



The Double Prosthesis: Supercrip Narratives and the Use of Disability as Storytelling Crutch in Indian Children's Stories

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Abstract

Ramendra Kumar's *Against All Odds* (2017) and Soumya Rajendran's *Wings to Fly* (2006) are simple and inspirational children's stories. However, an in-depth analysis reveals that both stories adapted the supercrip model of disability. Both stories utilized their protagonists' disabilities as narrative prosthesis and framed the plot in such a way that the protagonists triumph over their tragedy, i.e., their disability. The fundamental idea of each story relies on the protagonist's indomitable will to overcome their disability, culminating in their victory. They focused so much on their heroic triumph that they undermined the disabled protagonists' genuine experience of pain and suffering. As a result, it reduced disability to a personal tragedy that must be erased to be accepted. These stories are about disability, but they fail to promote inclusivity or affirm disability as a distinct social identity. Instead, they perpetuate harmful stereotypes by using disability as a plot device to create a feel-good narrative for non-disabled readers and thereby inspire them through tales of overcoming. Karthik, in *Against All Odds*, and Malathi, in *Wings to Fly*, tried to erase their disability and did something extraordinary for themselves. Nevertheless, they are accepted not for who and what they are, but for the remarkable achievement of defeating their disability. This article argues that beneath the inspirational surface, these two stories function as narrative prostheses, exploiting disability to craft super-crip stories that conceal the realities of ableism. The stories, thus, reinforce ableist stereotypes rather than confronting ableism or portraying disability with authenticity and inclusivity.

Keywords: Narrative Prosthesis, Supercrip, Disability, Overcome, Stereotype.



Received: 26.10.2025

Accepted: 05.12.2025

Published: 31.12.2025

CJHSSC, Volume: 1

Issue: 2, December 2025

Page: 43 - 49

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.18252799>

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Published by: Seth Soorajmull Jalan Girls' College,
Kolkata, West Bengal, India

Available at: www.ssjalangirlscollege.org.in/journal.php

Email: confluence.ssjgc@gmail.com

Introduction

Disability studies is an evolving field that originated in the 1970s and 1980s in the USA and the UK as an interdisciplinary field that influenced disability critics and academics. It emerged from the disability rights movement, which challenged the medical model of disability by advancing the inclusive social model. A person with a lack of abilities to perform an activity with perfection or in a manner that is considered normal for a human being is treated as having disability. Because of these inabilities, people with disability are stigmatised, marginalised, oppressed, and humiliated. Thus, they are sidelined as not fit for the world. The UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD) recognises that “Persons with disabilities include those who have long-term physical, mental, intellectual or sensory impairments which in interaction with various barriers may hinder their full and effective participation in society on an equal basis with others” (UNCRPD, 2006, p. 4). Disability theorist Michael Oliver defines impairment as “lacking part of or all of a limb, or having a defective limb, organism or mechanism of the body” (Oliver, 1999, p. 11). On the other hand, disability is best defined as “the disadvantage or restriction of activity caused by a contemporary social organisation which takes no or little account of people who have physical impairments and thus excludes them from the mainstream of society” (qtd. in Oliver, 1999, p. 11). Ramdendra Kumar’s *Against All Odds* (2017) and Soumya Rajendran’s *Wings to Fly* (2006) are two children's stories that utilise the supercrip model of disability to present feel-good stories for non-disabled readers. Both stories use the protagonists' disabilities as narrative prostheses to build their plots.

The Super-crip Model

The super-crip model within disability studies is a stereotype and a trope where a disabled person inspires non disabled people by overcoming their disability or performing something extraordinary for them. This model views disability as a personal tragedy to be overcome through indomitable will. Overcoming the disability is central to the story within this model. The story within this model primarily focuses on inspiring and motivating non-disabled people. Here, the disabled person triumphing over adversity through their sheer will makes the non-disabled people feel good. The super-crip model focuses “on disabled people overcoming disabilities. They reinforce the superiority of the non-disabled body and mind. They turn individual disabled people, who are simply leading their lives, into symbols of inspiration” (Clare, 2009, p. 2).

