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REMEMBER DIPPY- AN ANTI-ABLEISM NARRATIVE

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Abstract

Narratives always paint and repaint many perspectives. Recently, Disability Narratives are gaining momentum in various academic disciplines and literature is not an exception. Many 20th century writers brought the discriminations existing towards disabled people in their works. Shirley Reva Vernick's *Remember Dippy* is an amazing novel which portrays the life of Johnny and his autistic cousin Remember Dippy. Johnny, the narrator, and his friends spent a memorable summer with Johnny's cousin Remember Dippy. Johnny expected a frustrating summer in which he has to take care of his autistic cousin Remember which is normal because Johnny thinks he is normal and abled whereas Remember is Special and disabled. In the progress of the story it is evident Remember is not either disabled that in the summer brought a shift in the perspective of normalcy and the concept of ableism among the characters. The concept of ableism states that people with disabilities have less value in the society than that of

people without disability. The narrative beautifully describes the shift in thoughts in a way that ableism fades away and the true value of each individual is portrayed effectively. The paper aims to analyze the ways how ableism disappeared during the progress and end of the narrative. The select themes from Social Role Valorization theory by Dr. Wolf Wolfensberger is used to highlight the anti-ableism perspectives in the novel.

Keywords: Ableism, Autistic Spectrum Disorder (ASD), Normalcy and Social Role Valorization (SRV).

“If you force yourself to be the same as everyone else, it causes neuroses, psychoses, and paranoia. It's a distortion of nature, it goes against God's laws, for in all the world's woods and forests he did not create a single leaf the same as another”, says Paulo Coelho in his *Veronika Decides to Die* (“Paulo Coelho Quote”). Every

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person born in this world is unique. People play multiple roles throughout their life. Especially, the roles played by people in their family and society determine their abilities. Normally, the concept of ableism devalues the abilities and roles played by people with disabilities in society. Many writers, social activists, and disability theorists fight against the concept in many ways. Shirley Reva Vernick's Remember Dippy is an exemplary anti-ableism narrative which proves the real values of the roles played by people with disability within their family and in society. Dr. Wolf Wolfensberger's Social Role Valorization Theory is used to identify the anti-ableism incidents in the novel.

The narrative, Remember Dippy breaks the stereotyping of people with Autism Spectrum Disorder. The American Psychiatric Association defines ASD as, "Autism spectrum disorder (ASD) is a complex developmental condition that involves persistent challenges in social interaction, speech and nonverbal communication, and restricted/repetitive behaviors. The effects of the disorder and the severity of symptoms are different in each person." (What Is Autism Spectrum Disorder?)

Children with a spectrum disorder normally show a delay in social, interactive and other developmental skills. Ableism is one of the social beliefs that oppress people

with disorders. The Centre for Disability Rights states Ableism as, "Ableism is a set of beliefs or practices that devalue and discriminate against people with physical, intellectual, or psychiatric disabilities and often rests on the assumption that disabled people need to be 'fixed' in one form or the other." (Smith).

Remember Dippy (Mem) of the narrative Remember Dippy is an autistic young adult. He has a set of routines and habits. He feels frustrated when the routine is disturbed. The routines and habits include watching Weather Channel, playing with dogs and hiding in trees and taking care of his pet ferrets Linguini and Jambalaya. He likes meeting new people and making friends with them. Though he could not contribute to their chitchats and games he inspires and helps them in many other ways. Through his good habits and routines, Mem transformed an ordinary vacation to a memorable one for his cousin Johnny, Johnny's friends and neighbors. Moreover, Mem's characterization makes the story and anti-ableism narrative. The following incidents rewrite the views of people towards ableism, ASD and disability. The themes in Dr. Wolf Wolfensberger's Social Role Valorization theory are used to explore the nuances of the anti-ableism narrative in the novel.

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Dr. Wolf Wolfensberger introduced the principle of Normalization. The title may look simple but it has many underlying deep meanings. The principle was first formulated for mentally retarded people because they do not show any visible difference or immobility. The theorist observed that people with disabilities are either devalued or overprotected with a lot of myths. Furthermore, he split the principle of normalization into two dimensions; the interaction and interpretation respectively. Through the idea of interaction the theorist analyzed the way how people with disabilities are devalued in media. He highlighted the ways and means how people with disabilities are segregated with the models and labels.

