

PORTRAYING INTELLECTUAL DISABILITY AND ABLEISM IN THE NOVEL “FLOWER FOR ALGERNON” WRITTEN BY DANIEL KEYES

Cita Hikmah Yanti¹⁾, Adenin Anzar²⁾

¹⁾²⁾Universitas Bina Darma

¹⁾citahikmahyanti@gmail.com ²⁾adeninanzar427@gmail.com

Abstract

This research analyzes the representation of intellectual disability and ableism in the novel “Flowers for Algernon” by Daniel Keyes. The focus of this research is one the main character, Charlie Gordon, who experiences intellectual disability as well as the actions of ableism towards him. This research uses a qualitative method with a text analysis approach to explore how intellectual disability and ableism are portrayed in this novel. The results show that the novel effectively portrays the systemic discrimination and prejudice faced by individuals with intellectual disabilities, as well as highlighting the importance of inclusivity and respect for differences. This research contributes to a deeper understanding of the social impact of ableism and encourages advocacy for the rights and full inclusion of individuals with disabilities.

Keywords: ableism, daniel keyes, flowers for algernon, intellectual disability

©English Language Education FKIP UM Palembang

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.32502/ecj.v8i2.8874>

Introduction

In Indonesia, ableism manifests in numerous challenges faced by individuals with disabilities across various aspects of life. Discrimination against people with disabilities is pervasive, leading to limited access to education, employment, healthcare, and social inclusion (Cameron & Suarez, 2017). This discrimination is evident in the lack of inclusive policies and resources in schools, hindering children with disabilities from accessing quality education. Similarly, discriminatory attitudes among employers and inaccessible workplaces restrict employment opportunities for disabled individuals. Access to healthcare services is also impeded by physical and communication barriers in medical facilities, as well as a shortage of trained professionals. Moreover, cultural attitudes that view disability with stigma and pity contribute to social exclusion and marginalization, impacting disabled individuals' participation in social interactions and community life. Public spaces and transportation systems often lack accessibility features, further

isolating disabled individuals from full participation in society. Discrimination against the rights of people with disabilities, especially those with intellectual disabilities, is referred to as ableism.

Ableism, as defined by Redmond, refers to the systemic discrimination and prejudice against individuals with disabilities. This pervasive system of exclusion and oppression affects people who have mental, emotional, physical disabilities and also intellectual disability. It results in unequal treatment, limited opportunities, and marginalization across various aspects of individuals' lives, including education, employment, healthcare, and social interactions (Nario- Redmond, 2019).

Intellectual disability is a term used when a person has certain limitations in cognitive functioning and skills, including conceptual, social and practical skills, such as language, social and self-care skills. These limitations can cause a person to develop and learn more slowly or differently than a

typically developing person (Schalock, R. L., 2010).

Intellectual disability poses significant challenges for individuals, characterized by major difficulties or delays in acquiring skills across developmental areas such as motor skills, communication, social interaction, and learning (Adesokan, 2022). In Indonesia, individuals with intellectual disabilities encounter additional barriers due to ableism, including limited access to inclusive education, employment opportunities, healthcare services, and social inclusion. Discriminatory attitudes and inaccessible environments further compound these challenges, hindering the full participation and integration of individuals with intellectual disabilities into society.

The novel *Flowers for Algernon* by Daniel Keyes illustrate the pervasive effects of ableism on individuals with intellectual disabilities through the journey of its protagonist, Charlie Gordon. This novel highlights the discrimination, prejudice, and societal treatment faced by individuals with intellectual disabilities, emphasizing the urgent need for inclusive approaches. The research aims to challenge ableist attitudes and practices in society, inspired by the novel's portrayal of the complexities of ableism and its impact on identity, agency, and human relationships. The research seeks to contribute to a deeper understanding and advocacy for the rights and inclusion of individuals with disabilities, particularly those with intellectual disabilities.

