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Picturebooks in the Limelight of Health Humanities: An Evaluative Reading

Spandan Ghosh

Research Scholar,
Department of English and MEL,
University of Lucknow,
Lucknow, Uttar Pradesh.

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Abstract:

This study investigates how children's picturebooks address mental illness experiences within the health humanities framework. It explores the capacity of such literature to foster imagined communities, facilitate self-identification, and challenge the stigma surrounding mental health. The paper analyses contemporary picturebooks like *Bipolar Bear*, *Virginia Wolf*, *Once I Was Very Very Scared*, *Mama's Waves*, *Up and Down Mom* and *The Princess and the Frog* to illustrate how verbo-visual elements in these texts externalize internal struggles. Drawing on fields like graphic and narrative medicine, the analysis of the picturebooks includes representational paradigms and their role in community building and psychological resilience. By engaging marginalized experiences of mental illness, children's literature can redefine inclusion and promote awareness. The evaluative paper aims to trace the transformative power of these visual mediums in bridging individual challenges with societal conversations about mental well-being and inclusion. The potential of imagination in reshaping perceptions of mental health is a central focus.

Keywords: Children's Picturebooks, Bipolar Disorder in Literature, Narrative and Visual Representation, Multimodal Storytelling, Inclusive Narratives, Health Humanities.

In Virginia Woolf's *On Being Ill*, the author characterizes illness through evocative geographical and geological metaphors, referring to it as an archipelago of "undiscovered countries" and, in a subsequent revision, as an "unexploited mine" (*Being 3*). These analogies

resonated powerfully with early 20th-century readers, conjuring images of perilous expeditions to uncharted territories like the Antarctic, Himalayas, or Sahara Desert, and, as Jurecic observes, the lingering threat of unexploded ordnance from the recent global conflict (5). Woolf's figurative language is a precursor to the subsequent proliferation of illness narratives in the decades following the essay's publication.

The genre of illness narratives gained further traction throughout the 20th century, particularly from the 1960s onward, as the medical humanities and its ancillary sub-disciplines achieved scholarly legitimacy, thereby validating their objects of inquiry (Greaves and Evans 1). Health humanities prioritize patient-centred care and acknowledge the dialogic sociocultural influences that shape and define the individual experience of illness by moving away from symptom-centric approaches. (Pett 29).

Individuals with psychosocial disabilities and impairments have historically been subjected to societal devaluation. They were perceived as unproductive, deviant, marginalized, and pathologized. They have consistently faced stigmatization and exclusion across social, political, cultural, and economic domains. Becker remarks, “[s]ocial groups create deviance by making the rules when infraction constitutes deviance and by applying their rules to particular people and labelling them as outsiders” (9). Scholars advocating for social-contextual models of disability posit that impairment becomes disability not through inherent functional limitations but rather through socially constructed prejudices. These biases are formulated to privilege the needs of the normative majority, defined by the absence of perceived functional impairments.

Although rigorous academic research work related to mental illness and psychiatry are relatively unknown in the field of children and young adult literature (collectively called “juvenile literature”), Harriet Cooper, in her recent book, works out the figure of the “disabled child” who questions “the ground on which adult rationality is built”. Even though her research is bordered on the broader aspect of disability that is visible, Cooper’s contribution is seminal. She rescues such a child from double jeopardy – that by being a child, she is no more a passive recipient, and by being disabled, she is no more a victim of circumstances. The child becomes an active agent in assessing her impairment and disability that is around her and which conditions her – like in the family.

Disability studies, as an established academic discipline, has traditionally centred on physical and sensory impairments, while Mad Studies engage with the lived experiences of psychiatric

conditions. Echoing this distinction, Margaret Price critiques the term "mental illness" and proposes "mental disability" (337) to foster solidarity and coalition-building across disability communities, irrespective of impairment type. Disability Studies and Mad Studies share a common objective: to empower individuals with impairments to reclaim their narratives and exercise self-determination.

