Persons with Mobility Disabilities in Novels of

Greek Young Adult Literature

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Abstract: The objective of this research is the study of the imaging mode of mobility disability in novels of Greek young adult literature. The first part develops the theoretical framework and there is an attempt of a literature review on the research — international and Greek — which examines the imaging mode of heroes with mobility disabilities in young adult literature. The second part presents the findings of the research, the social institutions' attitude towards people with mobility disabilities, as this is imprinted in the studied novels. This research is of sociological content and in order to determine its characteristics, the qualitative form of Content Analysis is being used. The results of this research reveal the difference in the way modern writers cope with mobility disability. Disability is being depicted free from stereotypes and is approached with greater respect. Family cohesion seems to be directly influenced in all of the studied novels. The social environment is disadvantaged and reluctant to the protagonists. On the contrary, peers maintain a supporting role. The attendance of students with disabilities in school presents several difficulties. Finally, state's attitude has not been differentiated and continues to be negatively disposed towards people with mobility disabilities.

Key words: mobility disability, social institutions, novel, young adult literature

1. Introduction

Young adult literature in general is one of the most effective ways to transmit values and attitudes to adolescents. The books studied in this study, however, bear an additional responsibility to society as they are a powerful carrier of ideological messages that are sometimes aimed at consolidating and sometimes revising the dominant social structures and categorizing people with mobility disabilities. So what makes young adult books on disability dangerous, according to Solis (2004), is their tendency to establish social constructs such as the concept of disability and "normalcy" as authentic and therefore indisputable. Based on these positions, therefore, the revision of the concept of disability through literature acquires vital importance mainly in modern Greek society which makes early efforts to accept children with mobility disabilities and to integrate them into its ranks.

The objective of the present research, according to the above reflection, was to study the way of depicting mobility disability in novels of youth adult literature. In particular, the emotions, psychological fluctuations and general difficulties that adolescent protagonists and their families face on a daily basis due to mobility disability are

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investigated. The aim is also to analyze the attitudes of peers and wider society as well as the way they affect the formation of self-image of heroes. Finally, the position of school and state in life of adolescent is examined, whether they are helpers or an obstacle on his/her mobility disability.

The research is structured in two parts. The first part develops the theoretical framework of disability and analyzes the methodology used in conducting this research. The second part presents the findings of the research in relation to the objectives, the questions and the theoretical framework that has been defined.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Young Adult Literature and Disability: Research Conducted in Greece

In earlier novels of Greek young adult literature (until about 1985), disability is presented in a fairly stereotypical way. For example, in the study of Μαλαμίδου (1987), which examines perceptions of people with disabilities, as depicted in 19th-century Greek alphabets, the study data are completely discouraging. There are images of rejection, exploitation, ridicule, pity and compassion towards the protagonists (Μαλαμίδου, 1987). Another example of a negative portrayal of a child with a disability is found in the work of Γεράσιμος Ρηγάτος (1989) "Το άρρωστο και κακοποιημένο παιδί στη λογοτεχνία (1922–1988)". The researcher seems to consider it natural in the concept of "sick" to include children with disabilities (Ρηγάτος, 1989). Based on the literary material he studied, he considers that the "disadvantaged" child causes complete rejection, since he has to face a hostile social environment (Ρηγάτος, 1989, pp. 167, 182–183).

In modern novels of Greek young adult literature (from 1985 onwards) the prejudices are mostly removed. Books use modern narrative techniques and the representation of disability is consistent with modern theoretical approaches to this issue (Λίβα, 2005). Mobility disability is free from stereotypical perceptions (Κάργα, 2008) and is presented with sensitivity, realism and awareness of the situation (Σουνιάδη, 1999). At the same time, moral didactism and fatalism that distinguished novels from earlier years are absent (Σουνιάδη, 1999).

Heroes with mobility disabilities are realistically portrayed and introduced as "normal" children among their peers (Σουνιάδη, 1999; Ντόβα, 2012, p. 94). In modern young adult literary works, there are no images of isolation and marginalization from family or social environment (Μάλμου, 1999).

