

# Poetry Therapy, Disability, and Trauma Expression: A Therapeutic-Phenomenological Perspective

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**Abstract:** This study aims to explore how individuals with disabilities express traumatic experiences through literary works from a therapeutic-phenomenological perspective. The research employs a qualitative-phenomenological method, with data collected from 45 literary works written by individuals with disabilities. The therapeutic process involved filtering, handling, and follow-up stages, involving 45 participants with disabilities. Data analysis was conducted through identification, classification, reduction, and exposition. The findings revealed varied themes: social criticism (35.5%), absurdism (17.7%), religion (13.3%), romanticism (4.4%), feminism (2.2%), and other themes (26.6%). Social criticism was the most dominant theme, followed by absurdism, religion, romanticism, feminism, and others. These works not only reflect emotional expression but also serve as a medium for critiquing discrimination and injustice experienced in society. The trauma expressed is primarily relational, such as social rejection and bullying, beyond just physical limitations. This study confirms that literary works are a vital means for individuals with disabilities to authentically voice their experiences and symbolically resist non-inclusive social systems. These findings aim to enrich interdisciplinary studies in literature, psychology, therapy, and disability studies.

**Keywords:** Disability, phenomenology, literature, therapeutic, trauma.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Disability studies have recently garnered significant attention from global researchers. Two primary reasons explain the current prominence of disability studies in the worldwide context. First, there is growing awareness among researchers that individuals with disabilities have equal rights to justice, education, law, and socio-cultural participation. Consequently, research on disability must be advanced to ensure these rights are upheld across various domains. According to UN News data from June 2024, UN observers and 191 countries have signed the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD), reflecting a collective commitment to ensuring that individuals with disabilities have equal rights and are included in decision-making processes that affect their lives [1].

Additionally, global initiatives such as the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) emphasize the principle of leaving no one behind, ensuring that individuals with disabilities are integral to development efforts [2]. Second, the increasing visibility of individuals with disabilities demonstrates their growing presence on a global scale. This trend highlights that disability is a worldwide concern, with individuals with disabilities asserting their existence and identity as people with equal rights to education, law, and socio-cultural opportunities. In the context of modern technological advancements, digital technology provides new opportunities for individuals with disabilities to express themselves [3] and authentically represent their identities in cyberspace.

Recent research on disability has increasingly focused on the lived experiences of individuals with disabilities, particularly in the contexts of culture, emotions, and daily life, including issues related to trauma, race, and gender [4]. These discussions appear in research articles, book chapters, books, and

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international forums. The United Nations (UN) and World Health Organization (WHO) emphasize that disability extends beyond physical limitations or bodily conditions, being profoundly shaped by environmental factors and societal treatment of individuals with disabilities [5]. Consequently, disability studies must adopt a broader, more humane approach that amplifies the voices, experiences, and narratives of individuals with disabilities themselves [6]. Otherwise, individuals with disabilities may feel objectified by researchers, notably when data collection lacks a humane approach, leading to discomfort. Factually, the issue of disability has gained significant attention, with researchers increasingly prioritizing the representation and participation of individuals with disabilities in various sectors. However, their presence in mainstream media remains limited, with minimal appearances on television or in films.

Several studies indicate that individuals with disabilities portrayed in television, film, or other media are often depicted as figures deserving pity or inspiration, failing to reflect their authentic lives and identities [7]. This suggests that disabilities are still treated as objects of sympathy or research material. In the arts, including painting and performance, as well as cultural activities, individuals with disabilities frequently encounter barriers to participation [8-11] due to both physical limitations and organizers' lack of responsiveness. Although efforts toward inclusivity have emerged, representations of disability in art and media often remain simplistic or stereotypical, frequently depicting individuals with disabilities as "inspiring" solely for living with their conditions, as burdens, or as objects of pity rather than as independent, strong individuals. They are typically cast as supporting characters or victims, not as protagonists with nuanced narratives, and are often portrayed dramatically [12]. It is critical to ensure that these representations do not reinforce stereotypes or exploit disability identities [13]. In research, individuals with disabilities are rarely involved, and unsupportive societal attitudes and policies further hinder their participation in research activities [14]. Although studies on disability and trauma have expanded significantly over the past decade, there remains a notable gap in academic literature regarding literary works authored by individuals with disabilities themselves, particularly those addressing trauma. Most research continues to focus on works by non-disabled authors, overlooking the authentic voices and complex personal narratives of individuals with disabilities.

