https://doi.org/10.65734/tgi.ssei.avp.ijcsss.ti.26.29.13

Moral Courage Beyond Physical Strength: The Heroism of a Visually Impaired Child in Arup Kumar Dutta's *The Blind Witness*

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Abstract:

Child heroes in children's fiction exhibit moral values and courage to young readers. The themes of this genre often include adventure, fantasy, social injustice and eco-consciousness. Such narratives play a vital role in shaping moral and ethical awareness among child readers. In India, children's fiction often portrays child heroes who fight for justice against social prejudice, environmental exploitation and crime facing difficult circumstances. Arup Kumar Dutta's novel *The Blind Witness* portrays the motif of child heroism through its protagonist Ramu, a visually impaired boy whose determination and moral conviction enable him to bring justice for the death of his neighbour Gopalan despite societal scepticism. The novel narrates the mysterious murder of Gopalan, Ramu's neighbour and close friend. Gopalan treats Ramu as a normal human being, unlike others who pity or discriminate against him for his blindness. He encourages Ramu to cultivate self-respect and teaches him that true courage lies not in absence of fear but in overcoming fear to do what is right. Following the murder, Gopalan is falsely accused of being a thief and society shows little concern to uncover the truth behind his murder. However, Ramu goes against this injustice and approaches the police with his friend Sunil, stating the clues he has gathered. Ramu's blindness is a bar to interrogate him, though he witnessed the crime. People doubt that he will provide the right information, so the police at first hesitate to meet him. However, the story turns hope when the superintendent of police

believes him after recognising his extraordinary hearing ability that allows him to recognize voices, footsteps and movements so intricately that a normal person is unable to do. His ability to read a crucial clue in Braille eventually helps the police uncover the truth about Gopalan and capture the criminals. Drawing on the moral development theory of Lawrence Kohlberg, this paper argues that Ramu's actions reflect a higher stage of moral reasoning in which individuals act according to principles of justice rather than personal benefit or social approval. Therefore, this paper studies *The Blind Witness* through its portrayal of moral courage beyond physical strength and as a challenge to stereotypes surrounding disability.

***Keywords*:** Arup Kumar Dutta, courage, disability, hero, moral courage

Introduction

A child's moral consciousness and development are shaped by its surrounding that comprises of guardians, peers, games, movies, songs, books, etc. In this viewpoint, the art of reading and telling stories on great child heroes to young people develop various values such as courage, empathy, honesty, responsibility and justice. One of the most significant aspects of children's fiction is the figure of the child hero, who comes up with role model qualities which are influential in shaping the reader's moral imagination. So, the role of the hero serves the essential qualities to build an ideal world of hope, courage and problem-solving abilities in the mind of youngsters. This notion is considered to be effective as children's cognitive power is fluid and not fixed to a particular stage of development (Siegler, 1996) and literary representations of brave child heroes can influence their moral consciousness and social understanding.

Adventure, fantasy, bildungsroman and social injustice are the common themes in modern children's fiction. In many narratives, child heroes go through the 'hero's journey' or 'monomyth', a heroic cycle devised by Joseph Campbell where they undergo a transformative journey of departure, initiation and return (Campbell, 2012). Here, the hero leaves his comfort space, faces challenges or fears, receive guidance, develop power and he returns as a psychologically transformed being with overseeing power. This transformation actually is shaped by the social, cultural and physiological milieu of the hero's journey which eventually develop as the story progresses.

In this light, child heroes may develop a sense of responsibility and social awareness among young readers. The concept of child hero across the globe centres upon the characters from *The Famous Five*, *Peter Pan*, *The Jungle Book, Harry Potter,* etc which are constructed from the western perspective. In Indian children's literature, ranging from short stories to adventure fiction, a multiplicity of child heroes who go through social, cultural and even religious interpretation can be seen in almost all stories.

From the north-east region of India, Arup Kumar Dutta remains as the 'Enid Blyton' of India as he incorporates the theme of adventure in most of his children's fiction. His works such as *The Kaziranga Trail, Smack, Trouble at Kolongijam,* etc blend crime and adventure with social awareness and the theme of responsibility towards environment and society. What's more interesting is the child characters who belong to poor or lower middle-class family, who possess a great deal of social ethics, environmental stewardship and defy criminal or illegal activities that bring injustice. His novel *The Blind Witness* inculcates a different tone where he brings in the theme of disability blending with his ideal theme of adventure to fight social injustice. It features a visually impaired boy Ramu who comes out as a hero in solving a murder case.

The present paper throws light on *The Blind Witness* to examine the novel's portrayal of moral courage beyond physical strength and challenges stereotypes surrounding the social construct on disability. It analyses the venture of Ramu on how he serves as a child hero who is ethically committed and determined to fight social injustice. In this way, the conventional notion of heroism dependent on smart, witty and physically powerful entity is challenged through the character Ramu.

Children's literature shapes children's perceptions of disability and difference. According to Maria Manola et al., literary narratives function both as mirrors and windows as they allow children to recognise themselves while also introducing them to unfamiliar social experiences. The representation of disabled characters in children's literature therefore themselves becomes important in creating social attitudes toward disability. The authors argue that disability is culturally produced and socially constructed through myths and social discourse rather than merely determined by physical impairment (Manola, 2023). Also, John Quicke in *Disability in Modern Children's Fiction* argues that children's fiction can play a crucial role in shaping positive

attitudes towards disability by encouraging readers to engage empathetically with disabled characters (Quicke, 2024).

Portrait of Disability in The Blind Witness

In literature, the ideology held with disability has been portrayed as something shaped and constructed by stereotypes where physically abled individuals are pitied upon, seen as a burden, dependent and incapable beings. These culturally and socially held notions are being challenged through various fictional and non-fictional literary works on disability. Likewise, in children's literature too, disabled child characters have been marginalised as objects of sympathy. Suh portrayals reinforce social prejudices and contribute to the exclusion of physically abled individuals from mainstream narratives of heroism and power.