Research Methodology

This study used the qualitative method. The qualitative method is the process of understanding social phenomenon by getting closer to it. This type of study is about descriptive data that can be in the form of words, pictures,

or even films (Seth, S., N. K., & Bhatia, 2022)

This research also used textual analysis method to explore themes if intellectual disability and ableism in a literary work involves a thorough examination of the text's content, language, characters, and context.

The objects of this study are intellectual disability and ableism described in the novel named *Flower for Algernon* (1966) written by Daniel Keyes, first published as a short story in 1959 before being expanded into a full-length novel in 1966. The novel is presented as a series of progress reports written by the protagonist, Charlie Gordon. The data will be taken from the dialogue and the narrative in the novel *Flower for Algernon*.

The researchers used an appropriate technique for collecting data. This study used written data, so the proper technique use in this research is the documentation technique to obtain data or information in form of books, archives, documents, writings, and also pictures (Sugiyono, 2018).

The steps used for the documentation technique are: Reading and understanding *Flower for Algernon* Novel. In this step, the researchers read it carefully and comprehended the novel by choosing and selecting the important data for the analysis, reading some studies and references about ableism and intellectual disability as a guide to collecting the data.

To analyze the data for this research, the researcher tried to analyze the data that have been collected briefly. This analysis aims to get valid data that is appropriate to the research problems.

The researcher uses these following steps in doing data analysis such as: Identifying Intellectual Disability based on AAIDD (American Association on Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities) on the main

character Charlie Gordon, Categorizing the Ableism towards the main character in the Novel *Flowers for Algernon*.

Findings and Discussion

The novel *Flowers for Algernon* by Daniel Keyes portray intellectual disability and the manifestations of ableism through its main character, Charlie Gordon. Charlie, who has cognitive limitations, is depicted as someone who faces various challenges in his daily life. The portrayal of intellectual disability is evident through Charlie's writing, marked by spelling errors, simple language, and his reliance on routine, which highlights his limited understanding of abstract concepts. Additionally, the novel addresses the issue of ableism, where Charlie is frequently subjected to discrimination and is looked down upon by those around him due to his intellectual limitations. Despite his efforts to navigate a world that often does not understand him, the social interactions he encounters reveal the deep-seated stigma and prejudice present in society towards individuals with intellectual disabilities. Thus, the novel not only exposes the harsh realities faced by individuals with intellectual disabilities but also critiques the societal attitudes and treatment that are often discriminatory.

a. Intellectual disability

The intellectual disability of the Charlie Gordon as a main character in the *Flowers for Algernon* experiences cognitive limitation, emotional and social challenges.

"I can't write good but Miss Kinnian says it don't matter. She says I should write how I talk" (Keyes, p. 3). This is evident from the beginning of the novel. He struggles with basic

reading, writing, and comprehension, which is depicted through his progress reports, written in simplistic language with frequent spelling and grammatical errors. "I don't understand what they mean when they talk about things like love and friendship. It's like they're using words that don't mean anything" (Keyes, p. 14). Charlie finds it challenging to grasp abstract ideas or complex instructions, often requiring things to be explained multiple times in simple terms. "I do the same things every day because that's how I remember what to do. If something changes, I get confused" (Keyes, p. 11). He relies heavily on routine and repetition in his work at the bakery, performing tasks by rote without fully understanding them.

"I don't think about things too much because it just makes my head hurt. It's easier to just do what people tell me" (Keyes, p. 25). Charlie's inability to think critically or question his surroundings reflects his cognitive limitations. He accepts things at face value and has difficulty seeing beyond the immediate and concrete.

"They say they're my friends, so I believe them, even when they laugh at me. I think they're just having fun" (Keyes, p. 22). Charlie's intellectual disability makes him extremely naive and trusting, often leading him to be taken advantage of by others. He is unable to discern when people are being cruel or manipulative.

"I laugh when they laugh, even if I don't know what's funny. I just want to be part of the group" (Keyes, p. 19). Charlie is acutely aware of his desire to be accepted and liked by others. This drives him to participate in activities he doesn't fully understand or enjoy, simply to fit in.

