



The portrayal of disabled character in Paola Peretti's *The Distance Between Me and the Cherry Tree* (2018)

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ABSTRACT

Disability is a natural and inherent aspect of human diversity. This issue also becomes a relevant topic in literary works, for example novels. In novels, the existence of disability can influence and shape the readers' perspective about it. Using Reams' (2015) theory of characterization, this qualitative study aims to examine how the main character of *The Distance Between Me and the Cherry Tree* (2018) is positively portrayed and conveyed through narrations and dialogues. This study found that the main character is presented through three categories of characterization during two phases of her disabled experience, the denial phase and the acceptance phase. After experiencing physical changes and emotional upheaval as the effect of losing visual ability, the main character is portrayed as having an improved hearing ability, independent, confident, and brave in facing difficulties as a disabled person. The case of this study is expected to give insights into the challenges and daily experiences of individuals with disabilities and facilitate the growth of people's awareness of disability.

Keywords: Character; characterization; disability; novel analysis

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INTRODUCTION

In the literature landscape, novels have long served as a mirror reflecting the diversity of human experience and life. The human experience and life that often appear in novels include death, relationships, and human rights. In novels, the characters portrayed not only entertain but also embody the complexities of life, including the myriad challenges faced by individuals with disabilities

There is a correlation between disabilities and literary works. In numerous works of literature, including novels, poems, and plays, individuals with disabilities often appear prejudiced and stereotyped as dependent and hopeless (Kusuma, 2021). This portrayal significantly influences readers and the broader societal perception of people with disabilities. It also makes the two communities, abled and disabled, biased against one another (Sugiarto, 2020). People

without disabilities often view disabled people negatively. For example, in a children's short story published in Bobo magazine, Kacamata UFO, the disabled character is portrayed as a weak girl who does not dare to fight or defend herself from her bullies (Sugiarto, 2020). This example highlights how even children's literature can contribute to shaping negative stereotypes in society towards disabled people. Therefore, it is essential that literature positively portrays disabled people to promote better understanding, knowledge, and respect (Kusuma, 2021).

The existence of disability in life is a natural and inherent aspect of human diversity. In novels, the existence of disability can influence and shape the readers' perspective about it. This is in line with Leininger et al. (2010) in Reichenberg (2021, pp. 2), "Books that absolutely and appreciatively portray characters with

disabilities can increase mindfulness, understanding, and acceptance of scholars with disabilities.” Therefore, the author of literary works should carefully examine and promote such disability portrayals, which are vital for building a more inclusive and empathetic society.

Unfortunately, studies on disability in literary works have been little explored. To the best of the researcher’s knowledge, there are few studies about disability in literary works (Bianchi et al., 2021; Hodkinson & Park, 2017; Kusuma, 2021; Lalani, 2015; Sugiarto, 2020). To elaborate, Bianchi et al. (2021) discovered that a substantial portion of their analysis of Disney animated films tended to depict disability negatively, often emphasizing characters with disabilities overcoming obstacles or being portrayed as burdens. Hodkinson & Park (2017), in their examination of classic children’s fairy tales, identified recurring themes, including the promotion of normalcy, an emphasis on “perfect” physical appearance, exclusion, and the portrayal of disabled characters as “evil objects”, frequently concluding with a ‘happily ever after’ ending. Kusuma (2021), applying Tobin Sieber’s theory, determined that characters in the four stories under analysis were consistently depicted as weak, dependent, unproductive, and subjected to various negative prejudices stemming from societal misconceptions about disabilities. Lalani (2015) observed that classic children’s literature often presented disability negatively and stereotypically. Furthermore, Sugiarto (2020), employing Edward Said’s orientalism theory, revealed that children with disabilities were frequently depicted as weak, dependent, unproductive, objects of curiosity, and vehicles for the personal growth of other characters within the narrative. However, those studies have not discussed how disability characters are positively portrayed. Hence, the current study seeks to explore *The Distance Between Me and the Cherry Tree* (2018), a novel by Paola Peretti, which prominently features a positive character with a disability.