The principle of Normalization was followed by the Social Role Valorization Theory (SRV). Dr. Wolf Wolfensberger defines SRV as “The application of what science can tell us about the enablement, establishment, enhancement, maintenance, and/or defense of valued social roles for people” (Social Role Valorisation - Wolf Wolfensberger). In Marxism, the term Valorization means increasing the value of a product in the market. Likewise, SRV highlights the abilities and values of people with disabilities who do not enjoy the good and bad things of life like everyone else in society. The concept includes ten themes which enables people with disabilities to enjoy their life. The official website of Dr.

Wolf Wolfensberger lists the following themes

“SRV is usually taught by means of ten “themes” or motifs that run through all its implications. These themes are: (1) the prevalence of unconsciousness and the importance of consciousness about devaluation, how it is expressed, about service practices and their rationales; (2) the conservatism corollary, or the importance of compensating--even bending over backward--for devaluation and the disadvantages it brings; (3) the power of mind-sets and expectancies about what people can accomplish, and how these are conveyed; (4) the importance of social imagery and interpretation in shaping mind-sets, expectancies, and attitudes, the prevalence of imagery, and how so much of it is taken in unconsciously; . . . (Social Role Valorization - Wolf Wolfensberger)”

The themes in SRV help in exploring the anti- ableism perspectives in literature and other fields. By analyzing the narrative Remember Dippy in accordance with the themes of SRV, the anti- ableism views dealt in the novel can be validated easily and effectively. SRV aims at creating a society where everyone is treated with equal values. The key concept is applicable to many others areas too. As young adults

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Johnny and Mem have their own roles to play in their family and society.

Cousins are the best people to have fun. Especially, a vacation will not be complete without a little adventure with cousins in childhood. Johnny the narrator of Remember Dippy by Shirley Reva Vernick felt terrified when his mother asked Johnny to spend his summer vacation looking after his Autistic cousin Remember Dippy (Mem). Johnny narrates:

“. . . He’s two years older than me, and he’s what polite call different. I call him weird. He doesn’t have friends. He looks the wrong way when you speak to him. He either talks a mile a minute or not at all. He’s stubborn and high-strung. I could go on and on. Not that it’s his fault. Mom says he’s weird differently. Aunt Collette says he’s just who he is. But fault or no fault, he’s hard even to be around, much less look after. This was definitely going to be a disaster.” (Veronick, 5-6)

In the beginning, Johnny thought looking after Mem will be hectic and his vacation is completely ruined. Here, unconsciously Johnny devalues Mem. As a young adult, Johnny wanted to hang out

with friends and do many adventurous activities. He considered Mem disabled in other words Johnny thought Mem is unable or incapable of doing the things that other children of Mem’s age are capable of doing. To everybody’s surprise, Mem turned out to be the best friend of Johnny and Johnny realized that being different is normal. When Johnny came to know about the potential of Mem, Mem’s value increased drastically. Johnny’s attitude towards ableism fades away during the narrative when the role of Mem in the society is valorized and in the end, he realizes; “Funny how the summer that started out in the pits had turned into something so exceptional. And none of it would have been possible without Mem . . . But I did know one thing: Mem and I were always going to be more than cousins. We were going to be friends.”(226).

The first theme in SRV is the role of (Un) consciousness. The society creates many cues among people unconsciously. But to valorize the peers preferring consciousness to unconsciousness is the first and foremost step. According to Wolfensberger (2013) “that once our unconscious thoughts and objectifications surface in our consciousness, then we can help people create strategies that will “remediate social devaluation” (p. 132). In this narrative, Johnny unconsciously believed that his vacation will be hectic and Mem will be a burden but when the

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narrative progresses Johnny preferred his conscious mind to unconscious beliefs so he found a wonderful friend in his cousin.

Johnny, the protagonist finds taking care of Mem a burden and unconsciously believes that though he is younger than Mem, he has to be more responsible and he has to adjust with Mem's schedule. Unexpectedly, Mem seemed more valuable than any other friends of Johnny because of Mem's habits and routines. Mem helped Johnny and his friends throughout the summer vacation.

The second theme in SRV is Conservatism Corollary, which means by nature everyone has some flaws. Exaggerating people's flaws with reference to their impairment is bad and everyone must be validated through their activities and participations in society.