Building upon these foundational theoretical advancements, the evolving field of "graphic medicine," which examines representations of illness within the comics medium, "challenges the concept of a universal patient and vividly portrays diverse subjects with legitimate, and occasionally divergent, perspectives and experiences" (Czerwiec et al. 2). Personal narratives of mental illness empower marginalized individuals, offering alternative perspectives to prevailing (and often detrimental) discourses surrounding mental illness (Saji and Venkatesan 1).

Picturebook Research, an emerging field of studies, is crucial at this intersection. It ties a knot between all the above disciplines and makes them available to a younger audience. Children's picturebooks (notes Jennifer Miller) represent experiences that defy perceptual binaries and can foster "imagined communities." These collectives, in turn, have tangible impacts on communal integration and development. She elaborated her idea on Benedict Anderson's seminal 1983 work on nationalism that introduced the concept of the "imagined community." Anderson defined the nation as a socially constructed entity shaped by shared cultural narratives. He argued that active engagement with cultural artefacts enabled individuals to forge a sense of kinship with others. Miller writes that this correlation "encourages identification and fellowship with a network of strangers." She suggests that cultural texts addressing mental illness can similarly inspire identification with an imagined collective. (Miller 5).

Contemporary picturebooks like *Bipolar Bear* (2019) by Victoria Rimmel present a family of polar bears where the father bear has bipolar disorder. The father bear alternates between the dazzling, bright, sunny North Pole and the gloomy, dark, dreary South Pole. With sunglasses, he shields his eyes from the intense sun at the North Pole while a flashlight illuminates the dark South Pole. He sometimes relies on his family to find these tools and navigate home. Through the relatively deceptively simple combination of image and written text, this picturebook provides a new perception of looking towards experiences of mental illness in the philosophical

light and also urges to expand the horizons of imaginations about self, personhood and familial relationships.

The experiences of the father-polar bear are described as his agency to keep acting on his own, and his "family is always on his mind." It is said that "sometimes he finds his sunglasses by feeling around on his own. Sometimes, he finds them quickly. Sometimes it's longer for him to get home." In the pages where the bear visits the North Pole, the watercolour-painted drawings depict him on a bright yellow background with tinges of sunlight on his body. However, when he is in the Southern part of the world, the colour is dimmed out to blue and violet, and his posture is bent down or lying on the ground. It is described as "cool and quiet, not much of the sun shines there," and the yawning, tired bear declares "It's hard to see all the beauty" (Remmel). Everything that is gloomy and dark is cast aside because the bear's family comes back to assist him with a flashlight.

On a similar theme, Hayley Long's 2009 illustrated novel, *Lottie Biggs is NOT Mad*, targets a tween/adolescent readership and explores the nascent manifestations of bipolar disorder, which is revealed through both depressive and manic phases. It is described as one of the personality disorders which has "an enduring pattern of inner experience and behavior that deviates markedly from the expectations of the individual's culture, is pervasive and inflexible, has an onset in adolescence or early adulthood, is stable over time, and leads to distress or impairment" (*DSM5* 645). Using a first-person narrative technique, the author portrays a teenage girl named Lottie Biggs, who is grappling with her initial symptomatic outbursts. Her initial preoccupations are all juvenile. However, the interspersed visual elements become ominous and create connotative underpinnings. Lottie's artistic expressions augment the text. She scribbles on paper; puts up annotations and stickers on walls; and showcases collaged self-portraits. Initially perceived as whimsical, these collages gradually evolve, mimicking Lottie's escalating emotional instability that denotes an increasingly uncontrolled behaviour.

With Lottie's manic episode, her self-portraits become disquieting in nature. These fragmented images – a sketch overlaid with the eyes of a seemingly deranged individual, juxtaposing a composed female figure with a bespectacled male face, and the disconcerting fusion of two unnervingly "idealized" women – create jarring incongruities. This dissonance evokes a sense of unease, simultaneously bordering on the comical and the tragic, as the reader witnesses Lottie's progressive detachment from reality. The visual representations underscore her dwindling self-awareness, a disintegration further reinforced by her narrative, in which she

describes the unsettling loss of bodily integrity: "my head was banging from the inside as if my brain was trying to burst its way out. I suddenly felt very wobbly and very panicky" (Long 138).