The main aim of this study is to explore the therapeutic diagnosis of trauma among individuals with disabilities as expressed through their narratives (in this context, narratives are related to literature [poetry]). By analyzing these narratives, the study aims to address gaps in existing literature and contribute to the fields of disability and literary studies. It also seeks to amplify the often-overlooked voices of individuals with disabilities, ensuring they are recognized and valued in academic discourse. This approach aligns with the concept of integrating disability and trauma studies more deeply [15]. Furthermore, the study aims to contribute to interdisciplinary research in psychology, disability, and literature on a global scale.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### Poetry Therapy

Poetry therapy is defined as the use of language, symbols, and narratives in therapeutic, educational, and community-building contexts [16]. It is a therapeutic process that enhances an individual's psychological well-being through poetry writing. Poetry therapy can be conducted individually, in groups, in outpatient, inpatient, or unguided settings. Central to poetry therapy is the concept of "intersubjectivity," which fosters self-reflection [17, 18]. The study of poetry therapy, an interdisciplinary field bridging therapy, psychology, and literary criticism, remains underexplored in academia, as therapy and literature are often viewed as distinct disciplines. However, their integration can enrich both therapeutic and literary studies [19], a practice increasingly recognized as arts-based therapy. In this article, poetry therapy is examined concerning poetry authored by individuals with disabilities.

In the context of disability, the term refers to conditions arising from illness or injury that limit physical, mental, or emotional functions, thereby restricting full participation in community settings [20-23]. Disability encompasses not only physical limitations but also constraints on activities and social participation [24, 25] in everyday life. It is not solely about inability but also about how individuals experience limitations due to physical conditions and unsupportive environments. This underscores the importance of the social environment in understanding disability beyond viewing it as an individual issue [26]. Disabilities can be categorized into several types: physical disabilities, which affect body function and structure, including neurological, musculoskeletal, and

sensory impairments (e.g., visual and hearing impairments) [27, 28]; intellectual disabilities [29], which impact daily tasks and social or academic participation; and mental or psychosocial disabilities, encompassing developmental, behavioral, and cognitive disorders [30, 31]. This classification aids in tailoring support and approaches to the specific needs of individuals with disabilities.

Literature is an imaginative and aesthetic expression of human experience conveyed through language [32-34]. Inspired by reality, literature reflects societal truths artistically [35]. However, the truth in literature is aesthetic, distinct from factual truth in broader societal contexts. Thus, literary truth serves as an alternative perspective rather than a definitive reference. Literature is generally categorized into three primary forms: prose, poetry, and drama, each with unique characteristics for conveying messages and emotions. It encompasses written and oral expressions that reflect views on life. Understanding these forms is essential for in-depth literary analysis. Contemporary literature includes printed forms (poetry, drama, short stories, novels) and digital forms (minifiction, short fiction, flash fiction, instapoetry).

Psychology, as a scientific discipline studying the psyche, mental processes, and behavior, can use literature to understand human experiences. This demonstrates a mutual relationship between psychology and literature [36]. Disability studies in literature, an interdisciplinary approach, examines how disability is represented in literary texts and how these narratives shape societal perceptions of disability. This approach emphasizes that disability is not merely a medical condition but a social and cultural construct shaped by norms, values, and societal structures. It highlights that disability and ability extend beyond the body, influenced by societal definitions of 'normal' and 'abnormal' [37]. In literary studies, individuals with disabilities are often portrayed stereotypically as symbols of evil, suffering, or fabricated "mystical wisdom." Such depictions fail to reflect the whole reality of their lives and reinforce stigma, framing disability as a flaw or obstacle to overcome.

Literature reflects complex human experiences, including social, cultural, and identity issues [38], in an aesthetic form that invites in-depth study. Beyond entertainment, it serves as a tool for social criticism and reflection on the realities faced by individuals and groups, both with and without disabilities. Modern literary works increasingly portray vulnerable groups,

such as women, minorities, and individuals with disabilities, in more humane ways, highlighting their diverse voices, perspectives, and experiences [39, 40]. Literature also promotes education and empathy, particularly in children's and young adult books. In educational settings, reading literature fosters understanding of diverse perspectives and encourages open discussions about human diversity [37]. Disability is increasingly recognized in literary studies, with recent research examining how characters with disabilities are depicted, both as symbols and as individuals with authentic experiences. These studies often employ disability theory and cultural literary criticism, addressing themes of trauma, identity, and social inequality.

