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Watching Back: Disability, Surveillance, and Child Agency in Zainab Sulaiman's *Simply Nanju*

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Abstract:
Zainab Sulaiman's book, Simply Nanju, has garnered critical praise for its anti-ableist portrayal and, just recently, its disturbing examination of disabled embodiment, poverty, and the grotesque. This article focuses on how the school's visibility and knowledge could be distributed rather than on representation. It claims that Sulaiman creates the school as a disciplinary space in which the bodies, behaviour, movement, cleanliness, and achievement of disabled children are constantly observed, classified, and corrected, but that the novel's detective narrative is experienced in reverse. Nanju, Mahesh, and their young colleagues steal the very practices they associated with institutional surveillance, observation, record-keeping, suspicion, spatial monitoring, and rule knowledge, and turn them into ways of inquiry. The disabled child then stops being something known by the adult and starts to acquire knowledge. This turnaround is not a matter of a single click, nor does it represent a joyous occasion. Disparities in the distribution of poverty, domestic violence, access to care, and interpretation of actions are the result of poverty and social disadvantage. The essay proposes "watching back" as a useful description of Sulaiman's distinctive politics of disabled childhood, drawing on his reading of the novel through Michel Foucault's account of disciplinary surveillance, Rosemarie Garland-Thomson's work on staring, Tobin Siebers's complex embodiment, as well as the capabilities tradition of Amartya Sen and Martha Nussbaum, and the narrative prosthesis of David Mitchell and Sharon Snyder.
Keywords: Disability, Ableism, Grotesque, Oppression, Empowerment.

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Introduction

When discussing disability in children's literature, it is typically approached through the lens of the ethics of representation, such as whether a character is stereotyped or complex, pitied or empowered, and medically defined or socially situated. While these questions are always essential, they are not the only ones Zainab Sulaiman asks in Simply Nanju. In the novel, who looks, who is looked at, who interprets behaviour, and whose interpretation gains authority is also a focus. It is packed with adults, student prefects, classroom monitors, drivers, Ayammas, teachers, rivals, and friends at its school. A succession of routines is what repeatedly makes Nanju's body legible: has he peed his diaper yet, is he moving fast enough, has he put on his calipers, is he wearing them properly, does he keep them in place, does he move too quickly, is he wearing his calipers, is he moving with his calipers, and so on. Has he promoted his marks, does his conduct show the "responsibility" adults demand, and is he wearing and managing his calipers? Meanwhile, the novel's central mystery compels Nanju and Mahesh to become watchers, too.

They analyse their peers, observe patterns, interpret motives, track movements, and formulate hypotheses. The mystery, then, does not exist alongside the disability narrative; it reframes it. There were two important points of departure set out to begin with: Debapriya Goswami reads Simply Nanju as disability studies that disrupts institutionalized ableism and explores medical and social models of disability. Sujata Patel and Smriti Singh take the discussion further by bringing grotesque embodiment, poverty, special-school experience, and intersectionality into play. Their labour makes it difficult to sanitize and turn Sulaiman's characters into figures of inspirational disability. The relationship between institutional observation and children's knowledge is underdeveloped: how the novel gives disabled children the power to survey the institution while also making them objects of surveillance. This essay is about a movement they call "watching back." The argument is that Simply Nanju

stages United Integrated School as a disciplinary space but does not leave disabled children in the position of passive visibility. The epistemic technologies used within the institution- observation, classification, rule awareness, timing, spatial knowledge, and record-keeping- are the technologies that Nanju and Mahesh learn to use for purposes that the institution does not anticipate. Their agency is not uniformly distributed, and through a whodunit structure they become interpreters of a world that interprets them. There is Armaan's lack of money, Pratik's history of domestic violence, Kevin's troubled childhood, Sangeetha and Aradhana's academic competition, and the reality of disability that complicate a simple celebration of independence. Rather than abolishing dependency, the novel's politics is one of producing independence and capability in its relational, material, and institutional forms.