The participation of both parents in the upbringing of the child with mobility disability is almost equal. The role of parents, however, seems to reflect the stereotype of the traditional Greek family: the mother is the one who is most interested in daily care (Παπαδάτος, 1997, pp. 726–739; Ντόβα, 2012, p. 97). She is always or almost always by the side of the protagonist and fully bears his/her upbringing and psychological support (Ντόβα, 2012, p. 97). Out of necessity, she neglects herself, sacrifices her free time and is isolated from her previous social environment (Παπαδάτος, 1997, pp. 726–739). In contrast, the father has the lowest incidence in the plot (sometimes completely absent) and assumes mainly auxiliary roles (Παπαδάτος, 1997, pp. 726–739; Σουνιάδη, 1999; Ντόβα, 2012, p. 97). Sometimes, however, he is presented as indifferent, hostile and dismissive (Παπαδάτος, 1997, pp. 726–739; Σουνιάδη, 1999). The siblings of protagonists are possessed by a variety of emotions (Σουνιάδη, 1999), dominated by those of shame, guilt and jealousy (Παπαδάτος, 1997, pp. 726–739).

The attitude of social environment towards the protagonists is the stereotypical attitude of the society towards the view of a child with mobility disability. The range of emotions ranges from embarrassment, pity, and ridicule to disgust (Ντόβα, 2012, p. 98). The attitude of peers, respectively, escalates from pity, contempt, curiosity, ridicule, and even revenge (Παπαδάτος, 1977, pp. 726–739). In some cases, of course, as Παπαδάτος observes (1997, pp.

726–739), friendly relationships and mutual assistance are developed, but mainly in adolescence and always among children of different sexes. Of course, mutual understanding and support is developed among children with mobility disabilities (Παπαδάτος, 1997, pp. 726–739; Σουνιάδη, 1999) and friendships are formed even among non-peer heroes (Ντόβα, 2012, p. 98).

2.2 Young Adult Literature and Disability: Research Conducted Internationally

Worldwide, from time to time, various studies have been conducted in which efforts have been made to collect and classify children's literary books that have disabilities as their central theme. The results of research converge on the view that earlier children's books (until the 1980s) are usually lack literary quality (Heim, 1994, pp. 139–142) and treat disability in an unrealistic, utopian way. At the same time, authors choose to present only the stereotypes that society attributes to people with disabilities (Heim, 1994, pp. 139–142). Most books depict the hero with disability as a "victim" or "parasite" of society, attributing negative characterizations to him/her (Ayala, 1999: 103-170). In addition, there are many children's books that focus only on the differences among children with and without disabilities and not on the similarities among them (Mellon, 1989, pp. 46–47).

In modern children's books, data seems to be changing. Heroes with disability are more realistically introduced and approached with sensitivity and awareness of the situation. Most of them have high expectations of themselves while their authors provide opportunities that they leverage to achieve whatever they desire in their lives. Many of the protagonists appear to have contributed positively to their family and some of them to the wider society. In addition, they are treated equally by society and seem to have the same obligations and rights as their peers (Dyches et al., 2001, pp. 230–243). Interpersonal relationships, that are developed among children with and without disabilities, are sometimes characterized as negative and sometimes as positive (mainly among peers or family).

3. Research Method

This research is of sociological content, and in order to determine its characteristics, the qualitative form of Content Analysis is used as a methodological tool. The Analysis concerns the author's attitudes towards adolescents with mobility disabilities, which is why the subject is used as a unit of recording in combination with the face. To better understand the meaning of recording units, however, we must define the unit of context, which in the present research is the novel itself. In addition, the research was divided into sections in which the attitudes and perceptions of various institutions towards the adolescent with mobility disability were identified and analyzed. Thus, the system of categories was formed which includes: the attitudes and perceptions of protagonists (e.g., sense of inferiority), family (e.g., emotional crisis), social environment (e.g., pity), peers (e.g., support), school (e.g., marginalization) and state (e.g., exclusion).

3.1 Objectives of Research

The main objectives of this research are two. On one hand, through the theoretical part, to identify attitudes and perceptions towards children with mobility disabilities and on the other hand the way in which these attitudes are reflected and captured in young adult literature addressed mainly to readers over 12 years old.

3.2 Material of Research

The main theme of this work is the study of heroes with mobility disabilities (in upper and lower limbs). Initially, all literary genres (novels, fairy tales, illustrated short stories) of Greek and international (translated) literature starring such heroes were identified. Of these, only novels were selected as the illustration is not the subject

of study of this work. Finally, emphasis was placed on Greek literature and in particular on young adult, from which the seven novels that constitute the material of the present work are derived. These books present the daily life of adolescents, the difficulties they face, their emotional world and the attitude of both their family and their social environment and finally, their personal effort to survive and be distinguished in a world negatively opposed to any kind of disability.