The Distance Between Me and the Cherry Tree (2018) is a novel that was narrated by a 9-year-old girl named Mafalda, who is diagnosed with a rare genetic condition that causes her vision to deteriorate rapidly. As her vision begins to fade, Mafalda is

confronted with the reality that she will soon become blind. Despite her condition, Mafalda’s determination and resilience shine through as she refuses to let her disability define her. Throughout the novel, Mafalda’s perspective on life, disability, and the people around her evolves. She learns important lessons about empathy, the value of human connection, and the strength that can be found in vulnerability.

The Distance Between Me and the Cherry Tree (2018) is worth analyzing because the main character is different from other disabled characters and does not seem to conform to the general stereotypes of disability in society. Therefore, this study examines how the novel’s main character is positively portrayed and conveyed through narrations and dialogues. To achieve this, the current researcher adopts the characterization framework by Reams (2015), which facilitates a more in-depth analysis of the main character’s development. By analyzing the main disability character in the novel, this study hopes to give insights into the challenges and daily experiences of individuals with disabilities and facilitate the growth of people’s awareness of disability.

METHOD

Research Design

This study is qualitative because it explains how disability is portrayed through the main character of *The Distance Between Me and the Cherry Tree* (2018). This method is used because qualitative research explores and understands how individuals or groups attribute meaning to a social or humanitarian problem (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The study was intended to examine the portrayal and conveyance of the disabled main character within the novel through narrations and dialogues. The data were discovered using textual analysis to comprehensively analyze the text from *The Distance Between Me and the Cherry Tree* (2018). Textual analysis, as suggested by Belsey (2014), is a form of qualitative analysis that focuses on uncovering the implicit ideological and cultural presumptions within a text. By using a textual analysis method, valuable insights into the disabled main character’s representation in the novel could be drawn.

Data Source

The data for this study were taken from *The Distance Between Me and the Cherry Tree* (2018) by Paola Peretti. The data primarily consists of textual elements, specifically narrations and dialogues in the novel. *The Distance Between Me and the Cherry Tree* (2018), published on August 9th, 2018, exposes a disabled character as the main character. This book, which consists of 195 pages and is divided into five parts, presents the journey of a young girl named Mafalda, who loses her vision rapidly. This novel serves as the primary text of analysis in this research, with a particular emphasis placed on examining how the book portrays and conveys the disabled main character. The central focus on character portrayal and conveyance aims to uncover how disability is represented within the narrative.

Data collection

Several steps of procedures were used to collect the data. Firstly, the researcher employed a close reading technique to gain a deeper understanding of the novel. Through this close reading, the researcher examined the text in depth to seek dialogues and narrations regarding the disability depicted. Secondly, the researcher identified and wrote down essential events within the novel that relate to the depiction of disability. Thirdly, the researcher proceeded to collect and organize the data. Fourthly, the researcher analyzed the collected data closely based on the theory. Lastly, the researcher drew meaningful conclusions based on the analysis to provide insights into how disability is portrayed in the novel.

Data analysis

Some steps were used in analyzing the data. First, identifying narrations and dialogues that reflected disability. Second, analyzing and interpreting the narrations and dialogues that portrayed disability. Third, concluding the result of the analysis to see how disability was shown in *The Distance Between Me and the Cherry Tree* (2018). The Characterization theoretical framework by Reams (2015) was used as the theory basis to analyze all the research findings. Additionally, the findings were presented in a structured tabular format during the analysis process. This table included sections for

referencing pages of the textual evidence, contextual information, textual evidence, and interpretation of the evidence.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Findings

To reveal how a disabled character is portrayed in the novel, an analysis of characterization by Reams (2015) was conducted. In this analysis, the data were drawn from the narrations and dialogues that show the characterization of a disabled character. Then, the data were analyzed based on characterization theory.

Characterization of the Disabled Character

According to Shaffer (2008) in Pratama and Adi (2019, pp. 168), "a character is a person (or being given the characteristics of a person) who appears in, acts and/or speaks in, narrators or is referred to in a literary work." Reams (2015) states that characterization can be defined as any action by the author or taking place within a work that is used to describe a character. In *The Distance Between Me and the Cherry Tree* (2018), a disabled character named Mafalda is portrayed as socializing with abled characters. Her characterization is developed through the character's disabled experience, which is divided into two phases: denial and acceptance.