Literature Review and Research Gap

Goswami's "Subverting Ableism in Children's Literature in India" is the only published study on Sulaiman's novel so far. In Literary Voice, Goswami situates the piece within disability studies and highlights its critique of the able-bodied norm. Her reading is especially significant in highlighting the novel's shift from medical facts of impairment to the social production of exclusion. Nanju does not ignore that it is challenging for the body, but it does not reduce a child's social experience to a bodily difference. The difference is important in that the social relationships, such as humiliation, suspicion, and institutional pressure, are not just anatomical conditions, for instance, as with Nanju, but are part of what makes the equally social condition matter.

Patel and Singh's more recent work in Children's Literature in Education takes a turn on this topic. Their emphasis on grotesque bodies and intersectionality recognizes that Sulaiman does not prettify disability for the comfort of nondisabled readers. In the novel, bent legs, unusual proportions, incontinence, pain, unbalanced movement, and other bodily

differences are visible. It also situates disability in the context of poverty and social marginality, instead of considering disabled childhood as one homogeneous condition (Patel and Singh). The argument proves its value particularly in its resistance to a representational politics that demands bodily difference to become aesthetically inconspicuous.

This article extends these interventions, but the focus now is on the production of knowledge about disabled bodies, and about the school, rather than primarily on the representation of disabled bodies. The novel is constantly organized by a series of looks-looks of the prefects on the uniforms and socks, looks of the teachers on academic work, looks of the Ayammas on hygiene, looks of the classmates on each other, and looks of suspicion over missing books. Such practices are similar to Foucault's analysis of disciplinary power's hierarchical observation and normalizing judgment. However, Sulaiman's children do not stop there in the realm of the grown-ups' eyes. They learn to watch the watchers, make timelines, and read motives.

This focus also helps clarify the importance of the mystery form. It explains how Mitchell and Snyder describe narrative prosthesis as working out the frequency of disability to provide narrative meaning, characterization, or symbolic structure. That pattern is complicated by disabled characters, who are not simply marked bodies around which meaning gathers, as Simply Nanju suggests. They are not just characters in a master narrative of disability; they enable the story to be known, to be experienced, to be understood.

Theoretical and Methodological Framework

Close reading is the primary method, especially in scenes involving body management, school discipline, walking around, watching, and figuring things out. The school, of course, is not a prison, but Foucault offers a vocabulary for understanding the school as a disciplinary space. His description of the disciplining of hierarchical observation is valuable not because

United Integrated School is like a prison, but because throughout the novel power is exercised through the normal visibility of others: students and officials are visible to each other and to their supervisors, who monitor, assess, correct, and record. It is not institutional equivalence (Foucault) that is the basis of the force of the comparison, but rather the micro-practices of discipline. While the visual dimension of disability is emphasized throughout the book by Garland-Thomson, Staring: How We Look deals more with the social experience of looking and the uses of looking as a social relation and a way of acquiring knowledge than with a merely neutral optical process. Bodily differences can be the focus of attention in Simply Nanju, but the more important question is what interpretations are made by looking. Nanju himself is a watcher, curious, suspicious, jealous, admiring, and judgmental. Sulaiman thus escapes a binary in which nondisabled people look, and disabled people are looked at.

Siebers's Disability Theory helps avoid a too-sociological account of the novel. The social model is important for highlighting the barriers. Still, Simply Nanju is constantly reminding readers that they are material: calipers, wheelchairs, unequal legs, pain, incontinence, fatigue, shock of the road, need for help-these are all physical things that you cannot just talk past. In relation to complex embodiment and interdependence, Siebers's analysis can simultaneously attend to the body's limitations and the production of the social (Siebers). The capabilities approach of Sen and Nussbaum adds another corrective to the notion of independence: It is not so much a question of whether any individual child can do everything without outs, but what any given child is capable of doing and what he can be within the limits of available social arrangements (Nussbaum; Sen). In this sense, friendship, school transport, assistive devices, teaching, and peer support are all aspects of the conditions of agency. Charlton's focus on disability rights, control, and self-determination further empowers him to distinguish care from paternalism (Charlton). These frameworks are not intended to be used as a list; each is used only when the novel raises a problem that the concept is meant to answer.