"They talk about things I don't

understand, so I just nod and smile. I don't want them to think I'm stupid" (Keyes, p. 23). His disability affects his ability to engage in social interactions. He often misses social cues, fails to understand jokes, and is unable to engage in reciprocal conversations.

"Sometimes I feel like crying and I don't know why. It's like everything is too much for me to handle" (Keyes, p. 28). Charlie's emotional responses are often disproportionate or inappropriate for the situation, reflecting his struggle to navigate complex emotions. He swings between extreme happiness when praised and deep distress when faced with criticism or failure.

b. Ableism

The novel *Flowers for Algernon* provides a comprehensive portrayal of ableism through the life experiences of Charlie Gordon. This section identifies and categorizes instances of ableism in the novel into four types: Attitudinal Discrimination, Structural Discrimination, Social Exclusion and Stigmatization, and Intersectionality.

"They make fun of me because I don't know what they're talking about, but I still try to laugh along with them" (Keyes, p. 22). Charlie's coworkers often mock him because of his intellectual disability. They treat him as less than human, making fun of his every action. The nickname "dumb Charlie" is used by his coworkers and others, underscoring their perception of him as unintelligent and therefore inferior.

"They put me in a special class where they didn't expect much of me. I was just there to fill a seat" (Keyes, p. 17).

Charlie's initial access to education is extremely limited. His intellectual disability excludes him from mainstream education, relegating him to a night school for

adults with similar challenges.

"They gave me the easiest jobs, the ones nobody else wanted, and paid me less because they knew I couldn't complain" (Keyes, p. 20). When he makes a mistake, his coworkers use it as an excuse to belittle him, showing how the workplace is structured to exploit his disability rather than support him.

"They say I have to go to Warren. There's nowhere else for me now that I can't take care of myself" (Keyes, p. 210). As Charlie's intelligence regresses, the only solution presented to him is institutionalization, reflecting a systemic failure to provide adequate care and integration for people with disabilities in society.

"They never invited me to hang out after work. I was just there to do the job nobody else wanted" (Keyes, p. 19). Charlie is excluded from social interactions even before the surgery. His coworkers at the bakery do not see him as a friend or equal, and he is left out of social activities.

"They look at me with that sad face, like I'm a poor little thing who can't help being the way I am" (Keyes, p. 26). Charlie's intellectual disability is a source of stigma, both before and after the surgery. People see his disability as a flaw that defines his entire identity, leading to constant condescension and pity.

"They're starting to treat me like they used to, with that same look of pity in their eyes" (Keyes, p. 204). As Charlie's intelligence begins to fade, he faces renewed stigmatization. His reversion to his former state is met with pity and fear from those who had briefly respected him during his period of heightened intelligence.

The novel "Flowers for Algernon" is not merely a science fiction story about a medical experiment but a profound commentary on the human condition

and societal attitudes towards disability. Through the unique narrative structure, which uses Charlie's progress reports, readers are provided an intimate and deeply personal view of his experiences, allowing for a connection with his thoughts and emotions on a profound level. One of the central themes is the arbitrary and conditional nature of societal acceptance. Charlie's transformation from a person with an intellectual disability to a genius and back again exposes the superficiality of societal values. His increased intelligence initially garners admiration and respect but also brings new forms of alienation and prejudice. This shift underscores the novel's critique of how society values individuals based on cognitive abilities and productivity, revealing the fickleness of societal acceptance. When Charlie is perceived as "normal" or "gifted," he is celebrated and respected; however, as his intellectual abilities decline, he once again faces rejection and marginalization. This conditional acceptance highlights the inherent ableism in societal values, which prioritize certain abilities over others and fail to recognize the inherent worth of all individuals.

