**RESEARCH PAPER**

# Psychosomatic Trials Endured by the Disabled in Sharon M. Draper's *Out of My Mind*

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**ABSTRACT**

Disability happens to a person by birth or accidentally while living. But this is something that occurs beyond the control of a human being. No one wants to be disabled. Yet, disability is misled as it is misunderstood, and the disabled are ill-treated and harassed by ordinary people who fail to be thankful to the Almighty for giving them everything, whereas some are not blessed like them. Melody from *Out of My Mind* is an example of such a cause who tries her means to succeed in this world of misconception in spite of her physical disabilities.

**Keywords:** Disability, ill-treated, harassed, misunderstood, world of misconception.

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Disability studies is an interdisciplinary area that links disability with cultural, social and political phenomenon without giving much implications on medical conditions. It explores the meaning and understanding of disability by how the society concludes disability through the influences from history, literature, law and policy. Initially, the discipline explored the distinction between 'impairment' and 'disability', where impairment was an impairment of a person's mind or body, while disability was thought to be socially constructed. It examines the difficulties of physical disability such as the discrimination experienced by people with disabilities.

In *Out of My Mind* the protagonist, Melody Brooks suffers from cerebral palsy a neurological condition that impacts her muscles and mobility. She is intellectually high but physically needs some support for moving. She encounters many psycho-somatic difficulties as she faces life with cerebral palsy. Because of the difficulty in mobility, she has been isolated and avoided by her classmates too. Her talent in having photographic memory has not been noticed or appreciated by others. Her disability becomes the sole reason identifying her as the person who cannot walk or speak. She is a bright and creative student who is highly capable of thinking on her own. Though brave and strong, she is downtrodden by peers, teachers and even members of her family. She faces mental trauma as she cannot express her opinions or share her thoughts with those she wants to. Sometimes, her family members try to understand her but this makes them treat her like a statue. Her disability makes her classmates tease and bully her. They ill treated her verbally and physically instigating the sense of lack of identity and failing to know self worth. There is a painful scene where Melody's parents must make tough choices regarding her care, which causes conflict within the family and distress. Even teachers cannot judge her real capabilities , instead hurts her by avoiding her to compete in competitions.

The Psychological effect that even though intellectually gifted, a lot of people in Melody's immediate surroundings presume that she has a low cognitive function because she cannot communicate in normal means. Melody's silence causes extreme frustration because she possesses a rich inner life but cannot express her thoughts. Her solitude is increased further by her poor capacity to engage with people in a conventional manner, causing feelings of loneliness and isolation. Melody experiences deep emotional pain due to the way society views her condition. She faces the inner battle between self

acceptance and making the society accept her as an ordinary human being with a commendable cognitive power to conceive her our ideas on any problems and perceive others thoughts on her. She is not ready get absorbed with others' words of discrimination, instead rise up to her expectations on expressing herself and competing things in this competitive world by overcoming the physical limitations. With the support her parents, it has been possible to compete in a quiz contest by using a communication device which emphasizes the psycho-physical test of achieving her desire for independence against the physical restrictions caused by her disability. She mostly communicates through a communication board and eventually gets access to a personal speaking computer. She has a computer which is referred to as a 'medi-talker'. She and Catherine surf through the internet and learn about adapted computers and talking keyboards. Her parents has purchased the medi-talker which she named as 'Elvira'. She selects a voice which resembles a young girl and speaks in numerous languages.

The traumatic issues have a profound effect on Melody Brooks emotionally and psychologically throughout the novel. They are not only the result of her physical disability but also due to the society's perception and ill-treatment. People always underestimate her because of her inability to communicate or move independently. Numerous psychological researchers have provided explanations that are consistent with the novel's themes. Below are the view points from psychological researchers and theorists that are consistent with the life of Melody, the main character, who has cerebral palsy and is frequently misunderstood by people around her.

