object, I have insisted on being a subject in the grammatical sense: not the passive "me" who is acted upon, but the active "I" who does things. I practice law and politics in Charleston, which I'll nominate as the most interesting small city in America. I travel. I find various odd adventures. I do my bit to help the disability rights movement change the world in fundamental ways. (3)

Harriet puts up an uncompromising rhetoric against her physical disability; and she claims in her memoir that it has made her wise as she writes, “disability made me wise” (3). Instead of sitting in the saddle of helplessness, she swims against the tide and reinvents herself to clinch a position for herself in a world dominated by nondisabled people.

To explore the undetected is the challenge they face; the differently abled people store memory in their body and create an identity. The outcome of this phenomenon is their memoirs and blog writings which form part of the differently abled body. Memoir is the residual product of sustenance. Words spoken dissipate as time passes on, but words written will remain recorded for years to come. The books considered for the study are the outcome of the active and conscious endeavours of the differently abled. How they see the world around them and how the people regard them have found their expressions through their memoirs. Ultimately what remains of them are their books, a kaleidoscope of their genuine experience. Their books give them an identity and indeed a reason for existence. People, cutting across diverse sections of the society narrate their past, but writing memoirs and blogs have much better significance. Harriet justifies why she writes a memoir as follows:

And I tell stories. On one level, that’s not unusual. Most Charleston people-rich and poor, black and white, young and old-tell stories as part of daily life. For any Charleston lawyer, any Southern lawyer for that matter, storytelling skill comes so close to being a job requirement that maybe it should be tested on the bar exam. Beyond that, for me, storytelling is a survival tool, a means of getting people to do what I want. (3)

Harriet believes that the process of narrating her life is the tool that consolidates, and sustains her own life. She uses her memoir as a survival tool to elevate her ideas to great heights.

The disability study becomes incomplete without relating to its true purport with the views of the society. Different centuries have different attitudes towards disability. In many societies around the world, disability is synonymous with dependence and damage, and hence the disabled become marginalised and relegated to the rear. Unlike the previous generations, the post-modern world challenges the prejudiced concept of disability through reason and rationality. The great shift from the disabled to the differently abled is arguably the most visible one that the disabled are not merely the unfortunate victims of fate; instead they are differently abled with the same or even more unique talents and capabilities of their own. It can be observed that even normal people under normal conditions and opportunities do not perform as resourceful and productive as the differently abled do.

Obviously, the concept of disability has been bandied about by scholars for centuries to give it ‘A local habitation and a name’ (Shakespeare 75). The result was that the post- modern



values have a strong bearing upon redefining the terms that the world of the differently abled people has been so far familiar with. As such, the revised version is that it rejects the traditional view that the differently abled are puny weaklings incapable of making any concrete headway in the social and cultural milieus of their life. In sharp contrast to the traditional attitude of the society, the post-modernist thinkers since Jean- Francois Lyotard have made clear inroads into the existing decadent and biased social parameters. To quote Marian Corker:

The idea that disability is socially or culturally created seems more at home against the scenery of the cultural and intellectual movements of postmodernism and/or post-structuralism, since these are the movements within which social constructivism has taken shape.

The postmodern thought has created nascent cultural and social ethos which not only takes on the dominant beliefs, but also rejects the ultimate truth of the individual view of disability (Oliver 1996). Postmodernism emphasises pluralism and individualism, the two dominant features that rest within disability. The attitude of the community has created a miasma of oppression for the less fortunate ones in the society. Over the years, the oppressive attitude of the society has gradually changed into sympathy, empathy and identity respectively. As a result, the existing dichotomy between the abled and the differently abled gives rise to distinctive linguistic overtures that give them a voice to be heard. Since language is evolving and therefore, it is to be engaged in creating words, pictures, books, and so on.

The emanating trends are artistically contrived, realistically amalgamated and truthfully expressed. The resultant product is a characteristic blend of social and personal escapades. Jenny Corbett points out the role and the importance of language in creating an identity for the differently abled in the following way

Language reflects conceptions of reality, or truth. As such, I feel the term ‘special need’ is no longer useful or constructive. To me, it is reflective of professional ownership where medical and educational definitions dominate the discourse. It jars uncomfortably with the discourses in the disability movement where new languages and metaphors are emerging in a creative burst of pride and assertion ... if we are able to ‘move through’ identities, we can also adopt a similar approach to the use of special language, [one which] will make all language special. Thus ‘special’ becomes normality. (32-33,101)

Language is not only a medium of communication, but also is a great emancipator which facilitates an incessant interaction between the inner self and the outer self of the differently abled. Mairian Corker elaborates on language, and saying that, ‘language is not just a

descriptive tool-we use it and do things with it to achieve certain effects' (229). As Emmanuelle Laborit puts it:

When I discovered sign language, it was like finding the giant key that opened the giant door separating me from the world. I could understand both the deaf and hearing worlds....My thought processes were becoming more structured. I felt the need to talk. I wanted to say everything, tell everything, and understand everything. (47-48)

In view of the above observation, Albert Einstein's remarkable sentence is this: 'Everybody is a genius; but if you judge a fish by its ability to climb a tree, it will live its whole life believing that it is stupid,'(34) observed Albert Einstein. Every individual, no matter abled or differently abled, is bestowed with talents which, in certain cases, are manacled by physical or circumstantial constraints. The talents inherent in the differently abled may not always be the commonly accepted ones by the society. This unacceptability is the barrier that keeps the differently abled away from the mainstream of the society. The lacuna between the abled and the differently abled, more often than not, is created by the latter.

The undying desire to survive in a highly polarised society impels the differently abled people to look to fresh pastures of literature, though with different degrees of physical infirmities. However, Harriet McBryde Johnson successfully used the 'socialscape', the 'mindscape' and the 'wordscape' which brilliantly demonstrate that no facet of creativity is foreign to their interests. Their efforts show that language is not just a tool to express their predicament, rather an abiding genie that can rejuvenate the sagging spirit of millions of differently talented ones in the years to come.

“Nay, nay, never will they die;  
They do live through the letter,  
Ever through us, through their memoirs,  
Giving forth the fire, ad infinitum!” (Pakhovsky 12)

And it cannot be refuted that the fire and enthusiasm in him has found an expression, rather through an unprecedented and inimitable career for many, the memoirs. It is the law of nature that what becomes deficit is amply compensated through uncommon phenomenon. The imposed deficit becomes compensated through the gift of articulation, the gift of letters.

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