Mem's participation in society is more significant than other kids in the narrative. The good habits and kind- nature of Mem saved many people from danger. With reference to the idea of Conservatism Corollary, Johnny does not know to take care of pets but Mem loves pets and he takes care of them very well. In spite of his disorder, Mem created wonders in the life of Niko and Mr. Boots with his pets. Here, the narrative projects that both Mem and Johnny are good at some areas which are not the same so neither Mem nor Johnny can be valued on the basis of being good at the same aspect. Both are valuable in different ways. The two important incidents

in understanding Conservatism Corollary are as follows. First, Johnny was surprised to see Millie, the rude old dog of his neighbor Mr. Boots playing, jumping and dancing around Mem. Johnny says,

Mem got out of the car,
And Millie started wagging
herself in circles. When
Mem held out hid, she
bounced straight over to
him and let him pet her- let
him actually touch her.
I couldn't believe my eyes.
"Wow, Mem, this never
happens," I remarked.
"Well, it's not like Mem's a
stranger here," said Aunt Collette.
"Neither am I," I said, but
you don't see
Millie doing her happy
dance on me..." (39-40)

The dog-loving nature of Mem brought Millie to Mem when Mr. Boots was in grave danger later in the narrative. Mem and Johnny rushed to Mr. Boots' home following Millie. They found Mr. Boots lying on the floor and bleeding. He tripped over the hose and broke his legs. Mem was much worried and he pleaded for help. With the help of Dolly, a common friend, they admitted Mr. Boots in a hospital. Mem prayed for his friend chip's recovery. He took care of Millie when Mr.

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Boots was in the nursing home and they visited him often.

Second, Johnny visits Niko's Pizza shop often with his friends and Mem. Once they found out Niko had lost the ring he bought to propose his girlfriend in the sink. Leesha a good friend of Mem and Johnny suggests that they can send one of Mem's pets inside the pipe to get the ring. Mem hesitated in the beginning and finally, he agreed, "Mem didn't speak for a solid minute. Finally, he said, "Can it be Linguini?".(149). They sent Linguini inside the pipe. She boldly brought the ring and that made Niko very happy. Everyone thanked Mem for being helpful and understanding.

The third theme of SRV deals with the power of the mindset of the people. Johnny thought Mem is different and the things that interest other normal kinds will not interest Mem. Mem always watches a weather channel every morning. Many children of his age including Johnny never find watching a weather channel interesting. But this habit of Mem saved a life. Mem's wonders didn't stop with Niko and Mr. Boots. His routine even helped Dirk, the Jerk. After helping Niko they lost Linguini on their way home. The next morning the cousins went in search of Linguini. Near the lake, they found an unusual crowd and they saw Dirk swimming in the lake. They returned home with their friends and after a while, they

found a drastic change in the weather. There was a sign of storm Mem informed his friends;

" . . . Mem appeared in the doorway and interrupted the skirmish.

"That's bad," he said through the screen.

"What's bad?" Leesha asked.

"Dirk.Swimming. There's gonna be a storm.

Unexpected strong winds moving in quickly from the Northeast, bringing torrential rains and severe lightening with flash flooding in low-lying areas, "he quoted The Weather Channel..." (171).

Johnny called the helpline 911 and informed them about Dirk. Everyone was upset and Mem said,

. . . Could Dirk Dempster be dead? It didn't seem possible. I saw him alive just a few hours ago. People aren't supposed to die before they get a high school. They're supposed to live long enough to get their first car, travel the world, have grandkids, They're supposed to be old and crotchety when they die. Not young. Not my age. (176).

Mem understands of life and his empathy for Dirk amazed everyone around him. Meanwhile, a rescue boat came near their home and thanked Johnny for

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informing the rescue team on time to save Dirk. Mem shows great care and empathy for all living beings. Mem's strong belief on his habits helped Dirk. The incident changed the mindset of the children and they started to admire Mem. The change in the mindset of the people made the society a happy living space for everyone around Mem and Johnny.