4. Discussion

4.1 Mobility Disability and Novel Protagonists

Mobility disabilities which are depicted in novels under study are acquired and are mainly due to accidents (Ζαννάκη-Λιάλιου, 2006; Κλιάφα, 2003; Τζώρτζογλου, 1986) and secondarily to diseases (Μανθόπουλος, 1993; Πυλιώτου, 2014). In fact, disability is portrayed as free from stereotypical perceptions and authors present it with realism, sensitivity and awareness of the situation. In the novels, however, it seems to acquire different aspects in each protagonist depending on his personality and the socio-family environment from which he comes.

The protagonists, at the beginning of the novels, are rather introverted, closed to themselves without interests and joy for life (Μανθόπουλος, 1993, p. 83; Κλιάφα, 2003, pp. 21, 73; Σαλπαδήμου, 2007, p. 126; Πυλιώτου, 2014, p. 56). Most have poor self-image and low self-esteem (Μανθόπουλος, 1993, pp. 68–69; Κλιάφα, 2003, p. 75; Σκορδαλά-Κακατσάκη, 2011, pp. 13, 15, 52). They harbor feelings of inferiority and shame (Κλιάφα, 2003, pp. 128–129, 130, 133; Ζαννάκη-Λιάλιου, 2006, pp. 56, 101) while sometimes they express jealousy for their social environment (Σκορδαλά-Κακατσάκη, 2011: 38). Throughout the plot development, there is a change in their attitude (Μανθόπουλος, 1993, p. 179; Τζώρτζογλου, 1986, p. 28; Ζαννάκη-Λιάλιου, 2006, pp. 191–192; Σαλπαδήμου, 2007, p. 60; Πυλιώτου, 2014, pp. 119, 121). They are presented to have the will and willingness to participate in life, claiming the rights that belong to them as equal members of society (Τζώρτζογλου, 1986, pp. 105–106; Σαλπαδήμου, 2007, pp. 119–120, 125; Σκορδαλά-Κακατσάκη, 2011, p. 26; Πυλιώτου, 2014, p. 118).

4.2 Mobility Disability and Social Institutions

The coexistence of the family with mobility disability constitutes an obstacle on its cohesion and disturbs the balance of its relationships (Πυλιώτου, 2014, p. 61). In the novels studied, parents are usually the first recipients of the diagnosis and experience several emotional fluctuations. In fact, they go through a series of emotional stages, similar to those experienced by the protagonists, until they accept their child's disability.

Disability management, after all, is a very difficult task for both family and parents. In the novels studied, most couples go through a short period of crisis (Μανθόπουλος, 1993, p. 89). Within a family with disability, the roles of its members change, and so do the roles of spouses. Mother is locked up at home and abandons the professional and social life she had formed so far (Μανθόπουλος, 1993, p. 18). She becomes responsible for the health of her child and undertakes his psychological support. Father, on the other hand, is constantly working so that the family can cope with the needs and ensure a better quality of life (Μανθόπουλος, 1993, pp. 24–25). The biggest problem in couple's relationship is that parents identify their needs with their child's needs and ultimately neglect themselves (Πυλιώτου, 2014, p. 43). They do not have any personal spare time and their social life is degraded (Μανθόπουλος, 1993, pp. 24–25).

The siblings also belong to the close family circle. They are people directly involved in the issue of disability as they are affected daily. The present study, however, contrasts with previous ones since the siblings do not appear underprivileged, but are treated equally to the main characters. Parents have no increased expectations of them, they

do not burden them with additional obligations and duties.

In the novels studied in the present study, it is proved that protagonists' integration into society and the acceptance of their disability are interrelated issues. The novels under study no longer contain stereotypical isolation images and confinement of the protagonists, as was the case in literary works of previous years. Authors, of course, throughout plot, present society to marginalize heroes with disabilities, but they appear to have the will and willingness to participate in life by claiming the rights that belong to them as equal members of society. In cases where the main characters are housebound, that attitude is purely due to their personal choice (Μανθόπουλος, 1993; Κλιάφα, 2003).

The protagonists' first contact with the social environment is combined with the exit from the protected environment of the hospital and it is quite painful. The protagonists are treated as something different, unreal, and strange (Μανθόπουλος, 1993, p. 66; Κλιάφα, 2003, p. 49). The social environment considers the main characters inferior beings and as inferior they only deserve ridicule and mockery (Τζώρτζογλου, 1986, p. 83; Μανθόπουλος, 1993, p. 61). The pity that society feels towards the protagonist with disability, in any case, is an acting emotion and does not result from sensitivity and understanding of the child's problems (Τζώρτζογλου, 1986, p. 15; Κλιάφα, 2003, p. 50; Σαλπαδήμου, 2007, pp. 59, 101). The main characters, regardless of their personality, are unconsciously influenced by social prejudice and underestimate their abilities by feeling disadvantaged in relation to their surroundings (Τζώρτζογλου, 1986, p. 89). In other words, they adopt the views of their environment and identify with them, underestimating their abilities (Σκορδαλά-Κατσίκη, 2011, p. 38). The only social group that seems to seek to socialize with them is the people who have experienced similar situations of disability (Ζαννάκη-Λιάλιου, 2006, p. 33; Πυλιώτου, 2014, pp. 91–92).

