

Exploring Internal Strength and External Resilience in the Select Short Stories of Anne Finger's *Basic Skills*

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Abstract

This paper analyzes polio survivor and disability activist Anne Finger's semi-autobiographical select stories. Through her narrative style she brings to limelight how she turns over her life and other disabled individuals' lives from resilience to strength in the short story collection, *Basic Skills*. The present paper deals with three stories namely *Like the Hully- Gully but Not So Slow*, *Abortion*, and *Basic Skills*. As a physically challenged woman she pours out her melancholic life experiences in her stories. She narrates the strength of differently abled women to figure out that physical trauma is more important than mental energy, because physical trauma leads to mental empowerment. *Abortion* is a short story that predominantly discusses abortion, which is a requisite legal right for women. The study of disability experiences brings out the significant changes of an individual which is the interaction between her life and writing. The problem of disability arises from her physical flaws, the way her own family treats, and economic and everyday struggles which turn over into external resilience through inward force.

Keywords: Personal growth, Transformation, Powerful narrative, Self-Discovery, Empowerment.

INTRODUCTION

In general strength is a powerful motivation for each and every human being. It is a tool for self-discovery. Without the force no one does his/her job with fulfillment. In the absence of strength nothing is possible. Everyone must observe how a physical pain changes the mind stronger. These two conflicts appear in Anne Finger's collection of short stories *Basic Skills* which is her debut work. The power first arises from the inner mind/ thinking process and then it needs courage to implement the real actions. The inward power is necessary to empower the folks with impairment. The internal strength helps to fight against the struggles, which is of utmost advantage to persons with disability. This paper specifically discusses one of her short story collections *Basic Skills*. A person with mental or physical debility finds it difficult to survive. They have sorrowful experiences both inside and outside. The intricate relationship between her characters' inner feeling helps to bounce quickly from their external resilience.

This paper explores the reinvigoration of personal growth in narration as well as the efforts people with disabilities make to achieve it. This consistent strength gets reflected in Anne Finger's short story collection *Basic Skills*. It was published in 1988. This collection consists of seven stories. The seven tales combine to create a compelling narrative of self-discovery, empowerment, and personal development. It highlights Finger's experiences as a woman with disability and the day today experiences of disability individuals, while developing the fundamental skills necessary for survival.

Anne Finger is a physically handicapped woman who has written about her own experiences as a disabled woman. It shows several disability themes such as identity, personal relationships, body image, and self-acceptance, empowerment and self-advocacy, trauma and loss, writing and creativity, independence and accessibility, family dynamics, personal growth and transformation. In literary context "basic skills" typically refers to the fundamental competencies necessary for effective listening, speaking, reading, writing, comprehension, vocabulary development, and communication. These skills form the bedrock for further learning and development in more complex literary and educational pursuits. The term is synonymous with the basic learning needs. The title *Basic Skills* has multiple meaning referencing physical skills, life skills, emotional skills, and writing skills.

From Anne Finger's *Basic Skills*' three stories such as *Like the Hully- Gully but Not So Slow*, *Abortion*, and *Basic Skills* have been selected for this article. Two of them concentrate on her childhood experiences of polio. *Like the Hully- Gully but Not So Slow* is her first attempt to include a disabled point of- view character "Like the Hully- Gully" is really the first work where she writes about disability in a sustained way. It's set in the early 1960s, based on the events that happened when people lived in Providence. It deals with her writing experiences with disability, and self-expression. In *Abortion*, (1985) which she begins to write in the late 1970s when she was not aware of the concept abortion rights, and did not have a hope for getting the revolution in gender relations. She argues the traditional view on skill acquisition which overlooks the unique changes faced by these individuals making them essential to reevaluate the educational methods and expectations. This encourages a more inclusive approach to learning, where in all the disabled students can achieve their potential.

Finger craves for her interest in creative writing and thinking that started even from her childhood. Her mother all the time narrates stories to her and siblings. At that time, she didn't comprehend everything told by her mother. She considered it as wonderful experiences to her. Then she tells, "That experience when you can take pleasure in something and be confused by it" (2). It is a great lesson to her. This type of arriving at texts happened merely because of her mother, "I got from my mother reading aloud to me was fundamental to my life's work" (2). It indicates her talents to be a creative writer of both fiction, and non-fiction in disability studies. When she was six years old, she began narrating in her mind. She used to create a story in the third person, "She walked along the path..." (2). Immediately the moment she wakes up "I was walking along the path" (2). After that she initiates to start her "creative writing when I was at Harvard Extension" (2).