Furthermore, the novel delves into the ethical implications of scientific experimentation on human subjects. Charlie's surgery is conducted with little regard for his autonomy and informed consent, with researchers viewing him as a means to an end, prioritizing the success of their experiment over his well-being. This aspect of the novel critiques the ways in which scientific and medical practices can exploit individuals with disabilities, treating them as objects rather than as people with rights and dignity. The narrative raises important questions about the ethics of "curing" or

"fixing" disabilities through medical intervention, ultimately failing to address the underlying issues of societal prejudice and structural barriers. This critique extends to broader discussions about the goals of medical and scientific research, emphasizing the need for ethical considerations and respect for the dignity and autonomy of all individuals.

In addition, the novel addresses the complexities of identity and self-perception. Charlie's fluctuating intelligence forces him to constantly reassess his identity and place in the world, underscoring the fluidity of identity and the impact of external perceptions on self-concept. His ultimate realization that intelligence alone does not determine a person's value is a poignant reminder of the multifaceted nature of human worth. The novel suggests that qualities such as kindness, empathy, and the capacity for love and connection are equally, if not more, important than intelligence. This broader conception of human worth calls for a more inclusive and compassionate society that values individuals for their inherent dignity and humanity, rather than their cognitive abilities or productivity.

Conclusion

In "Flowers for Algernon," Daniel Keyes presents a nuanced and deeply human exploration of intellectual disability, societal prejudice, and the ethical implications of scientific experimentation. Through the character of Charlie Gordon, the novel delves into the lived experiences of individuals with intellectual disabilities, highlighting the societal biases and systemic barriers they face.

References

- Adelman, D. (2022). *Ambivalent Pleasures: Pleasure, Desire, Authenticity, and the Production of Value in Online*

Disability Cultures.

- Adesokan, A. (2022). Effect of Physical Exercise on the Motor Skills Acquisition among Pupils with Intellectual Disability. *Indonesian Journal of Sport Management*, 2(2), 159-166. <https://doi.org/10.31949/ijsm.v2i2.2490>
- American Psychiatric Association, D. S. M. T. F., & American Psychiatric Association. (2013).
- American Psychiatric Association, (2013). *Diagnostic and statistical manual of mental disorders: DSM-5* (Vol. 5, No. 5).
- Association, N. a. P. (2013). *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*.
- Berube, M. (2013). Disability, democracy, and the new genetics. *The disability studies reader*, 100-114.
- Bigby, C. (2019). Accommodating cognitive differences: New ideas for social work with people. *Routledge Handbook of Social Work Theory* (pp. 448- 460).
- Cameron L, Suarez C. (2017). *Disability In Indonesia*. Monash University. https://www.monash.edu/data/assets/pdf_file/0003/1107138/Disability-in-Indonesia.pdf
- Disability. (2023). World Health Organization;WHO. <https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/disability-and-health>
- Eisenmenger, A. (2019, December 12). *Ableism 101*. Access Living. <https://www.accessliving.org/newroom/blog/ableism-101/>
- Kinnear D, Morrison J, Allan L, et al. (2018). Prevalence of physical conditions and multimorbidity in a cohort of adults with intellectual disabilities with and without Down syndrome: cross-sectional study. *BMJ Open*, 2018;8:e018292.doi:10.1136/bmjopen-2017-018292.
- Nario-Redmond, M. R. (2019). *Ableism: The Causes and Consequences of Disability Prejudice*. John Wiley & Sons.
- Schalock, R. L., Borthwick-Duffy, S. et al. (2010). *Intellectual disability: Definition, classification, and systems of supports*.
- Scior, K., & Werner, S. (2015). Changing attitudes to learning disability. *Posjećeno*, 20(2019), 2016-08.
- Seth, S., N. K., & Bhatia, H. (2022). *Qualitative Methods: A Practical Journey into Research*. Friends Publications (India).
- Smith-D'Arezzo, W. M., & Moore-Thomas, C. (2010). Children's Perceptions of Peers with Disabilities. *Teaching exceptional children plus*.
- Szymanski, A. (1976) Racism and sexism as functional substitutes in the labor market. *Sociological Quarterly*, 17(1), 65–73. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1533-8525.1976.tb02152.x>