The Denial Phase

Physical Changes of a Person with a Disability
People with physical disabilities may experience a range of physical changes depending on the nature and severity of their condition. These changes may include difficulty seeing, hearing, walking, or problem-solving (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2020). In *The Distance Between Me and the Cherry Tree* (2018), the story narrates Mafalda, who loses her visual ability. She expresses her experience with visual loss by using action, thought, and speech/dialogue.

"Today I can see myself in the mirror from three steps away. This distance is getting shorter. A year ago, I could see myself from five steps." (Peretti, 2018, p. 6)

The data mentions the changing distance from which Mafalda can see herself in the

mirror, indicating a diminishing visual range over time. The phrase "Today I can see myself in the mirror from three steps away" (Peretti, 2018, p. 6) suggests that Mafalda can see her reflection clearly from a relatively close distance. However, the following sentence, "This distance is getting shorter. A year ago, I could see myself from five steps" (Peretti, 2018, p. 6), implies that her visual ability is getting worse than the previous year.

Furthermore, Mafalda's vision condition often suddenly worsens, causing her unable to do some simple daily activities, for instance, spilling the liquid from the glass or having difficulty reading something

"I reach out a hand to pick up mine—it's right there on my left, I think. But my eye goes dark and instead of picking it up, my fingers bump the glass and knock it over onto Chiara, who starts screaming because the disgusting gunk is all over her leggings. The dark fills with glimmering spiders. I can't see a thing; I only hear the glass roll away, then the sound of it breaking by my feet." (Peretti, 2018, pp. 23)

Mafalda experiences a sudden loss of vision. A simple action or task becomes intricate and challenging within this moment due to her visual impairments. The above quotation captures the complexity and unpredictability of navigating daily tasks for Mafalda, shedding light on the practical difficulties she faced due to her vision loss. It emphasizes the impact of her visual challenges on routine activities, revealing the obstacles Mafalda encounters in her daily life.

"I went into the bathroom to read it in private. I don't want my classmates to see me reading—that would be embarrassing. I need to get my face so close to the paper, even to read the really big writing; I'm like old people at the supermarket who can't see the sell-by date on the bags of salad. But I'm not old; I'm ten. Dad bought me a magnifying glass. He says I could use it like Sherlock Holmes, the detective we often read about in Dad's books and sometimes see in movies. I would never ever use it in front of other people" (Peretti, 2018, p. 38)

The above quotation shows Mafalda's difficulty in reading, a challenge directly linked to her visual disability. The act of bringing the paper closer to her face to read signifies a coping mechanism she employs to overcome her impaired vision. This action is a concrete action of the hurdles she faces daily due to her visual impairment. Mafalda does not want to read in front of her friends, because it makes her embarrassed to read close to the paper like old people. It is in line with Sugiarto's (2020) statement that being different from the majority has made a person with a disability unconfident. She worries that others might mock her because of her condition.

Emotional Feelings of a Person with a Disability

Adapting to the realm of disability requires mental adjustment. Depression will get worse when the amount of adjustment exceeds a person's social, emotional, and cognitive capacity, which worsens disability (Noh et al., 2016). Mafalda seems to be resilient; however, her emotional condition is disrupted due to her visual impairment situation. Mafalda undergoes emotional upheavals when facing her visual disability condition.

The first emotion is fear. Mafalda has a favorite character from her father's favorite book named Cosimo. At the end of every chapter, there are letters about her feelings to Cosimo, mostly telling him about losing her vision.

"Cosimo, can you help me? You can do anything you set your mind to, and you're kind. I know you are because in the book, you read stories to the brigand even though he'd been very bad. You read them through the prison bars until the day he was hanged, didn't you? What about me? Who'll read to me? Who'll read me stories when I'm left in the dark and Mom and Dad are at work?" (Peretti, 2018, p. 10)

The above quotation shows that Mafalda fears her condition will worsen but does not know to whom to convey her fear. It also highlights the emotional intricacy of Mafalda by highlighting her need for company and her

genuine fears about the impact of her visual struggles on her daily life. Therefore, she uses her favorite character, Cosimo, as her coping mechanism to deal with it. Cosimo is the protagonist of Mafalda's father's favorite book, *The Baron in the Trees*. In the story, Cosimo is a boy who goes to live in the trees and never returns because he wants to be free (Peretti, 2018, pp. 9-10). She channels her emotion about her fear to Cosimo, hoping he can assist and help her in facing the challenges of her vision loss.