The School as a Disciplinary Space

In the opening pages, it becomes clear that Nanju's spinal condition means he cannot always tell when he needs to use the bathroom, but the school makes it a matter of responsibility. The Ayammas do not care for dirty clothes, and when breaks come, Theresa Miss threatens to ring up Nanju's father if he does not check his diaper (Sulaiman 2-3). Suspicious and funny; Nanju is not embarrassed by his diaper; its discovery is what bothers him, and so is correction, and he is worried that an accident might be interpreted as being irresponsible. The same pages link the process of bodily management to academic advancement: the case of Standard Five in which Nanju has to demonstrate competency to advance to Standard Six. The new mantra in the narrator's words is "Learn to be responsible" (Sulaiman 2). Here, responsibility is wide-ranging, including marks, bodily self-management, school behaviour, and competence in meeting adult expectations.

This convergence can be seen in Foucault's disciplinary system: the child is taught but also benchmarked against sets of behavioural norms. The school offers a subject who should increasingly be able to exercise self-control, since he knows that others can check his shortcomings; the prefect system provides micro-level structure. Armaan comes in without his long blue socks, as required by the school, and a prefect approaches him, threatening to send him home if it happens again. The initial scene appears to be about the dress code. Then Sulaiman shifts his point of view to explain why Armaan cannot wear regular shoes (because his feet curve inward) and how his mother and five other children struggle with the morning commute. Socks become, says the narrator, "frivolities" which are often sacrificed (Sulaiman 13). The prefect witnesses a fault, and the narration is what brings it back. Nanju's reaction to it is not only resistance, but he is also a huge fan of the prefects. He loves their power and presence in the school, and how they can look over "the noisy boisterous rabble" (Sulaiman 13) at almost every moment. Admiration is important because it demonstrates that surveillance

is not limited to adults or to oppression; it can also be advantageous to have institutional authority.

Nanju desires that power; the novel follows not only the effects of discipline, but also the child's fascination with how discipline works. The school van contributes to the continuation of the disciplinary climate outside school. Children's movement is structured by seating, driver authority, transport rules, peer proximity, and road conditions. To Mahesh, potholes are jolts to his backbone, hurting the spine; to Pratik, they are a link between transport and conflict with adults, and then to violence at home. The van is thus best conceived as a mobile, institutionalized space: it transports rules, hierarchies, bodily vulnerability, and gossip, as well as surveillance, between home and school; the private sphere is permeable.

Watching Back: The Detective Plot and Epistemic Agency

The mystery teaches Nanju how to watch while the first movement teaches him what to watch. As books start to disappear, suspicion becomes the school's main mode of interpretation. Nanju and Mahesh step into that economy of suspicion but do more than echo grown-up accusations. They develop theories, probe motives, switch suspects, and then formalize their investigation; at some point, Mahesh makes a copy of a calendar and starts documenting the facts of the case, seeking to operate "more scientifically" like the detectives in his favourite serial (Sulaiman 70). It is a moment that is small but significant in the formal sense, because the disabled child who has been routinely cast into a category by the institutions now generates categories himself.

The calendar observes evidence; the difference between looking and investigating is method: an investigator must relate what is seen to time, motive, opportunity, and contradiction. The institutional knowledge is therefore turned on its head for Mahesh, who has to start learning to keep records. "Watching back" names the revelations that a school generates

records about, whereas a student generates records about the school world. It does not just involve defiance; it is the appropriation of the epistemic procedure. Nanju's role is also significant in that he is not a naturally objective detective but jumps to conclusions. He envies, misreads, suspects, and even reproduces class prejudice; when Aradhana's book is linked to Armaan's wheelchair, Nanju immediately assumes Armaan must be a thief, citing his frequent demands for socks and books. To stop the inference, Mahesh asks, "Why would Armaan steal something he cannot use?