Lottie's drawings of apparently simplistic, cartoonish self-portraits – "I was feeling a bit like a cartoon-scribble-person disappearing into a grey fog" – denote a "cathartic function" (Church 131). This visual praxis complements her written narrative. It helps facilitate the external processing of her internal turmoil, thus mitigating its perceived threat. This implementation of the verbo-visual language is what Graham (1990) asserts is the potency of pictorial representation. He says that, unlike the more arbitrary nature of linguistic signifiers, visual cues facilitate more direct communication due to their closer resemblance to the signified (7). The images become a powerful medium for expressing the complex emotional landscape.

Chandra Ghosh Ippen's picturebook *Mama's Waves* (2020) presents a little girl, Ellie, stuck in a cloud of sadness as her mother refuses to accompany her to the sea. The child is shown naturally hesitant to understand but eventually accepts that her mother is sailing through emotional waves. The child is shown agitated and angry at the beginning because she does not have answers to her mother's absence. Ellie recalls "mama stories" with Uncle Finn, standing on the seashore. They remembered "stormy days when Elle was sad and scared and smooth and sailing when Ellie felt so special." This act of remembrance is associated with simultaneous images of the little girl playing with her mother, and the mother sulking face upside down on her bed and walking away angrily when the child is left wondering about what is wrong. Miss K (the woman who took Ellie to the beach) adds something interesting to the tale. She remarks, "Thank you for sharing your stories.... We want to hear about the tough days and the good ones" (Ippen). The element or the urge to tell or hear stories on illness has therapeutic outcomes outlined by graphic and narrative medicine discourse. It constantly questions the medical model of understanding experiences of illness. Sarah Pett, in her doctoral thesis, remarks, "Within this disciplinary framework, illness accounts tend to be analyzed according to their tendency to reproduce or resist the narrative of restitution associated with the biomedical model, primarily with a view towards applying the findings of this analysis in healthcare policy and pedagogy, though the therapeutic outcomes of storytelling for people with illness are also taken into consideration, primarily by researchers and practitioners in psychology and related fields" (33).

The discipline resists the privileging of singular or monolithic narratives. On the contrary, it engages to offer voice to both caregiver and patient. This discipline prioritizes pedagogical

strategies that cultivate "narrative competence" among healthcare practitioners. Rita Charon, a physician, clinical medicine professor, and advocate for this approach, defines this competence as the capacity to "recognize, absorb, interpret, and be moved by narratives of illness" (vii).

This analysis primarily informs healthcare policy and pedagogy. The therapeutic benefits of storytelling for individuals experiencing illness are also considered, particularly by researchers and practitioners in psychology and allied fields. Acknowledging the importance of metaphorical expressions of mental illness, the "DrawingOut Invisible Diseases" initiative at Cardiff University facilitates expressing such experiences through visual metaphors via their website, www.drawingout.org. This online gallery of patient-generated artwork provides a platform for a community of individuals with mental illness to "share their thoughts and feelings about their condition" ("DrawingOut").

The other picturebook of Chandra Ghosh Ippen's *Once I Was Very Very Scared* is about a group of animal friends who share their experiences of feeling scared and how they overcame their fears. The reassuring tone of the book and its colourful illustrations make it an engaging resource for children struggling with fear or anxiety. The anthropomorphized animals partake in storytelling, each intending to listen to the other's voice. Some are hurt because of their family, some have been mistreated, while others are worried or anxious about their surroundings. These characters are shown to engage in reflecting thinking and participating in meaningful conversations. By the end of the book, they all come together for a meaningful resolution where each animal appreciates their difference and understands the virtue of kindness and compassion. Peter Nodelman, the pioneer theorist of picturebooks, sees a relation between a chain of implied meanings and a code of signification embedded in the otherwise unspoken vibrant pictures and their readers. He says, "Because we assume that pictures, as iconic signs, do in some significant way actually resemble what they depict, they invite us to see objects as the pictures depict them – to see the actual in terms of the fictional visualization of it... Furthermore, the intended audience of picturebooks is by definition inexperienced – in need of learning how to think about their world, how to see and understand themselves and others. Consequently, picturebooks are a significant means by which we integrate young children into the ideology of our culture" (131).