Due to her visual disability, she becomes very sad. It could be seen when she has a conflict between the desire to participate in an activity she likes and the difficulties of her visual impairment.

"For a second I catch sight of Filippo's leg, pulling back to kick the ball while still running, and then something whacks my left shoulder and I hear the ball bounce near me. I try not to think about the pain and to catch the ball in my hands, but all I can see is something white floating between me and the goal. I touch it. The other team shrieks, "Own goal!" and runs about wildly, just like we did. My teammates come over. They're furious, they're talking over each other, but I . . . I really didn't see the ball coming. Maybe I should stop playing." (Peretti, 2018, p. 27)

The quotation reveals the emotional and physical complexities Mafalda faces. Despite her growing disability to see, Mafalda tends to focus on the game. However, it causes her to make her own goal. The line, "I really didn't see the ball coming," (Peretti, 2018, p. 27) captures her frustration and the possibility that her visual impairment will limit her ability to participate in the game. Also, the last line, "Maybe I should stop playing," (Peretti, 2018, p. 27) further conveys her sadness since her vision impairment prevents her from engaging in her favorite activity.

Another emotion is frustration. Mafalda also often shows her frustration and a feeling of unfairness due to her visual condition.

"Something I don't need my eyes to do. I'm lying on the bed with my notebook

open on my knees, Ottimo Turcaret warming my feet. It's not easy. You can't do much without eyes. It's not fair. Why did Stargardt mist have to happen to me?" (Peretti, 2018, p. 31)

The quotation captures Mafalda's frustration. It highlights the difficulties that come with having Stargardt disease in her everyday life. The line "You can't do much without eyes. It's not fair" shows her feeling towards the unfairness of the limitations due to her visual impairment. Therefore, she often feels frustrated with her condition compared with others who are 'luckier' than her because she thinks she cannot do anything with her eyes.

The fourth emotion is sensitiveness when she deals with her friends' mocking. Her condition causes her to be more sensitive when someone asks or talks about her visual disability.

"Filippo puts his elbows on the fence and rests his chin in his hands. "Did he read it to you because you're blind?" I feel my face go red and my glasses steam up. "I'm not blind." I lift up Ottimo Turcaret to go home, but Mom's scarf falls to the ground and I have trouble finding it. "But you can't see much, can you?" I ignore him and keep looking for the scarf, feeling the cold, dry grass with my free hand. In the end I decided to give up and just go home." (Peretti, 2018, p. 37)

The above quotation captures a moment between Mafalda and Filippo –her friend. It shows Mafalda's struggle to find her scarf portraying her difficulty in having limited visual condition. Since her eyes' condition gets worse, Mafalda becomes more sensitive when someone mentions her ability to see. It is seen in the above quotation when Filippo asks her that her father read the book for her because she is blind. Mafalda responds to the question defensively. Her defensive response shows her sensitivity and emotion regarding her condition.

However, among those four emotions that are influenced by her visual disability, Mafalda does not sit still. She tries to overcome her emotions through several responses. For example, she initially changes

a game called “Blind Man’s Buff” into “Bandaged Man’s Buff” because she is uncomfortable with the word “blind.”

“I’m really good at bandaged man’s buff. I know the game’s not really called that, but I don’t like the other word —“blind.” I prefer “bandaged” because you’re in the dark only while you’re playing the game. I’d like to have a dream about playing bandaged man’s buff, wake up, and realize I’ve still got the bandage on so I could take it off and see clearly again.” (Peretti, 2018, p. 34)

The statement highlights Mafalda's choice to use the word “bandaged” over “blind.” It indicates a nuanced aspect of her emotional response to her visual condition. This choice goes beyond to reflect Mafalda's desire to use a term that doesn't directly emphasize her permanent visual impairment. By opting for “bandaged,” she introduces a symbolic element, suggesting a temporary state that can be addressed or overcome. This imagery of bandages implies a condition that can be treated or healed, in contrast to the more permanent and unchanging condition often associated with the term “blind.”