Narrative Prosthesis

Narrative Prosthesis is a device or tool where disability is used as a central problem to represent a story or agenda. The term is coined by David T. Mitchell and Sharon L. Snyder in *Narrative Prosthesis: Disability and the Dependencies of Discourse* (2001). The core idea is the use of disability as a crutch or prosthesis upon which a narrative is built. According to them, disability serves two functions in narrative prosthesis. Firstly, it is used as a plot device: The disability is the problem that sets the story in motion. Secondly, narrative prosthesis is used as a metaphorical device: The disability symbolises something else—evil (the disfigured villain), innocence (the person with cognitive disability), inner corruption, or societal decay. “Disability pervades literary narrative, first, as a stock feature of characterisation and, second, as an opportunistic metaphorical device. We term this perpetual discursive dependency upon disability narrative prosthesis” (Mitchel & Snyder, 2001, p. 47). The actual, material, and social experience of being disabled is erased. The

disabled character is not a person but a symbol or a problem to be solved. Mitchel and Snyder criticise literature for negatively exploring disability: “While literature often relies on disability’s transgressive potential, disabled people have been sequestered, excluded, exploited, and obliterated on the very basis on which their literary representation so often rests” (Mitchel & Snyder, 2001, p. 8).

Supercripdom and disability as narrative prosthesis in Ramendra Kumar’s *Against All Odds*

Ramdendra Kumar’s *Against All Odds* (2017) is an inspiring short story about a one-armed boy, Karthik, who defeats his disability with sheer will and extraordinary talent. However, this simple story about disabled Karthik looks inspiring on the surface. Still, his disability is taken as a narrative prosthesis to carry forward a motivating feel-good story for non-disabled people.

Karthik’s disability is the central problem that moves the story forward. He is taken as less capable. They did not take him as usual, but as someone to be pitied. Karthik’s experience with his classmates and teachers evokes pity in readers and those who care about him. It is very clear from his entry into DPS Rourkela. Sarla ma’am told Karthik she will “take special care of you” (Kumar, 2017, p. 18) because he is one-armed. Karthik felt sad to hear this from his teacher, who always thought of himself “as a normal child and wanted to be treated like one” (Kumar, 2017, p. 18).

Though the story appears inspiring on the surface, with the boy receiving sympathy and pity, it reduces the character to his disability and perpetuates certain stereotypes. Sarla ma’am’s attitude and behaviour prove this, who said, “Be kind to Karthik. ’ Sarla ma’am smiled pityingly at him” (Kumar, 2017, p. 19). At this, Karthik’s reactions said he is hurt by her words, who continuously reminded him that he is disabled: “Kartik looked down at his shoes, feeling terribly embarrassed” (Kumar, 2017, p. 19).

The story’s emotional core relies on his disability. Every emotion of the story comes from Karthik’s mistreatment by his classmates or others. His classmates humiliate and make fun of him for being one-armed. They call him ‘Tunde Karthik’, where ‘Tunde’ means one-armed person. One of them even made “a sketch of a one-armed boy, who looked quite a bit like’ Karthik, ‘hiding behind a girl. The girl was almost a replica of Kavya” (Kumar, 2017, p. 22), Karthik’s sister. Instead of accepting him as a person, the other characters always treated him as disabled, a freak, and others. Thus, perpetuates stereotypes: “In Rourkela, almost every second day, he was reminded that he was different” (Kumar, 2017, p. 30). Karthik’s disability is a crutch or prosthesis that carries the story from the outset. Karthik’s disability is taken as a problem, as a personal tragedy that needs to be fixed to accept him. However, this problem is not individual but a social construction: “The ‘problem’ is not the person with disabilities; the problem is the way that normalcy is constructed to create the ‘problem’ of the disabled person” (Davis, 1995, p. 24).

A super-crip story focuses on disabled people overcoming their disabilities. “They reinforce the superiority of the nondisabled body and mind. They turn individual disabled people, who are simply leading their lives, into symbols of inspiration” (Clare, 2009, p. 2). *Against All Odds* is a super-crisp story in which the protagonist, Karthik, inspires not only the characters within the story but also readers. Karthik is seen as having miraculous talent and did something that even non disabled people fail to do.

His classmates and coach do not accept Karthik until he proves his extraordinariness. He is not accepted as he is, i.e., a disabled boy. He is accepted because he has overcome his disability, which inspires the people around him. He has extraordinary knowledge about football. Because of his extreme knowledge about football, he inspired and guided Tina and Sanjay. Although Karthik is not a goalkeeper, he has extensive knowledge about goalkeepers. He passed that knowledge to Tina, a female goalkeeper: “Always remember, Tina, keepers are not merely defenders –they have to attack too” (Kumar, 2017, p. 48). With the help of Karthik’s suggestions, Tina saved goals, and their team won the inter-school football tournament.