In the context of literary and disability psychology studies, research typically focuses on three macro areas: the creative process of authors with disabilities, the psychological context of literary works, and reader response psychology [41-46]. Studies on the psychological context of works are the most prevalent, as they are particularly engaging. This interest stems from the application of theories such as philosophy, psychology, sociology, anthropology, feminism, or interdisciplinary approaches to analyze disability literature. Specifically, this study refers more to phenomenological studies. In the phenomenological perspective, consciousness is the main thing, and the subject is the actor who experiences it. Therefore, phenomenological researchers not only study the authors of literary works but also relate them to the creative process, appreciation, and individual experiences in writing that involve feelings of sadness, anger, longing, or happiness. Additionally, new findings from innovative approaches in disability literature studies make the psychological context of works especially compelling for research and exploration.

## 2. MATERIAL AND METHOD

This study employs a qualitative-phenomenological method to explore how the trauma experiences of individuals with disabilities are expressed in their literary works [47-49]. This approach focuses on the personal meanings and narratives of writers with disabilities as reflected in their works [50, 51]. The research involved therapeutic stages, including filtering, handling, and follow-up, adapting methods from prior studies, such as Jane D'Cruz (2019), who examined poetry and stories by traumatic brain injury survivors [52], and Kafer (2013), who explored disability and trauma in autobiographical studies [53]. Data were

collected through documentation, specifically digital and printed literary works [54-56]. The researcher gathered literary documents authored by individuals with disabilities. In addition, the researcher also adapted the stages of Colaizzi's phenomenological context qualitative research method, namely (1) familiarization, (2) identification, (3) formulation, (4) clusterization, (5) developing, (6) producing, and (7) verification [57].

The data source comprises literary works by individuals with disabilities, with 21 works by men and 23 by women. These works were selected based on the writers' disability backgrounds and the themes addressed. The works were analyzed by carefully reading and categorizing key themes, such as trauma, identity, healing, and acceptance [58]. This approach deepens understanding of the writers' experiences, amplifies their authentic voices, and challenges stereotypes about disability in literature [59]. To ensure accuracy, the study cross-referenced data from multiple sources, including interviews and writers' reflections [60]. Thus, the research views literary works not only as art but also as a vital means to understand the experiences and identities of individuals with disabilities humanely and critically.

### 3. RESULTS

In the data collection process, researchers used a form completed by individuals with disabilities who wrote short poems based on personal experiences or those of others. These individuals were given the freedom to choose themes aligned with their interests, fostering a comfortable writing environment. The literary works produced by individuals with disabilities were highly diverse, with themes including romanticism (4.4%), religion (13.3%), social criticism (35.5%), absurdism (17.7%), feminism (2.2%), and other themes (26.6%). These percentages reflect the distribution of literary themes in the works created by individuals with disabilities.

**Table 1: Percentage of Literary Works Themes Written by People with Disabilities**

No.	Theme of Literary Works	Percentage
1.	Romanticism	4.4%
2.	Religion	13.3%
3.	Social Criticism	35.5%
4.	Absurdism	17.7%
5.	Feminism	2.2%
6.	Etc.	26.6%

### Stage 1: Filtering

The filtering stage, the initial phase of data collection, gathers information on individuals with disabilities, including name, address, age, education, hobbies, and trauma experiences. This stage lasts one week, during which researchers collect data through questionnaires distributed to respondents. Additionally, interviews and discussions address challenges encountered during this phase. Data were collected from 45 respondents with disabilities, with their disability categories detailed as follows.

**Table 2: Percentage of Types of Disabilities and Number of Respondents**

Types of disabilities	Number of respondents
Physically disabled	9
Blind	19
Deaf	6
Mental Disability	7
Intellectual Disability	4

### Stage 2: Handling

The handling stage, the second phase of poetry therapy, involves researchers providing materials on poetry writing and its connections to psychology and therapy. This stage lasts one week. Researchers highlight that writing poetry serves to soothe the soul and express unvoiced desires. Respondents with disabilities use symbolic language to express their trauma experiences. Through this process, they write poetry that sublimates their trauma, reflecting either latent or manifest expressions of their experiences. This stage encourages respondents to produce poetry reflecting their trauma, either latently or manifestly. The trauma-related data collected from respondents are outlined as follows.