Finger has also written for *Disability Studies Quarterly* and has served as President of the society for Disability Studies. Northern observes, "delights in taking at peoples' attitudes towards disability lies a much deeper concern for the way that society is headed when it takes science as religion"(1). The oral tale of *Like the Hully - Gully but Not So Slow* begins by stating the rule of the library where children under sixteen are not permitted to enter the Adult Room. The reason is the young innocent kids' mind gets affected by reading anything about the sexual seduces, and their mind will become constantly eroded by the books. The protagonist wants to read some books like *Sue Barton at Nursing School*; *Beanie Goes to College* or *The Wonderful World of Electricity*. Those who want to get these books need to fill out Book Request Slip from the librarian, and then only they can get the book from the library. The protagonist's elder sister is Suzanne. She is fourteen years old. She and her friend Doreen spend the afternoon to practice their giggles. The protagonist dislikes her sister, the fact is she's practically shouting, "EAVESDROPPING" (88).

The protagonist's father hates an unnecessary thing that happens in his house and if her daughter commits any wrong act in front of him, he gets furious. She is waiting for her age sixteen, because she wants to discover herself and gain knowledge in science. As she is going cross sixteen, she likes to go to Paris. She figures out a problem while reading the newspaper. She finds a problem with fashion hint column that is when she puts on dresses, it looks like a robot wearing a fashion dress. She writes a letter to a Fashion Editor. When she turns the Fashion Hints column, she points out the fashion department's problems, "The first letter is from someone with short legs who wants to know what kind of clothing would be most flattering" (94). The reason of writing a letter is that she is going to help that department and share her experiences and problems with wearing uncomfortable dresses. She writes a letter to the fashion editor. There she mentions her sad experiences and problems with her whole family and difficulties of her body image.

Every humiliation and ill treatment she bounces to stand up with a strong will power of her mind. When she is going to fill out the book request slip to the librarian, she stares her from top to bottom. She is not the first person to do these kinds of things to her. She mentions people are always acting like this, and say:

It's my fault, for Christ's sake. Precocious puberty, that's what the doctor said. Nothing to be alarmed about. Easy for him to say: he wasn't five feet tall at the age of eight; sprouting breasts and hair in strange places. Bleeding. Too bad you're not a dairy cow. That's what my father said. "You'd be worth something then. He's a stupid bastard, which is not just my individual opinion It happen to be fact. F-A-C-T.(87)

The librarian handovers to her arms full of books, and says "Do you really think you're going to be able to understand these"? (87). After she offers her smile as a token, and asks "How did you break your leg"? (87). She slightly slides across the counter, and replies "I was born this way" (87). These kinds of talk make her to be in a melancholic stage. It is not in the name of being a woman, but her identity as a disabled. The woman who has a pain is fully not good and it is painful to be a differently abled woman. She has to overcome the experience as a disabled woman. In an article titled "Transforming Feminist Theory" by Rosemarie Garland – Thomas says disability as "epistemology that emerges from the lived experience of disability" (20).

The protagonist gets the mail lying on the floor under the mail slot. She abandons her book bag and crutches in the corner of the hall. She gets back and picks it up. She receives the letter from a guy named Dr. Fishbien. She doesn't know who he is. This letter is to her father. He keeps receiving bills from him. After explaining her house atmosphere, she does her daily regular moves in the house. She used to stay at the Third-Floor room. When she goes back to the stair, she makes crutches sounds. It is a place perfect to see who is coming and going outside her house. She likes to watch everything that happens outside. Usually, she looks out through the window around six o'clock when her father finishes the work and comes to the house. The protagonist is interested in science subject. When she sits next to the library books, people keep asking her "What kind of a scientist are you going to be?" (88). She raises her shoulder, and says "I don't know. But the truth of it is that I don't want to limit myself to just one thing-I want to know everything there is to know" (88). Her responses alone reveal how confident and courage she is. The people with impairment manage their everyday situations thereby giving inspiration, and motivation to those with disability or normal human beings.

Some people think one who has disability, manage everyday situation in this world. Those who think like this, learns from them what strength they have and how they manage even the difficult situations in everyday life. A person, who is physically or mentally disabled by birth or accident, can encounter troubles, and heartbreaks from various sides. When they sense to know what make them to be in down-and-out, thereafter they immediately bounce the way in which they are mentally prepared for everything that happens in every situation. The protagonist's words make everyone feel brave.

Doreen starts fiddling with the radio calling the first song is a kind of “Coming at you from Providence, Rhode... WJ... kind of like the monkey, kind of like the fish...” (88). The protagonist likes the song very much. “Pretend you’re in the water and – I was just so pissed off at her, she’s such an – like the hully-gully but not so slow...” (88). It is a lyrical phrase that means a dancing style. The Hully Gully is a famous dance that originated in the 1950s. It has metaphorical meaning in this story. It relates to life with disability. The protagonist relates the dance with her daily challenges such as learning, moving her body, and reply to social groups. It is not similar to able-bodied pace of the dance. The “not so slow” element draws attention to the tension while some people think handicapped persons are “slow,” the experience of being disabled isn’t just “slowness,” but rather a distinct rhythm that defies measurement by able-bodied pace.