In the beginning of her seminal work *Illness as Metaphor*, Susan Sontag describes illness as "the night-side of life, a more onerous citizenship" (3). "Everyone who is born," she notes, "holds dual citizenship, in the kingdom of the well and in the kingdom of the sick," and,

“although we all prefer to use only the good passport,” she continues, “sooner or later each of us is obliged, at least for a spell, to identify ourselves as citizens of that other place” (3) (quoted by Pett). Since this brief paper broadly and often scantily interrogates the decisive norm, the murky threshold separating the two kingdoms, and the path that tries to restore or correct or cure whatever is “ill”, the agenda here is to look for modes of acceptance and empathy.

The objective is to explore Harriet Cooper's fundamental question: "What do disabled children want to tell us about their lives? ..." (Cooper 1) and how they perceive psychosocial disability in a very adult world. The less acknowledged genre of picturebooks represents the debilitating world of mental illness with much compassion. The picturebook *Virginia Wolf* (2012), written by Kyo Maclear and illustrated by Isabelle Arsenault, presents Virginia, who is feeling wolfish and howling at the moon and is refusing to participate in whatever her sister Vanessa does to cheer her up. She looks sullen, and black and white illustrations depict her mood. Similar is the case in the picturebook *The Princess and the Fog* (2015), written and illustrated by Lloyd Jones. It presents a princess gradually being swallowed by a deep dark fog and refusing interaction with anybody. However, she finds support in her parents and companions, to whom she confides her distress. The fog never disappears, but the little girl learns to acknowledge herself. The picturebook *Up and Down Mom* (2020), written and illustrated by Summer Macon, shows a little girl who is often scared and embarrassed by her loving mother's hyperactive behaviours. The mother has bipolar disorder, and the child understands that she needs institutionalization. She remarks that when her mother is happy, she is on the “top of the world”, and when the mother is sad, it feels like “a deep dark hole”.

Scholars of children's literature have explored the possibilities of potential social change in inclusive picturebooks. Rudine Sims Bishop's 1990 essay “*Windows, Mirrors, and Sliding Glass Doors*” serves as a touchstone moment. She remarks passionately, “Books are sometimes windows, offering views of worlds that may be real or imagined, familiar or strange. These windows are also sliding glass doors, and readers have only to walk through in imagination to become part of whatever world has been created or recreated by the author. When lighting conditions are just right, however, a window can also be a mirror. Literature transforms human experience and reflects it back to us, and in that reflection we can see our own lives and experiences as part of a larger human experience.”

Though this research has an inclusive vision and an appeal to the masses, it is not self-sufficient. It needs to be tested whether these theoretical frameworks under health humanities can address

the experiences of mental illness and cognitive impairments in the world of young readers and to what extent they are successful. However, this is beyond the scope of this paper. The overarching aim was to analyze how the underpinnings of the discipline of health humanities can foster change in reading illness narratives through picturebooks. The approach undertaken here was thematic (medical pluralism) and disease appropriation (mental illness). The other ways in which health humanities can be conceptualized include but are not limited to the medium approach, period approach, region/geography approach, and reading archival medical histories, among others (Venkatesan). Thus, picturebooks serve as a powerful verbo-visual medium, encouraging reflection on illness. This brief paper explored how picturebooks can help mend the metaphorical holes in our hearts by bearing witness to the narratives of those we care for.

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