**Table 3: Percentage of Trauma Types in People with Disabilities**

Types of trauma	Percentage
Physical neglect	2.2%
Emotional abuse	46.6%
Emotional neglect	13.3%
Serious accident/disaster	8.8%
Physical violence	11.1%
Psychosocial	2.2%
Loss of a caregiver figure	4.4%
Sexual violence	2.2%
Other	8.8%

### Stage 3: Follow up

The follow-up stage, the final phase of poetry therapy, involves researchers providing reflective feedback on poems written by respondents with disabilities. This phase lasts one week. Assisted by psychologists, researchers offer therapy to address respondents' trauma experiences. They also explore the emotions and feelings of respondents with disabilities after completing their trauma-related poems.

One poem excerpt reflects a respondent's trauma due to society's lack of support for individuals with disabilities, stemming from emotional neglect and others' reluctance to acknowledge their voices. The respondent wrote:

"I made a sound, loud, but it felt like it was hitting and bouncing off me.

I moved, but not even the slightest ripple of air around me greeted him.

I was silent until my breath was choked as if death was my only final hope." (TFK, 2025)

These lines depict feelings of alienation, being ignored, and near hopelessness due to an unresponsive social environment. The trauma stems from systemic neglect by society, government, and immediate surroundings, creating challenges in daily life.

After completing the poetry writing process, the respondent expressed feelings of "relief and liberation," highlighting the therapeutic impact of expressing emotions through literature. She noted that the poem served as a form of self-reflection and motivation to persevere despite harsh realities. By referencing a social media quote, "Keep living, what else can you do? You've already been born," she emphasized that writing is a way to sustain life despite limitations. This supports the view that poetry therapy provides a space not only to express trauma but also to foster meaning and resilience for individuals with disabilities facing trauma.

## 5. DISCUSSION

Analysis of literary works by individuals with disabilities revealed social criticism as the most dominant theme. These works often depict social injustices faced in community, education, career, and other life aspects. Through their poems and narratives, individuals with disabilities express feelings of

marginalization and being undervalued, often deemed unworthy due to their physical conditions or limitations. In addition, based on the table of results of the analysis of respondents' poetry, This section presents excerpts of poetry and narratives written by respondents, categorized by themes: romanticism, religion, social criticism, absurdism, and feminism. These themes align closely with those found in literary works by non-disabled individuals [61].

Regarding the therapeutic stages—filtering, handling, and follow-up—respondents with disabilities reported personal changes. They noted that writing poetry served as individual therapy, fostering relief and calmness. This aligns with research by Bolton [62], McCulliss [63], and Zahedi *et al.* [64], which demonstrates that poetry writing can be therapeutic for writers.

Based on data from open-ended questions about trauma experiences, most respondents with disabilities reported psychological trauma related to social acceptance and discrimination. These experiences led to diminished self-confidence due to mistreatment by their communities. Several respondents disclosed being victims of bullying, ostracized in academic settings (schools and universities), and feeling silenced. These traumas impact not only their emotions but also their self-confidence, social interactions, and personal development as individuals with disabilities. When unable to speak up, poetry becomes a vital medium for expressing their desire for justice, equality, and freedom, akin to non-disabled individuals.

This analysis indicates that trauma among individuals with disabilities is not merely a personal burden but a consequence of non-inclusive social systems and cultures. Relational trauma, stemming from rejection, ridicule, and social exclusion, outweighs trauma from internal or biological factors. This underscores the need for supportive, empathetic environments to mitigate the psychological impact on individuals with disabilities.

Limitations and future research: This study is limited to disabilities in adolescence and has not covered disabilities in old age. This causes the research not to be fully optimal. This research is an initial stage, so some stages in the study are still not optimal and still need improvement from the methodological aspect. For that, further researchers can strengthen the methodological stages properly so that the research results are more optimal. Future research can benefit

from using respondents with disabilities who can represent each age level, from children to older people, thereby reducing bias. In addition, future researchers can be more specific in terms of more thematic poetry themes that are used as materials for therapy for people with disabilities.

## CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that literary works, particularly poetry, are an effective medium for individuals with disabilities to express personal and social experiences. Through an online form (Google Form), respondents freely wrote poetry based on their chosen themes. From 44 literary works by individuals with disabilities, diverse themes emerged: romanticism (4.4%), religion (13.3%), social criticism (35.5%), absurdism (17.7%), feminism (2.2%), and other themes (26.6%). The predominant theme of social criticism reflects their experiences of discrimination, stigma, and mental health challenges, highlighting the significant impact of societal barriers.

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