The peers are also part of the social environment of the protagonists, but they are a special group as they have a huge influence on them. Most research shows that children without disabilities have a negative attitude towards children with mobility disabilities. The present study, however, comes to overturn the previous ones by finding that the peer group is favorably disposed towards the respective hero with mobility disability (Τζώρτζογλου, 1986, pp. 56–57; Σαλπαδήμου, 2007, pp. 58, 70, 77; Πυλιώτου, 2014, pp. 61–62). Throughout the plot, they have a supporting role and give the protagonist the strength to continue his effort (Τζώρτζογλου, 1986, p. 81; Κλιάφα, 2003, pp. 134–135; Σαλπαδήμου, 2007, p. 153; Πυλιώτου, 2014, pp. 114–115). They treat him equally, do not treat him negatively and do not underestimate his capabilities (Τζώρτζογλου, 1986, p. 13; Ζαννάκη-Λιάλιου, 2006, p. 181). Their frequent engagement with peers has a beneficial effect on the evolution of the physical and psychological well-being of the main characters.

School is also one of the most important factors influencing heroes with mobility disabilities as it is the institution where the child's socialization takes place. That is where the difficulty in the school-protagonist relationship lies. In the novels studied in this research, this relationship is characterized from challenging to non-existent (Ζαννάκη-Λιάλιου, 2006, p. 56). The first and foremost problem is the children's transport. The school's building infrastructure is unsuitable for welcoming students with mobility disabilities (Ζαννάκη-Λιάλιου, 2006, pp. 81–83; Πυλιώτου, 2014, p. 112). But their participation in the learning process is quite difficult as the material and technical infrastructure of school does not provide for the facilitation of students with disabilities (Τζώρτζογλου, 1986, pp. 71, 105). Thus, school makes the presence of all the main characters difficult regardless of the type of mobility disability (upper or lower limbs).

Also, another important issue related to the school space is the acceptance of protagonists with disabilities by the people who staff the school unit as well as by the people who belong to it. In the novels studied in the present

research, the attitude of the teaching staff towards protagonists differs depending on each one's personality, his pedagogical competence and his sensitivity on disability issues (Τζώρτζογλου, 1986, pp. 43–45, 54, 66, 137; Ζαννάκη-Λιάλιου, 2006, pp. 126, 192).

State is also a very important institution as it is related to the daily lives of people with disabilities. In the novels being studied in the present study, state has marginalized children with mobility disabilities and is trying to ostracize them by ignoring their existence. State does not seem to take care of their needs (Μανθόπουλος, 1993, p. 118; Ζαννάκη-Λιάλιου, 2006, p. 56) and so the families of the protagonists are forced to replace its shortcomings (Ζαννάκη-Λιάλιου, 2006, p. 93; Πυλιώτου, 2014, pp. 112, 120). The information on disability issues provided to the community is limited to non-existent. Therefore, the protagonists of novels, due to the inappropriate and inaccessible infrastructures, refuse to leave the house (Ζαννάκη-Λιάλιου, 2006, p. 55).

5. Conclusions

The study of novels shows that mobility disability is free of stereotypes and is approached by authors with realism and respect. The attitude of protagonists towards their disability varies and is mainly determined by the personality they have formed and the family environment in which they have been raised. Family cohesion and the quality of life of the rest of its members seem to be directly and in exact same way affected in all the novels under investigation.

In all the novels, the social environment behaves disadvantaged and rejects the protagonists. Children must fight to claim a place in society, an equal and humane position. Of course, the way in which peers treat children with mobility disabilities is also quite progressive. In all the novels, the protagonists are treated positively by friends, who play a supporting role and inspire the disabled heroes.

The study of books also helps to find that students with disabilities school attendance have several difficulties. Even in the most modern novels, care is absent and the lack of building and technical infrastructure prevails. As far as the attitude of the teaching staff is concerned, however, it differs and adapts to the pedagogical perceptions of the decade to which each novel belongs. The attitude of the state has not changed and it continues to be negative towards people with mobility disabilities.

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