The Acceptance Phase

Other Senses’ Ability of a Person with a Disability

People with disabilities can develop their other senses to compensate for losing one or more senses, known as sensory substitution (Lloyd-Esenkaya et.al, 2020). Sensory substitution techniques are used to represent one sensory form with an alternative. For instance, people with visual disability can acquire visual information via auditory.

In the case of Mafalda, when she lost her visual ability, she later on realized that her hearing ability improved. For example, she can hear sounds from far away.

“The boys are picking teams. I can’t see how many of them there are because it’s a bit hazy from a distance, but I can hear Marco, one of my classmates, saying he has to go. His parents have finished at the graveyard. I can always hear all the words, no matter how far away I am, and all the sounds. When an ambulance is coming, I hear it before everyone else—

at school, at home, everywhere I go. Doctor Olga says my hearing has become more developed because my sight is so poor. This doesn’t make me feel lucky, though.” (Peretti, 2018, p. 26)

In the above quotation, Mafalda states her difficulty counting the exact number of boys due to a hazy view from a distance. Despite her visual challenge, her hearing skills have increased. She can hear sound no matter how far she is from the sound source. This ability makes her begin to accept her condition because she thinks that not everyone has this special ability.

Moreover, this improved hearing ability makes her more active in socializing or playing with her friends. This ability helps her to be good at playing games.

“I have a secret tactic—I stand right in the middle and listen for someone moving. It’s so easy to catch people when they move—you just run to where the noise is coming from. No one expects it.” (Peretti, 2018, p. 34)

The above excerpt demonstrates how Mafalda's vision impairment has improved her hearing. Since she can clearly hear movements during the game, her friends thought she cheated. Nevertheless, her skill in playing this game is the result of her improved hearing sense; therefore, she can hear her friends’ movements easily.

Other than that, her improved ability in hearing makes her easily hear such a small sound even in noisy surroundings.

“The housephone rings. With all the racket going on, I’m the only one who hears the first ring, although it almost felt like a whisper of air had brushed my face at the same time that I heard the shrill, piercing sound.” (Peretti, 2018, p. 87)

The quotation shows that Mafalda's hearing ability has increased despite her vision loss. It illustrates a moment when the house phone rings amidst a noisy or chaotic environment, yet only Mafalda notices the first ring. The sentence, “I’m the only one who hears the first ring, although it almost felt like a whisper,” presents that she is the one who hears the sound when others do not, even though it

seems impossible to hear since it is like a whisper.

A Person with a Disability can be Independent
A person with a disability is described as a dependent person who requires assistance from others to live independently (Rapley, 2004). However, it is not always accurate, as many people with disabilities are capable of living independently and leading fulfilling lives. It is also seen in *The Distance Between Me and the Cherry Tree* (2018). Mafalda makes some plans to help her become independent when she is completely blind.

“I lay it on my pillow. The label on the front of it says: MAFALDA'S LIST. I use this notebook as my personal organizer. There's a date—September 14—on the first page. That was three years, eleven days ago. Under that, I've written: Things I care a lot about (that I won't be able to do anymore)” (Peretti, 2018, p. 7)

Mafalda uses a notebook to write many things she cares about but believes she won't be able to do anymore. The above quotation leads the readers into the emotional landscape of the main character. Placing her book on her pillow suggests a close relationship or a sense of comfort. Her book is deeply personal and tied to Mafalda's identity. The timeframe in her book introduces the idea of change over a specific period. It can also mark a significant moment, especially her vision. The list that she writes contains activities, aspirations, wishes, or aspects of her life that she feels are slipping away due to her changing abilities. This not only reveals the challenges she faces but also highlights her emotional adapting to life with a disability.

Mafalda also counts her steps from the cherry tree to her school to help her measure her vision quality. Therefore, when she loses her visual ability, she already knows how many steps she must take to get into her school.