The narration then provides the economic facts: Armaan's father is a trader in plastic pots, his mother is a domestic helper, and they struggle to make ends meet (Sulaiman 26-27). The first meaning of visible poverty has to be changed, and investigation becomes ethically significant just because of this change. We see in the episode that agency does not necessarily create justice - a marginalized child can misrecognize another marginalized child. Nanju's surveillance needs to be educated; Mahesh acts as a counterweight, who insists on motive and plausibility, not prejudice. Thus, the friendship becomes an epistemic little collective where one child's certainty is challenged by the other's reasoning, so that their agency is, therefore, relational rather than heroic.

The Aradhana-Sangeetha conflict has a similar problem: Aradhana wants a cash scholarship to go on to further coaching and have a better chance to get into another school; Sangeetha seems to have a plausible motive to enter into a competition, as loss of books would cause a problem to her academic standing; Nanju and Mahesh are going to watch her (Sulaiman 48-49). The plot illustrates the emergence of institutional incentives to create motives based on scarcity: grades, scholarships, reputational ranking, and access to better education all have a tangible impact on academic competition. Suspicion is not random; it follows the lines of opportunity that are unevenly distributed. Garland-Thomson's account of staring at knowledge gathering is useful here because Sulaiman repeatedly dramatizes the ethical instability of

looking. Observation can reveal a pattern, and it can also make difference into evidence even if there is no evidence. The detectives have to be taught that appearances are not necessarily realities: a body, a poorly made school bag, a feud, a record of misbehaviour can make any child a prime suspect, and the novel's mystery form is an education in the limits of appearance.

Material Disability and the Economics of Everyday Life

The politics of material disability and the economics of daily life: Sulaiman's disability politics are material; objects such as diapers, calipers, socks, schoolbags, notebooks, textbooks, and vans mediate what bodies can do; thus, a purely attitudinal narrative of inclusion is not sufficient. Nanju's calipers are an additional burden on his bent legs; Armaan's shoes meet a need of his body that cannot be resolved by acceptance; Mahesh needs a wheelchair; these objects are not symbols of disability in the distance but in the body. Siebers' complex embodiment is helpful because it rejects the dichotomy of saying that disability is "in the body" and saying that disability is "in society". Just as Nanju sits between those claims, Nanju's struggle with the issue of continence is physical, but fear of being caught institutional is psychological. Armaan's feet curl inwards, but a disciplinary meaning of missing socks is social. When road vehicles stop, Mahesh's spine is susceptible to jolts, but the extent of that susceptibility varies.

The schoolbag is a sign of class and the medium through which disability is constituted by the interaction between bodies and environments. As Armaan's bag is a striking symbol of it, it carries a pencil, an old notebook full of addition sums, an extra pair of pants to avoid getting his shorts soiled, and, with its broken zip, lets everything else fall into it (Sulaiman 27). This links poverty to impaired hygiene and vulnerability to suspicion. There is a greater sense of care or aspiration when a child's bag is fuller, versus Armaan's being more empty. However, poverty is not a virtue in the novel, and it reveals how material conditions influence the

narratives people tell about behaviour. Educational capital is the book loss degrades the seriousness and reputation of a child, class performance, and parental expectations about the child's class performance.

The crime is not only theft of property but also interference with the institution's main currency: successful participation in schooling, so the mystery becomes intertwined with class. Aradhana is seeking a scholarship for coaching; Pratik's dad buys quality school supplies and invests heavily in his success; Armaan lacks necessities; and Nanju is afraid of being kicked out of his comfort school if he fails. The same educational institution can have different definitions depending on the resources available to each child in his environment. From a capabilities point of view, these differences are significant because being formally enrolled in a school does not necessarily mean that children have the same freedoms-one child might be in the same format as another but have vastly different real freedoms. A scholarship alters Aradhana's life; a pair of socks is a regular occurrence for one family, but a constant source of problems for another, and transport is access for one child but pain and conflict for another.