Lev Semyonovich Vygotsky's *Sociocultural Theory* has highlighted social interaction and the cultural environment's influence on mental growth. He says "What a child can do in cooperation today, he can do alone tomorrow" (Vygotsky). Melody's path follows Vygotsky's suggestion that cognitive development and capabilities are nurtured and developed through interactions with others. Through the entire narrative, Melody has problems with communication but as she begins to have access to technology and positive relationships, her cognitive capabilities have developed. Erik Erikson Salomonsen has proposed eight stages of psychosocial development and at each of these stages people encounter various problems. He believes "The more you know yourself, the more you have for what you see in others" (Salomonsen). Jean Piaget, a Swiss psychologist opines, "The aim of education is not to add more to the amount of knowledge but to provide the child with possibilities for inventing and discovering." Melody's intellectual capabilities are much higher than individuals can imagine because her condition does not allow her to communicate. Piaget's concept regarding the significance of learning through experience and interaction is crucial in comprehending Melody's potential. Thomas G. Plante, a clinical psychologist, advocates, "Self-compassion is an essential ingredient of well-being, self-acceptance and good mental health." Melody's actions in being accepting herself with her physical disabilities and responding to it with strong determined mind to expose herself bravely without any hesitation comes only after having self compassion and the quest towards reaching heights despite hurdles. These prepositions of the psychological theorists add value to Melody's life in *Out of My Mind*, as she battles many psychological and societal obstacles to prove herself, develop her capacity and acquire self-love despite the obstacles raised by her disability.

Melody Brooks' intelligence and determination are central to her journey of overcoming the numerous barriers she faces due to her cerebral palsy. Despite being trapped in a body that does not allow her to speak or move in the same way as others, Melody's mental abilities and fierce determination help her to defy the limitations imposed by both her physical condition and society's perceptions of disability. Through her intellectual strength and unyielding will, Melody proves that she is capable of achieving greatness and in doing so, she confronts the prejudice and misunderstanding that have held her back.

A turning point in the novel is when Melody's team is disqualified from the quiz competition because another member of the team cheated. For Melody, this experience is extremely traumatic, as it not only belittles her success but also destroys her hopes of demonstrating her intelligence to those who had questioned it. This experience of loss is emotionally shattering, particularly since she had tried so hard and had such great expectations of winning. Melody is terribly frustrated and hurt when her teammates abandon her. Rather than allowing her feelings to remain bottled, she speaks with her teacher and teammates, bringing them to a realization of how they treated her unjustly. Though she feels the loss of the competition, Melody never allows it to define her. She is brilliant and capable despite what others think of her. Following the competition incident, Melody suffers an even more significant loss --- the death of her precious goldfish and eventually, a tragic accident with her sister, Penny. Rather than losing heart, Melody keeps going and accepts her singular strength. Melody's experience imparts a valuable lesson on staying tough, holding on self-acceptance and hanging tough in the middle of trouble. These challenges shape Melody's experiences and growth throughout the novel,

making it a powerful exploration of the intersection between mind and body, as well as the resilience of the human spirit. The trauma of being constantly overlooked, underestimated, and excluded from activities, including school events, friendships and social interactions, significantly affects her emotional well-being.

Melody possesses a photographic memory, a learning capacity and an acute grasp of complicated topics like history, science and language. Since individuals cannot look beyond her disability, they tend to undervalue her intellectual skills. Here are some instances that refer to the way Melody regrets for her disabilities. She says, "Words. I should have known. They are like a beautiful, hidden treasure. But my body can't get them out" (11). While feeling the frustration of having a mind full of thoughts, yet being unable to express them due to her physical limitations. She feels, "I am not broken. I am just a little different" (58), which reflects her awareness of her mental abilities, despite her physical limitations. She realizes her mind is sharp and capable, but her body does not reflect that. Her willpower enables her to persist in the face of adversity, ultimately leading to moments of achievements that challenge societal perceptions of people with disabilities. Melody's willpower enables her to overcome the shame of being disabled. Throughout the novel, individuals underestimate Melody, thinking that her physical condition determines her intellectual ability. This shame, which she must endure daily, is upheld by how adults and peers treat her. Despite this, Melody's refusal to believe these restrictions and her drive to defy others' presumptions are pivotal in her own development.

By the novel's conclusion, Melody's intelligence and tenacity have made her a self-advocate and a role model for herself and others. She has developed the skills to speak out and demand respect and opportunities that are hers. Her accomplishments are a strong reminder that intelligence and perseverance are not determined by physical capacity and that individuals with disabilities are capable of overcoming even the strongest barriers. Melody learns to esteem herself more through her experiences. Her intellectual ability and perseverance enable her to view herself as more than her disabilities. She learns to accept herself as a being who is strong, smart and worthy of respect. Her tale is one of the stories of empowerment, where she takes charge of her life and defies the social views that have kept her down. Melody's transformation is also inspiring to others. By transcending the obstacles that have been set against her, she becomes a beacon of hope and strength to individuals who have similar challenges. Her unwavering resolve inspires other people to have faith in their own capacity, no matter what challenges are ahead of them.

This study explores how her condition prevents her from being as much a part of the world but also shows her inner strength and struggles against overcoming these challenges. The psychological struggle of feeling invisible and alone is just as real as the physical obstacles she encounters.

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