On the other hand, Sanjay was a hater of Karthik. Sanjay is first found to be “targeting Karthik at every opportunity. He would try to push him, trip him, or crash heavily into him” (Kumar, 2017, p. 52). After noticing Sanjay’s performance, Karthik suggested, “I know you have always played back. But I think, given your strength and stamina, a Centre defensive midfielder would be the ideal spot” (Kumar, 2017, p. 53). Sanjay did what Karthik suggested and performed better. Later, he thanked and cherished Karthik: “For the last couple of days, I have been playing as a Centre defensive midfielder, and the result has been great ... Thanks dude” (Kumar, 2017, p. 53).

The question arises of whether Karthik did not have extensive knowledge of the game or was an average footballer. Would his classmates or people around him ever accept him and stop booing him for his disability? The answer is no. This proves the story through the protagonist Karthik is not spreading harmony, normalcy, or accepting disability as a distinct identity. It actually perpetuates the idea that a disabled person will be accepted and cherished if they have extraordinary talent, if they overcome their disability. This is what a super-crip, inspiration porn story does. The story emphasises that achievement and disability are two opposite poles. They cannot go hand in hand. A super-crip story affirms disability as helplessness. So “to believe that achievement contradicts disability is to pair helplessness with disability (Clare, 2009, p. 9).

The coach Peter Sir’s change in attitude, i.e., from doubt to admiration, is a fundamental mechanism of the super-crip trope. Peter Sir only values Karthik after his stellar performance. He is not accepted and given respect as a fundamental human right, but he earned it through his extraordinary performance. As a result, this extraordinariness places a heavy pressure and burden on the disabled character. An average performance from a disabled person would not be worthy of the same respect. Peter Sir did not consider Karthik a whole person because of his disability. He moves from seeing him as less than to seeing him as more than. Both of his views are dehumanising because they do not consider him to be normal. This proves that the super-crip narrative is less about authentic representation of disability and more about reinforcing a moral fable for the non-disabled.

The story’s super-crip trope becomes clearer when Sunil Chhetri arrives to see the young players play. The author presented Karthik in “a make-or-break moment” (Kumar, 2017, p. 57). Karthik realised that “even if he excelled in academics and extra-curricular activities, he would continue to be an object of sympathy to be pitied or an oddity to be ridiculed” (Kumar 57). Karthik is determined to excel in football. He understood that if he did some miraculous performance in football, “people would see him as normal” (Kumar, 2017, p. 57). “Karthik played his heart out” (Kumar, 2017, p. 57) to erase, to overcome his disability and become one of the abled. Karthik owns the supercripdom as a shield. As Clare said, we make supercrip our own, particularly the type that pushes into the extraordinary, cracks into our physical limitations.

We use supercripdom as a shield, a protection, as if this individual internalisation could defend us against disability oppression (Clare, 2009, p. 9). Karthik impressed Sunil Chhetri with his technique and enthusiasm and got selected for the school team.

In the Synergy Cup, Karthik's DPS team qualified for the finals. Karthik was in the team. His coach did not select him for a single match in the whole tournament. Nevertheless, he got a chance to play in the last moment of the game as a replacement for an injured player. He was again humiliated when he fell on the ground from a kick from an opponent player: "Football is not a game for guys like you" (Kumar, 2017, p. 83). His disability is the central problem; throughout the story, he tries his best to defeat this problem. At the climax of the story, Karthik, with his technique and game plan, changed the scorecard from 1-1 to 1-2 and won the game for his team. Suddenly, Karthik became a hero: "Karthik was lifted on the shoulders of his mates as they did a victory lap" (Kumar, 2017, p. 84). His disability is a crutch or prosthesis, which the author utilised throughout the story to make a feel-good story and inspire non-disabled people.

Supercripdom and disability as narrative prosthesis in Soumya Rajendran's *Wings to Fly*

Soumya Rajendran's *Wings to Fly* (2006) is an excellent short story for children about Malathi Holla. She is a lame girl who "lost the strength in her legs" (Rajendran 9) when she contracted a great fever at the age of one. The story conveys that with a strong will and perseverance, one can achieve everything one wishes. Malathi Holla, despite her disability, conquers everything she desires. From the outset, the story looks like a fantastic story about a firm girl who wins with extraordinary performance, inspiring the reader. However, a deeper look at the trope reveals that the story is nothing but a supercrip story that utilises Malathi's disability as a narrative prosthesis. Overcoming the disability is the key theme in the story. This overcoming theme is the main point of the super-crip story.