Objects in the novel then teach us the conversion factors that Sen and Nussbaum call upon: the conditions of body, society, and economy that make resources into capabilities. (Nussbaum; Sen)

The biggest obstacle to a celebratory agency narrative is provided by Pratik and Kevin, both of whom are hard to interpret at the level of the adult; disruptive or delinquent behaviour is accompanied by conditions that are not immediately apparent to the adult. The novel does not wipe out wrongdoing; rather, it complicates moral judgment by bringing hidden contexts back into the picture. The clarity of Pratik's story is that, late in the novel, his father is loving and giving with money, but when drunk, he is violently abusive, and she has seen burns, bruising, swelling, etc.

After a transport complaint, his father beats him by making him remove his shoes and strike the soles of his feet (Sulaiman 110-11). Sulaiman sees the previous events in a new light, as disobedience, the act of hiding, or an absence from the scene; these events now have new causal structures. The book theft, too, is linked to fear: Pratik has been stealing notebooks and crafting them into different forms to appease his father's fears, leaving traces on them when they are returned. As the children and Theresa Miss reconstruct it, Nanju begins to see an "irritating rival or suspect" (Sulaiman 112) as an evil that harms other children, but the frame is different. Explanation and exoneration are ethically significant because agency is limited, strategic, and influenced by risk.

Structural reading is reductive if it does not take responsibility; moralistic reading is reductive if it is not sensitive to conditions. Nanju is the more difficult middle ground; Pratik acts but in a home that is terrorized; Theresa Miss can intervene, but her power is not necessarily at home; Pratik's mother knows there is danger, but she is afraid too. The protection of the institution and of the child is partial, and Kevin too is on the verge of disciplinary judgment (his aggression and his participation in the wrongdoing make him an easy target). However, the story slowly reveals a broader family history. It prompts reflection on how instability influences the behaviour of both the child and the institution. It is not poverty or a family difficulty that automatically produces delinquency, but the institution that tends to see what it sees first, the conditions second.

This sequence generates unequal suspicion: children, already regarded as problematic, are more easily scanned through guilt. Although there is no mechanical application, Foucault's account of delinquency is suggestive here. Institutions not only punish acts; they can also create types of people (troublemakers, irresponsible children, thieves, weak students) through accumulated observations. Sulaiman breaks into that typification time and time again: contexts

arise, and the seemingly safe category becomes unsafe; a detective plot reveals not only the culprit but also the fragility of institutional labels.

Friendship as Collective Capability

The closest alternative to the paternalistic care in the novel is friendship-Nanju and Mahesh are not just a helper-helped relationship. Nanju's physical support for Mahesh is often relied upon, while Mahesh repeatedly provides him with analytical, academic, and strategic assistance, with each lacking in specific circumstances. They signal their partnership against the notion of agency as individual independence. This reciprocity is particularly relevant when considering a children's book about disability, one in which assistance can easily turn into a moral performance in which the nondisabled helper dominates. Sulaiman instead retains care within normal friendship: pushing a wheelchair, locating a chair, copying work, providing information, quibbling about suspects, and making up for each other's limitations are all part of the fabric of school life, and care is neither sanctified nor unidirectional.

What Charlton stresses is control; this reciprocity is not pity but assisting the person being helped to do more, thereby taking control away from them (Charlton). It is made clear through Mahesh's role in the investigation: he is not mobile yet becomes the methodological heart of the investigation. Thus, Nanju's mobility does not mean that he is intellectually independent; there is a sharing of capability between the pair. However, the same goes for the school more generally: the school that disciplines bodies provides resources without which many kinds of participation are difficult, teachers, peers, transport and mobility assistance, structured learning, a community in which disability is more common than it is exceptional; that is why a reading of the school as an oppressive institution would be insufficient. United Integrated School is paradoxical; it is normalizing and enabling, restricting and supporting,

watching and protecting. The strength of Sulaiman's achievement is that he did not resolve that contradiction neatly.