“I start counting right away: one, two, three. . . . I keep counting. I count thirty steps before I hear Estella whistle. Thirty-five, thirty-six . . . forty, fifty, one hundred. We reach the school gates.

...
It took me one hundred and forty steps to reach the cherry tree from where I started to see it. Seventy meters.” (Peretti, 2018, p. 16)

In the quotation, Mafalda engages in the routine of counting her steps from the cherry tree to the school gate to measure the distance she can visually perceive. This practice serves as a daily measurement, allowing her to track changes in her visual capabilities over time. Consistently counting her steps can help her to walk independently when she completely loses her visual ability. Therefore, she will be able to walk alone without asking for help from someone else.

In addition, Mafalda does not want assistance from her surroundings, including her parents, because she does not want to make her parents worry about her condition.

“I don't want to speak to Mom anymore. I can't see her, so I can pretend she's not here and not talk to her. I pull the covers back up and try to cry quietly, with my body, not my voice, the way Filippo does, while Mom keeps moving around, and I feel the bed vibrate ever so gently with each of her steps.” (Peretti, 2018, p. 112)

The quotation shows that Mafalda finds herself completely visually impaired. It also conveys Mafalda's deep emotional situation when she faces the condition. It is stated that she does not want to speak to her mother anymore since she cannot see her. It implies that Mafalda does not want to make her mother worry about her condition; hence, she pretends she is okay. When she cries in silence, it suggests a desire to hide her emotional vulnerability, potentially due to not wanting to reveal her feelings to her mother. Therefore, her mother will not be sad about her condition.

Other than that, Mafalda's desire to be independent is portrayed when she pretends that she is fine and dresses by herself.

“I start to reach for my glasses, but what's the point? I don't need them anymore. But I have to convince Mom and Dad that everything is okay. Better put them on. I reach out to the shelf

where I lay my glasses at night, but I've been too hesitant." (Peretti, 2018, p. 112)

The above quotation shows Mafalda does the usual things she always does, such as wearing her glasses, even though she does not need them anymore since she is completely "in the dark." However, to make sure that everything is okay and to make her parents think that everything is in the right place, she still wears her glasses. Therefore, her parents do not worry about her condition.

"I dress slowly, not too slowly or Mom will come check on me. Too bad Mom picked today to leave me out a blouse. The buttons are difficult in the dark. But my fingers like the buttons; they're smooth and cool and slip quickly into the right slots. Maybe one didn't. I'll just have to hope Mom doesn't check." (Peretti, 2018, p. 114)

The quotation illustrates Mafalda's experience of getting dressed independently despite facing challenges due to her visual disability. She dresses slowly to ensure she can manage it without any issues. She does not ask for her mother's help because she worries her mother will find that she is completely "in the dark." Furthermore, the sentence, "But my fingers like the buttons; they're smooth and cool and slip quickly into the right slots" shows her adaptability and reliance on touch and sensory perception even though she cannot see well.

Lastly, even though she is afraid of walking alone when she loses her visual ability, she convinces her father to let her walk by herself because she does not want him to worry.

"Your friendly janitor doesn't seem to be here today. I'll take you inside," Dad says, and I hear him moving toward the stairs already.
"No, it's fine. I'll go up myself."
I start going up the steps, my heart pounding under my sweater, under the small white printed star. Wearing Estella's T-shirt under my blouse seemed like the best way of bringing it with me.
"Are you sure?"
"Yes. Bye," I say, without turning round.

"Okay. Bye. See you later." (Peretti, 2018, p. 115)

The dialogues illustrate a moment when Mafalda goes to school with her father. Her father wants to help Mafalda by taking her inside, but Mafalda refuses. She says that she can go inside the school by herself, even though she is afraid since she cannot see anymore. She does this because she does not want her father to know that she is completely visually disabled and becomes worried about her condition.

The Role of Friends

Compared to their classmates without disabilities, children with disabilities often have fewer friendships that are reciprocated (Nadeau & Tessier, 2006). It causes them to experience some significant chances of isolation (Lindsay & McPherson, 2011). Whereas, Cummings et.al (2006) stated that children and youth with disabilities may be able to complete developmental tasks and lead fulfilling lives with the support of peers and adults. Therefore, someone with disabilities needs to have supportive friends in order to improve their social skills and boost their self-confidence.