The protagonist’s father makes a discomfort and dangerous circumstances to her. When she stays on the stairs at 2 o’clock, she hears footsteps sounds. She is frightened and hides under the blankets, pulling over her head. He asks her to see his face, and obey his words. She does not feel well. He sits down on the bed next to her. He wants to control her. Otherwise, she tells “He’s not such a bad guy” (92). He holds his rough hands to her face. She gets shivering and wants to move away from him. He crouches over her, and he fixes his hand around her throat. At that time, she tries to say a few words, but the words are lost. She is unable to pause the grip of his hands. She falls and swirls downward on the bed. For a second he makes a pressure to her. She screams to call her mother. Her mother opens the door and switch on the lights during that time she feels safe. When the old man tortures her that time also, she thinks about her age. She will be sixteen-year-old within 1757 days. He shouts, “nothing to do with her”(92). She cries to her mother. She folds her arms across her chest, one of her sisters Kate tells “You shouldn’t upset your father...” (92). This is how every disability individual suffers in family circumstances. Apart from all the things occur she overcomes the challenges she faced.

The next personal story is *Basic Skills*. The whole story focuses on the retarded children’s daily life experiences. A review by Jillian Weise observes:

From a disability fiction perspective, *The Colony* is a direct descendent of the work of Anne Finger – a writer whose work deserves a much greater reading than it has gotten. Though Flannery O’Connor certainly incorporated characters with disabilities into her short stories, it was Anne Finger’s work, beginning with her short story collection *Basic Skills* in 1988, that tried to stake out territory in fiction that spoke to the issues faced by women with disabilities.(2)

According to the Oxford English Dictionary retarded means having a slow mental development than other people of the same age. The protagonist’s mother names her Dale. She is “a trained helper of the retarded, cannot help herself; she continues to agonize over her failure to please her emotionally distant mother” (117). It is related to the author’s real life as well. Dale works in Basic Skills Unit of the Raymond Mosby State School. She started working a year ago. The main concept of the story is “Normalization” which is a big thing here at Basic Skills”(37). In the beginning paragraph she speaks about Normalization. She teaches Basic Skills to the retarded kids, which is about how to use toilet, how to carry a food plate, and how to dress themselves. The tale begins with one of her students, Jeanette who screams and screeches every time. She is a thirteen-year-old retarded kid, “she’s always running her fingers through her hair the wrong, not smoking it down, but making ruffle out from her head”(37). In an article titled “Setting the Record Straight: A Critique of Some Frequent Misconceptions of the Normalization Principle” Burt Perrin says, “Normalization as meaning the acceptance of the mentally retarded with their handicap, offering them the same conditions as are offered to other citizens inclusive of treatment, education, and training needed to provide for optimal development”(69).

The author shows through the narrator’s voice how she suffers from retardation and with the same retardation kids and the absence of her mother. When Dale comes to pick up the phone, she besides with Jeanette. She gets shriek again. It’s three o’clock, and she tells herself “I could do with a scream myself”(37). She takes care of the retarded kids, while she remembers her Thanksgiving to her mother and she flies to New York tonight. She thinks about her family and house. One of the traditions in Mosby, the kids’ whose parents do not come to take them home for holidays. It is not happening, the kids should have to go staff member’s home. She breaks the usual tradition. She declines the honor of dealing with Jimmy, Jeanette, Ramona and any of the other kids. Then she goes to get off few days. She guesses her mother will approve the right word. Jeanette does not begin to menstruate yet. But it may take her weeks, even months, and to know the mechanics. She has ideas to begin her teaching before Jeanette need.

The kids—we always seem to call them that, even though some of them are seventeen or eighteen—are severely and profoundly retarded. The technical term for them used to be idiots; severely and profoundly is the new term, introduced by progressives in the field of mental retardation. Here at Basic Skills we toilet train them, teach them that if they carry a plate upside down the food will fall off, teach them to dress themselves. When they are learning some-thing, the process has to be broken down into small steps. We reward the completion of each one. I have a list in front of me of the twenty-seven steps Jeanette will go through to put on a sanitary belt and pad. (39)

Dale gives thanks to Jeanette, and she asks her to repeat Thanksgiving. She makes guttural sound. She has two roommates Karen, and Tasha. Karen asks her “Fine,” I lie. No explanation is required for fine. For awful you must discuss, explain, and I don’t want to re- create the day: living it once has been enough” (39). Karen doesn’t know her mother, but she talks to her often. Both Dale and Karen came to first year at B. U. Karen’s mother calls her at least once a week. Dale receives the call from Karen’s mother, she asks “Where is she? When will she be back? She’s all right isn’t she? in a voice so filled

with love and concern that you couldn't feel she was nagging" (40). She faces these conditions, emotionally getting strong when she handles kids and remember her mother. Finally, her mother departs from her.