The fourth theme in SRV is the importance of breaking the social imagery. In the following two incidents Mem breaks the existing image of him. Everyone's impression towards a person with a disorder is thinking that they always need support and they always need someone's sacrifice to win. According to Wolfensberger (2013) "All people, no matter how impaired or oppressed, have a capacity for growth and change and that this capacity is much greater than most people realize" (p.134). Remember Dippy is the best example for his words and beliefs. The following incidents from the novel breaks the image created on people with a disorder. The first incident is Johnny and Mem playing video game together for the first time. During his vacation, Johnny takes care of Mem, meets his friends and mows his lawn. Once Johnny saw Mem playing the 10th level of Johnny's videogame called Star Bender. Johnny astonishingly says "No one I know has ever gotten that videogame beyond level 8, and I have never made it past 7."(50). Immediately, Johnny joined Mem for a game. Mem won three straight games

and taught Johnny the tricks to win the game. Johnny becomes a hero among his playing by winning the game with them.

The above incident is one of the most striking scenes in which Mem breaks the stereotyping perspective on ableism. Normally, people think children with a disorder must be entertained by other children and other children must give up the game to make the child with a disorder to win and be happy. But Johnny says,

"Whoa. This was awesome. Not just the game, but being able to play it with Mem- I mean, really plays it. In my whole life, Mem and I had never played a legitimate, regulation game together. Mom always made me play cards and checkers with him, and then she made me let him win . . . But this was a real competition. I was free to try my hardest; I wasn't guaranteed to win, not by a long shot. It was kind of like having Mo or Reed here."(51-52)

The words of Johnny make the readers feel that Mem is a better gamer and his company made Johnny happy. Moreover, Johnny found Mem a better competitor than his friends for the first time

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in his life. A small change in perspective and freedom makes a big change and this proves that Mem as an ableist in his way. Mem's skills at playing the video game changed the mindset of Johnny and he understood the true potential of Mem. The narrative strongly depicted the expertise of Mem so Johnny could find no difference in Mem while playing with Mem. The incident brings a strong shift in the perception of ableism.

The second incident is saving Johnny from Dirk. Johnny hates Mem's neighbor Dirk Dempster, a bully. He calls Dirk a jerk and they both change their name boards to insult each other. One day Johnny finds Mem missing at home so he goes in search of him. At the time, Dirk attacked Johnny. Johnny found some stones hitting Dirk and the stones hit Dirk until he left. Johnny wondered and looked up to the tree. He found Mem hiding behind the branches of a tree and hitting Dirk. The incident comforted Johnny a lot and he felt, "I had to wonder who was taking care of who this summer." (106).

Johnny always thought Mem is the trouble creator and he will rescue Mem. In contrast, Mem saved Johnny from Dirk. Here, Johnny feels that Mem does not need assistance all the time and he is capable of taking care of Johnny. Mem's ability to fight against his foe alerts the readers that children with the disorder need not be protected all the time. They can protect themselves and others from danger.

The select themes from Social Role Valorization theory give a wider perspective in normalcy and ableism. The true value of a person relies on who he is in a family and society. The so-called ablestic people sometimes play a very inactive role in families and society. Paulo Coelho in his *Veronika Decides to Die* has rightly stated that

"Each human being is unique, each with their own qualities, instincts, forms of pleasure, and desire for adventure. However, society always imposes on us a collective ways of behaving, and people never stop to wonder why they should behave like that. They just accept it, the way typists accepted the fact that the QWERTY keyboard was the best possible one. Have you ever met anyone is your entire life who asked why

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the hands of a clock should go in one particular direction and not the other?"

Unconsciously and unquestionably the society imposes many ideas in people. One among the toxic ideas is the idea of ableism. The ablestic point of view states that people with the disorder need help and they must be pitied. Literature always voices out the unvoiced. The narrative Remember Dippy by Shirley Reva Vernick proves it wrong. Even though Mem is autistic, he shows great courage, empathy, and care. Most actions of the story revolve around Mem, Johnny and their friends. People may generally think that Mem is the one who needs care and support to survive but in contrast, Mem cares and supports everyone around him. Mem is different from other children but he is not weak or disabled. He has a disorder that never stops his abilities. Mem is not a useless but he was used less.

The narrative proves that Mem disorder has nothing to do with his abilities. Whenever Mem's cousin and his friends are in danger Mem is the simple solution for them. Mem has proper routines and good habits which pay timely help to him and his friends. Shirley Reva Vernick's strong anti-ableism perspective is evident through the characterization of Mem and the narrative itself speaks her protest against ableism. The select themes from Social Role Valorization theory throws light on various

anti-ableism perspectives. Each theme added value to Mem who was devalued in the beginning of the narrative and finally everyone understands that being different is normal.

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