In the novel, Mafalda has two best friends who are always supportive and help her in facing her difficulties as someone with a visual disability. Filippo and Estella always show her their positive support to make her confident with her condition. For example, Filippo helps Mafalda find an activity that she can do even though she cannot see well.

"Filippo plays it in a fun way, and I can't help but sing the chorus and sway in time on the stool, laughing. He smiles too, right through to the last note. We both take our hands off the piano. I applaud just for him. "Well done!"
"I'll teach you if you want."
The joy of the moment vanishes instantly.
"I can't read the notes."
"It doesn't matter. I played without music."
"Another time, maybe."
"Promise?"
I feel my face go red. "Only if you keep practicing your modern songs." (Peretti, 2018, pp. 62-63)

The quotation portrays a moment of Mafalda and Filippo. Filippo offers to teach Mafalda to play piano, but she hesitates because she cannot read musical notes due to her visual disability. However, Filippo convinces her to learn it by seeking a promise. Hence, he can help Mafalda to believe in herself and pull her away from her comfort zone.

“He plucks the strings and sings. “Dooo . . .”
I do it too, even though I’m embarrassed.
“See? You’re good. Now this is ‘Re.’
Reeee . . .”
I copy him.
“It comes so naturally to you. You’re lucky.”
I find it impossible not to smile. It’s not often I feel lucky about something
I don’t need eyes for. Or glasses.”
(Peretti, 2018, p. 66)

The above quotation shows that Filippo tries to teach Mafalda to vocalize the notes. It is seen that Filippo compliments Mafalda’s musical ability. It makes Mafalda happy and believes she can do something despite losing her visual ability. Moreover, at the end of the story, Filippo is willing to help Mafalda in writing her book.

“Will you help me write the book?”
Filippo slips the list back into my pocket and takes my hand. The bell rings; it’s time to go in.
“Okay. Do you know how it’s going to start?”
I smile. “Yes. It starts like this. . . . All children are scared of the dark. . . .”
(Peretti, 2018, p. 132)

The quotation illustrates a moment when Mafalda seeks help from Filippo to write a book. The sentences, “Filippo slips the list back into my pocket and takes my hand” and “Okay. Do you know how it’s going to start?” suggest a supportive gesture, demonstrating Filippo’s willingness to help Mafalda because he already knows that she lost her visual ability.

Mafalda’s other friend, Estella, also helps her in facing her challenges of visual loss. For instance, when Mafalda talks about her fear, Estella tries to motivate her to face it.

“Of course I’m afraid. You’re afraid of something too, aren’t you, Mafalda?”
I play with one of the silk flowers that landed on my hand. “Yes. Of the dark.”
“Aren’t you in the dark now? You don’t seem too scared to me. You climbed up the cherry tree.”
I look at her through the gray. Her face is so close, I can nearly see it, I’m sure, nearly.
“How do you know I’m in the dark?”
“Well, I’ve got a third eye, just like you.”
“Are you going to tell my mom and dad?”
“They’ll work it out by themselves. They also have a third eye, you know. All moms and dads have them.” (Peretti, 2018, pp. 124-125)

The above quotation shows a conversation between Mafalda and Estella about fear. Mafalda finally admits her fear of “the dark”. However, Estella challenges Mafalda’s fear of “the dark” by pointing out that she is currently in “darkness” and appears unafraid because she can climb the cherry tree alone. Estella’s empathy and support help Mafalda overcome her fears and face her condition.

“I’m in the dark. I’m scared.”
“To live in fear is to not live at all, Mafalda. Come on, I showed you how to get down. Put foot here, remember?”
Okay. I do what she says.
“Like this?”
“Yes, like that. Now, jump.....” (Peretti, 2018, pp. 127-128)

The dialogues portray that Mafalda is completely visually disabled and she is scared about that. Her fear comes from her visual disability, causing discomfort and uncertainty in sensing the environment without sight. Fortunately, Estella gives guidance and encouragement to help her solve the situation. This guidance and encouragement make Mafalda overcome her fear and take action despite her uncertainty.

