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Problematisation of the Image of Helen Keller in *The Story of my Life*

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During the late 19th century and early 20th century the myth of Helen Keller as saintly beacon of love become a common cultural currency. She was known as a miracle child who beat her physical afflictions with indomitable courage and prowess. Representations of her life and activities through contemporary newspaper, journal, magazines within the discourse of disability elevates her to an iconic status from flesh and blood human being .From an early childhood she became the centre of public attention and sympathy. She was called saint, idol, miracle child .Our present text “The Story of My Life” first appeared as a series of several instalments in the Ladies Home Journal in 1902.In 1903 it was published as a book. This text was also an attempt to rebuild that iconic identity .Identity is always a matter of representations and a continuous performance over those representations.

My paper will concern --

1. What are the representational strategies she undertook to rebuild her image of a saint or miracle child?
2. This myth of Helen Keller made her immensely popular public persona. So my next concern will be--

How far does the present text become a document of her public self?

At the very outset of the text we come to know that a dreadful disease snatched both her eyes and ears and plunged her whole being into utter darkness. Anne Sullivan came to rescue this semi-wild child. Throughout the text it is deliberately stressed that a deaf blind overcame her utmost difficulties in a beatific and electric manner. It was a conscious effort on her part to make reader realize the way she snipped her problems away, rather than the problems themselves. It was accentuated in details that how much moral fibre she had to show to communicate with others by using signs, to learn moderate behaviour, to acquire the power of language , to learn Braille and manual alphabets, to admit in Radcliffe college , to understand the class lectures and finally to complete her graduation . Later Keller repented for making her struggles appear too easy.

Rhetoric of optimism is run through the text, so that she can be turned into a model of inspiration. At that time when these kind of handicapped children were shut away in asylum, she tasted her childhood enjoyments to the last dregs. She enjoyed canoeing on moonlit night, sailing, spinning on her tandem bicycle, going to the theatre, knitting, and playing chess, cards, swimming and many more.

She was not run-of-the-mill kind of child. She was mentally more matured than the children of her own age. So the children might be her playmate but could not be her soul mate. Her soul mates like Ann Sullivan and Graham Bell were all elder than her.

A saint should not be allowed to transverse the ethical limits of purity. Here she always represented herself as “Pure” as nature. She was shown as nature’s darling child. So nature would be the exact backdrop which feed and stimulate her “Pure” image. It is noticed that she took her early education not in the closed rooms, but in the open bosom of nature. In chapter 17 she shared with her reader “all my early lessons have in them the breath of woods- the fine, resinous odour of pine needles, blended with the perfume of wild grapes. Seated in the gracious shade of wild Tulip tree, I learned to think that everything has a lesson and a suggestion”. Moreover, she said that she shared an organic relationship with all the elements of nature. She had many tree friends in Wrentham. A splendid Oak and a gentle Linden are one of them.

The saint figure is represented as the embodiment of the higher truths of nature, art, and religion. She had the talent to realize “grace and freedom of the forest and the spirit that tames the mountain lion and subdues the fiercest passion.” In case of religion, she learned from Bishop Brooks “the fatherhood of God and the brotherhood of man and made me feel that these truths underlie all creeds and forms of worship.” This saint has also the soft soul to empathize with the slum children. This salubrious image did not allow a single space for physical longing, desire that are common to all ordinary human being, though we later came to know about her affair with Peter Fagan.

Now I come to my next section---why and how did the text become a document of her public self rather than her private self? In the text we do not find an adequate story of her parents, half brothers, sister. Characters are sketched in a feverish manner. They are all put in reference to Helen’s story. Ann Sullivan was always represented as her teacher, ‘spiritual liberator’ who sacrificed her whole life for the benefit of her pupil. She was never presented as autonomous human being. She herself was partially visually impaired too. But the focus of reader’s sympathy was not allowed to transfer to her for a single time.

We would know a lot about them who are related to Helen’s public life .She talked much about Graham Bell, Mark Twain, Bishop Brooks, and Dr. Oliver Wendell Holmes, Mr Jefferson and many other persons related to her public life. She also talked about her tours in many places especially her trip to Washington during the inauguration of President Cleveland and her visit to world’s fair. She detailed her experience of exhibition -----how president of world’s fair Mr Higginbotham gave her a chance to touch the exhibits implying that she was an important and special visitor. These details reinforced and established her identity of a public persona. She was conscious of her power of a celebrity. She knew that people are interested to know her each movement. She gave a comprehensive catalogue of her likes and dislikes to quench the curiosity of the reader. In the present text she referred to the frequent interviews by the reporters. This public image was much at stake during the events of 1892.this year she was much debated in the public sphere due to the publication of little story ‘The Frost King’ in one of the Perkins Institutions reports. She was accused of plagiarism. She clarified the whole matter to the reader that she had not the intention to do that and they should not judge her guilty. She also shared with her reader how much pain and shame she had to bear because of it. She spent a whole chapter (no-14) to defend and protect her public image while she spent two lines to express her grief due to her father’s death.

In the fag end of the text, she acknowledged her gratitude to them (perhaps to Standard oil magnate Henry Huttleson Rodgers and his wife Abbie) who paid for her college education. The text becomes also an instrument to deal with her public affairs.

So by using these representational strategies the text becomes a potential space where a culturally displaced girl makes her own iconic status and vehemently maintains that status to be well fitted in culture.

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