The most moving of these consistently affecting stories in the reader's opinion is *Abortion*. The story begins with the protagonist's second day in New York at morning. She starts to write her wishes in a notebook, which explains the two days of the protagonist and Amber togetherness. The protagonist is the narrator. Amber says "I like your cane" (409). It is narrator's grandfather's cane. Next she shows her left hand to Amber. It prints of her palm. "It's really meant to be a walking stick. When I lean on it, it hurts my hand – it's not much help" (410). The narrator tells about her scoliosis. It affects "my backbone bends" (410). It is polio. She has that for long time. She works as a legal secretary and shares her recent life events with her friend Amber. Both of them go to have "breakfast at diner near protagonist house" (411). While the protagonist asks her "Amber, when you had your abortion"(411). Amber says a word guilty, and the protagonist repeat it "What do you mean, me, guilty. I'm guilt-ridden"(411). Amber feels very guilty for diminishing the physical strength of her second blood. She is an abled woman but the protagonist is not. Amber tells her illegal abortion to the protagonist. When she was fifteen years old, she got pregnant. She realizes after missed her first period. She gets help from one unknown woman, who gives her a doctor's phone number. She says to Amber "don't say pregnant, don't say abortion"(412). She contacts him and gives her details about age and situation, she tells the word pregnant the phone clicked off. Again she tries to call him but it rings only not attending a call. Hank is Amber's boyfriend. He finds a doctor in South Providence to go to get abortion. After a couple of years later, she reads news about the "guy had been arrested for illegally prescribing narcotics. Mr. Sleaze"(412). He is a junkie. He gives an ergot. This is used for migraines but sometimes uses for miscarriage.

In an article titled "Choice and Prejudice" by Anne Finger "disability rights activists: more meaning to the life of baby jane doe" "Feminist need to be fighting for freedom for all women and girls—abled and disabled. Rather than advocating death for Baby Jane Doe"(28). The protagonist mainly raises a voice for herself and specially need for females.

Two young women—one physically fit, the other not—consider the loss of their pregnancies aborted. A year later, the former uses his sadness to further his academic studies on infanticide while denying any guilt. The latter is conflicted. She views abortion as a necessary legal right for women and, at that time, a morally acceptable option. She is politically aware. However, she still regrets for not following her instincts and allowing herself to become pregnant despite her intellectual judgment. The "guppy-like possibility that was sucked from my body, and the warm smell of henna"(423). She now laments; she wanted them to "have something perfect come out of (her) body"(417). The damaged fetus turns into a representation of labor's lost and potentials unrealized due to various disabilities, a form of disability from which no reader is exempt.

From the beginning chapter of the memoir *Past Due: A Story of Disability, Pregnancy, and Birth* Anne Finger shares her working experiences in abortion clinic. She gives the details of the abortion procedures, and clears the doubt about abortion. In an article titled "Disability & Reproductive Rights" Anne Finger says:

Michelle Fine and Adrienne Asch point out in their excellent article which appeared in the Reproductive Rights National Newsletter, unconditionally support abortion rights without using ableist arguments to bolster our demands. There are racist and classist arguments that can be made for abortion; to argue against them does not compromise our insistence on abortion rights. The analogy is obvious. (18)

Anne Finger says, "A social description would include physical characteristics, but would emphasize that, in our society, we are paid far less than males; we are less likely to vote Republican; and more likely to be emotional and emphathetic"(18).

Furthermore, many of Finger's stories explore the psychological and emotional aspects of disability. With conspicuous words in her writing she says, "My mind is not going to go. My body may be going, going, gone, but my mind is not going to go. I am going to keep writing every day" (PDS86).

Finger's writings express the full-fledged emotions that disabled people experience. She effectively blends the protagonists' interior conversations, anxieties, and hopes with the exterior difficulties they encounter.

The experiences of mentally impaired and physically challenged women combine to express the depth and significance of the stories of *Hully-Gully*, *Abortion*, and *Basic Skills*. These stories points out how do they overcome their routine deeds with the help of their inner power, and how they manage family and social circumstances deriving out all the obstacles in their exposure of outward resilience. Social negotiation and inner strength combine to form resilience. Through these stories, Finger shows how her characters convert their vulnerability into agency, facing emotional hardships, physical restrictions, and social stigma with bravery and dignity. Additionally, while dealing with the outside forces, she develops inner strength, highlighting the interconnectedness between structural reality and individual resolve. According to these narratives, resilience is an active process of self-definition and resistance to both personal and institutional obstacles rather than passive endurance. Finger challenges conventional beliefs about strength and reliance by redefining disability as a place of creativity and empowerment.

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