The emotional core of the story relies on the lame girl Malathi. Malathi's disability evokes pity not only in those around her but also in the readers. She is seen as dependent on other people. Her family is sympathetic to her. Malathi is loved by everyone in her family, especially his brother and father. "She was his favourite" (Rajendran, 2006, p. 13). His eldest brother loved her so much he "would put her in the carrier of his cycle" (Rajendran, 2006, p. 13), and she enjoyed a good time with him. He also brought her to the cinema hall. This support reminds us every time that she is a wheelchair-disabled girl.

Malathi is shown as a strong girl. When her doctor told her to exercise (Rajendran, 2006, p. 15) to make her fit and fine, she took the advice to heart. She loved exercising. The doctor's suggestion to make her fit is a prime example of overcoming the disability. Her disability is her personal tragedy, which requires a cure. Though disabled, "she liked to play" (Rajendran, 2006, p. 15). She dreamed of winning medals as "she loved the medals". Later on, when she became 18 years old, she actually won what she had dreamed of. Here, the author showed her indomitable will and perseverance, which finally made her a winner: "She won two gold medals and two silver medals at the first national sports meet for the disabled" (Rajendran, 2006, p. 16). This indomitable will and perseverance are the key criticisms that super-crip critics raise. Here, the pain and suffering of a disabled person is sidelined, and it is shown that willpower can help someone to achieve the thing they crave.

Disability is used as a narrative trope, a narrative prosthesis in the story by the author. Malathi's winning of the medal became a newspaper headline. The author showed us that

disability could not defeat her; she defeated disability by winning in life despite having it. Disability and achievement contradict each other. A disabled person winning a competition is not natural. This is why Malathi's winning as a disabled girl "made her famous". Her winning is not a regular event; thus, when she won, "she was in the newspaper" (Rajendran, 2006, p. 17). Through her victory, the author is not liberating people with disabilities but actually perpetuating stereotypes and a hostile atmosphere about disability.

Author Rajendran showed Malathi how to be a successful bank employee. It is seen that she cannot do certain things, but she can do some things better than the so-called non-disabled people. Author Rajendran described that Malathi acquired such a strong brain that she can remember every detail of people's bank accounts, starting from name, bank account number, and even "how much money they had when they could not themselves" (Rajendran, 2006, p. 19). The story promotes that disabled people can be accepted only if they are extraordinary. A disabled person with average skill and intelligence cannot be accepted. It can burden people with disabilities and push them to despair.

Author Soumya Rajendran's extraordinary trope culminates in the story's climax when she wins a race with male competitors. The author showed her indomitable fighter attitude when, during a track event in Ahmedabad, no woman registered their name, only Malathi herself. The organisers did not allow her to participate as they "need at least three participants" (Rajendran, 2006, p. 21), which was "the rule". However, she was not ready to accept that. She participated in the men's category: "I will race with the men" (Rajendran, 2006, p. 21). The author undermines the pain and suffering Malathi went through. The story focused more on her indomitable will and resilience than on her physical and mental hardships.

Conclusion

Both *Against All Odds* (2017) and *Wings to Fly* (2006) follow the same track where disability is used as a narrative prosthesis and storytelling crutch. The core of both texts relies on the protagonists overcoming their disability through their sheer and indomitable will, thus inspiring non-disabled readers. Following the supercrip model of disability, both stories end up with a feel-good moment for non-disabled readers who are motivated after reading them. Instead of spreading harmony and normalcy about disability, they actually perpetuate harmful stereotypes about disability. They focus so much on the protagonists' winning that they undermine their sufferings and pain. Eli Clare rightfully said that stories about disability should talk about the lack of conditions like lack of access, employment, education, and personal attendant services that disabled people witness. They should talk about stereotypes and the oppression that disabled people face. They should talk about disability as a distinct, diverse identity. Unfortunately, "these stories (supercrip) rely upon the perception that disability and achievement contradict each other and that any disabled person who overcomes this contradiction is heroic" (Clare, 2009, p. 8-9). To conclude, "the dominant story about disability should be about ableism, not the inspirational supercrip crap, the believe-it-or-not disability story" (Clare, 2009, p. 3). Thus, the disability story should promote inclusivity and must-see disability as a distinct social identity.

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