Discussion

The data found shows the portrayal of Mafalda, a disabled character in *The Distance Between Me and the Cherry Tree* (2018). The data were divided into two phases; denial

phase and acceptance phase. It was found that Mafalda's character was depicted through three out of five categories of characterization according to Reams (2015). In both the denial and acceptance phases, Mafalda's characterization as a disabled person was revealed through action, thought, and speech/dialogue.

In the denial phase, those dominant characterization categories emphasized Mafalda's decreased visual ability and the emotional feelings she feels as a disabled person. Her physical changes in her vision sparked feelings of fear, sadness, frustration, and sensitivity. The complex emotional feelings as a result of her visual ability loss illustrate the significant psychological impact her disability can bring. Even though her visual disability influences her emotions, she still can manage it. She is able to cope with her feelings, for instance, initially changing the word "blind" in a game since she is uncomfortable with it.

Meanwhile, in the acceptance phase, the same characterization categories highlighted Mafalda's experience in improving her hearing ability, becoming independent, and facing her difficulties as a disabled person by receiving support and help from her friends. Her strengthening hearing sense and resolve to challenge the difficulties as a disabled person show both bodily and emotional adaptation. Receiving support and help from her friends makes her more confident and brave in facing the challenges she has as a disabled person. Hence, this study disproves Kusuma (2021) and Sugiarto (2020) in the sense that the characters with disabilities were portrayed as weak, dependent, and unproductive people. Furthermore, as a comparison to the disability characterization in *The Distance Between Me and the Cherry Tree* (2018), disability characterization in various literary works is shown differently. For example, the disabled character in some Disney films is presented as a burden on friends, family, or society (Bianchi, et al., 2021), meanwhile, this study presents that the disabled character does not want to be like that.

The characterization of disability in *The Distance Between Me and the Cherry Tree* (2018) is revealed in this study. By applying Reams' (2015) theoretical framework of characterization, this study

offers new insights into the construction of disabled characters portrayed in literature. Additionally, this study's findings debunk common misconceptions about how disabled characters are portrayed in literature works.

CONCLUSION

Based on the findings, it can be seen that Mariam and Laila undergo traumatic experiences that come from their socio-cultural environment, and they illustrate different trauma responses. This study examines how the main disabled character, Mafalda, in *The Distance Between Me and the Cherry Tree* (2018) is positively portrayed and conveyed through the narrations and dialogues of the novel. To answer the question, the theoretical framework used was the characterization theory from Reams (2015). To present the characterization of a character, Reams (2015) categorized it into five categories; however, this study only found three categories: action, thought, and speech/dialogue. The characterization categories of physical description and reactions could not be found because the portrayal of Mafalda's disability was not shown through those two categories.

The study found that the portrayal of disability was divided into two phases: the denial phase and the acceptance phase. In the denial phase, Mafalda is portrayed as someone who experiences physical changes in the form of decreased visual ability. She also undergoes some emotional feelings that she feels as a disabled person, such as fear, sadness, frustration, and sensitivity. Those emotional feelings are the effect of her decreased visual ability. Even though her visual ability influences her emotions, she can still manage them by coping with her feelings. Meanwhile, despite her worsening ability to see, Mafalda's hearing ability has improved in the acceptance phase. It helps her in socializing with others. Additionally, she becomes independent, confident, and brave in facing difficulties as a disabled person by receiving support and help from her friends. For that reason, those situations led her to start accepting her condition.

This study gives insights into the challenges and daily experiences of individuals with disabilities and facilitates the growth of people's awareness of disability.

Even though disability is a complex case to be portrayed, it does not mean it is impossible. The portrayal of disabled characters in other novels or literary works will be different and vary depending on how the author depicts it. In order to gain insights into how disabled characters are constructed and portrayed differently in other novels or literary works, future researchers can explore it and compare the findings to this research's findings. Furthermore, besides focusing on the disabled characters, the influence of peers on individuals with disabilities could be an interesting topic to analyze because they can motivate and inspire disabled people to face their challenges. Therefore, it can also influence people, especially those without disabilities, to be more respectful and boost their awareness of disabled people.

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