From Object of Care to Producer of Knowledge

The epiphany at the end of the novel is about the epistemic authority, the end of the explanation of the adult to the children; the storytelling prosthesis of Mitchell and Snyder could be usefully adapted; the end of the novel-the revelation of what happened to Theresa Miss and Nanju and Mahesh-has them talking in a different register with one another; the end of the novel has Nanju noting, "She was talking to them as if they were friends and not her students" (Sulaiman 112); it is a comic thing to note-but it is a changed relation to knowledge-if the children are participating in reconstruction, then it is a changed relation to knowledge. I would say that the novel organizes attention to the narrative through bodies, devices, school structures, and vulnerability. However, it does not use disabled characters as symbols for readers who are not presumed to be disabled. Its disabled characters are made into interpretive objects; their body and institutional experiences make them viscerally aware of the way authority operates because they are under its watch.

"Watching back" thus refers not just to an opposition to work with staring, but also to a shift in the epistemic position: the children learn to think the institution that is interpreting them; they learn that rules have contexts, that visible disorder points to hidden causes, that poverty can feel like irresponsibility, that academic competition can lead to credible but misleading stories, and that adult authority can be protective or harmful. The formal mechanism by which this learning becomes active is the detective plot, and the argument justifies Nanju's flaws. A super-heroic cop with a disability would be in danger of being another "compensatory stereotype," in which intellectual ability is valued to the detriment of physical diversity. Nanju is not a genius; he takes and makes his own, he lacks judgment, he is afraid of his father's

choices, he wants to be a part of the hierarchy the novel attacks, and sometimes he is the one attacking the hierarchy; epistemic authority is thus earned through error, correction, and collaboration. This is why Sulaiman is not to be considered "inspiring" someone with exceptional talent, since he rejects the demand that people with disabilities be matched with the exceptional.

Nanju does not gain in value by transcending his body; his body remains a physically particular, grounded thing; the diaper, calipers, walking difficulty, school routines, and the possibility of embarrassment do not disappear once he is an investigator; agency emerges through impairment, not despite it. Together, the complex embodiment that Siebers creates demonstrates that social participation and bodily limitation do not rule each other out (Siebers). The movement of the final ethical act in the novel is therefore not from weakness to strength, but from simplified judgment to more adequate interpretation. The reader is asked to undergo the same revision as Nanju learns to ask what makes an action intelligible. The missing socks no longer count as a sign of negligence; Pratik's actions are only comprehensible in the light of violence; academic rivalry does not justify theft; physical difference does not equal competence; and adult supervision does not have the monopoly on the truth.

Conclusion

Nanju is not just worthy of notice because it is about disabled children without sentimentality, nor just because it is a politics of knowledge embedded in its school mystery. It is a formal achievement of its own in the first place, for the politics of knowledge it entails is unique. United Integrated School is a place where children are always monitored: uniformed bodies, marked bodies, grouped bodies, bodies of motion, bodies of conduct. Sulaiman then inverts that structure, and Nanju, Mahesh and his colleagues learn to observe in turn, with the result neither individual nor simple, but rather agency. The children make mistakes; their

suspicions can perpetuate class prejudice; their capacities rely on wheelchairs, calipers, transport, teachers, families, and friends.

A capabilities approach is more appropriate than an emphasis on independence because poverty and domestic violence significantly shape the possibilities available to various students. The fantasy of the self-sufficient disabled child is not the issue, but the creation of genuine opportunities as a result of relationships, material support, and interpretation. The novel's redistribution of authority is best represented by the term "watching back." Disabled children are first read by adults and institutions in the form of their bodies and their behaviour, and they are then read by the detective plot. This epistemic reversal builds on existing scholarship on ableism and grotesque embodiment by demonstrating that Sulaiman's critique of the disability hierarchy concerns who has the right to know. The novel does not simply invite the reader to consider the disabled child differently; it places the disabled child in the narrative, the one for whom things are different.

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