Contemporary academic field such as disability studies emphasise the need to view disability through a broader perspective. The social model of disability associated with Mike Oliver argues that the problem of disability does not merely confine to physical condition but is greatly constructed by the various disparities that come up in the society (Oliver, 1990). *In The Blind Witness* Ramu emerges as a unique child hero whose strength lies in his moral conviction rather than physical power. This hero deviates away from the conventional hero characters who possess a great deal of physical strength, authority and acceptance by the society. Instead, his heroism is marked by his perseverance and determined effort to seek justice and his refusal to remain silent in the face of wrongdoing.

As a visually impaired boy, his witness of the murder of his neighbour Gopalan was initially rejected as people doubted that he could provide accurate information. Even the policemen hesitate to interrogate him on the crime. Following the murder, when the police make room-to-room enquiries for evidence, one of the neighbours in the apartment said, "Only a boy who is totally blind. I doubt if he can be of any help (Dutta, 2024). So, the novel narrates the mysterious murder of Goplan, Ramu's neighbour and close friend. Gopalan is one of the few people who treats Ramu with dignity. Unlike others who pity him for his blindness, Gopalan encourages him to cultivate self-respect ad confidence where he said that "it was the overcoming of fear to do what one believed to be right and just" (Dutta, 2024). This inspires Ramu to become a hero throughout the story.

Following Gopalan's murder, everyone labels him a thief and shows little concern to uncover the truth behind his death. However, Ramu refuses to accept this injustice. Despite facing disbelief and scepticism, he approaches the police with his classmate Sunil, giving them every detail he encounters during the murder. This brave decision of a young boy marks a significant turning point in the novel as it presents his willingness to act according to his conscience even in a state of discouragement and criticism from the society.

Moral Courage and Kohlberg's Theory

The theme of moral courage is central to the novel. To be morally courageous may be defined as the willingness to act according to ethical principles despite fear, refusal or personal risk. Ramu's actions consistently reflect this form of courage. He does not remain silent in the face of injustice nor does he allow societal prejudice to discourage him from doing what he thinks is right. The moral development theory of Lawrence Kohlberg provides an important framework to study Ramu's character. Kohlberg proposed that moral reasoning develops through different stages, progressing from self-interest and obedience to adherence to universal ethical principles. At the highest stages, individuals act according to principles of justice and fairness rather than external reward or social approval (Kohlberg, 1981). Ramu's actions aligns with this level of moral reasoning. He does not seek recognition or reward but is motivated by a strong sense of justice and responsibility. His willingness to challenge false accusations and assist in uncovering the truth demonstrates his ethical maturity.

Beyond Physical Ability

The central theme of the novel is the idea that true courage lies in moral strength rather than physical power. Ramu's actions demonstrate that heroism is defined by the willingness to stand up for what is right, even in the face of adversity. In his heroic journey, he challenges stereotypes surrounding disability. His ability to provide reliable information on the murder case proves his heightened sense of hearing that allows him to identify voices, footsteps and movements with precision. His ability to intricately study and read out a crucial clue in Braille becomes instrumental in solving the case. Moreover, when he and his friend Sunil are abducted, his extraordinary power to move and walk freely in dark atmosphere, where a normal human eye is of no use proves that he possesses the overpowering feature that a hero

should possess. This portrayal emphasises that disability does not equate to inability but it highlights the importance of recognising diverse forms of intelligence and perception.

Discussion

The study closely examines how Ramu, a child character in Arup Kumar Dutta's *The Blind Witness* functions as an ideal role model who serve as an important subject matter to contemporary Indian children's literature in English. The paper places the discussion on this within realistic problems and actions from disability perspective. In doing so, the universal traits of heroic qualities such a courage, intelligence and moral responsibility are highlighted. Through the integration of various understandings that arise from Kohlberg's Moral Development Theory and disability theory, this study illustrates how young heroes in Dutta's novels signify moral and ethical growth when they interact with various challenges that are brought socially. The analysis puts forward that the characters as shaped by their narrative environments, respond to crime, threat, disability and injustice with exceptional wisdom and problem-solving skills.

So, these characteristics situate the young character Ramu not only as a problem solver, but also as a leading figure who is ingrained with values that are practical for young readers. These observations are directed to fill a visible gap in scholarly attention, as previous studies have limited discussion of an in-depth study of Arup Kumar Dutta's heroic child characters. As the literature review part of this research suggests that existing scholarship concerning the works of Arup Kumar Dutta are entirely comparative and thematic, often limited to detective, adventure and conservation motifs. Therefore, the present research promotes a detailed understanding of child characters as social actors in Indian literature. Also, it aspires to enrich the status of regional writers like Dutta while promoting the diverse landscape of Indian Children's Literature in English.

Conclusion

The representation of a physically abled child character in Arup Kumar Dutta's novel *The Blind Witness* exhibits moral courage beyond physical power through his extraordinary hearing ability and commitment toward justice. His perseverance and brave mind prove him a reliable hero who challenges

stereotypical notions on disability and redefines the concept of heroism through ethical strength rather than physical ability. With reference to Lawrence Kohlberg's theory of moral development and the social model of disability proposed by Mike Oliver, this study analyses Ramu's actions that reflect higher moral reasoning grounded in justice, empathy and responsibility. It can be understood that the novel critiques ableist assumptions by portraying disability not as weak but as a different form of experience and perception. Therefore, this study finds that *The Blind Witness* creates a new layer to children's fiction where the concept of physically powerful young heroes is shifted to emotionally, ethically and morally strong ideals in heroism.

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