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## Bullying as Capillary Power: Disciplinary Spaces in *Fish in a Tree*

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**Abstract:** Lynda Mullaly Hunt's *Fish in a Tree* (2015) reveals schools as Foucauldian disciplinary spaces where power is used to generate docile, yet productive bodies. For Foucault, schools are among the first disciplinary spaces to institute "enclosure, the specification of a place heterogeneous to all others and closed in upon itself, the protected place of disciplinary monotony" and are also partitioned in order to assign and track every individual's position "so as to expedite the need to supervise, to break dangerous communications" (141). Hunt's novel portrays the classroom struggles of an 11-year-old protagonist, Ally Nickerson, who experiences dyslexia as a disciplinary marker and is constantly subjected to peer and institutional surveillance via her classmates as well as teachers. Ally gets reprimanded by her educators for not reading effectively or taunted by her classmates for her academic shortcomings. This disciplining takes the form of bullying on her peers' part, which can be analysed as the "capillary power" mentioned by Foucault. These mechanisms produce abjection, transforming both Ally's subjectivity and classroom dynamics. As Foucault suggests, power is omnipresent and does not narrow down to a single individual or powerful institution, but is composed of "force relations." *Fish in a Tree* is a novel which can be read through a Kristevan lens, tracing the journey of a neurodivergent protagonist whose disability shapes her experience as she attempts to find her way within the classroom, a microcosm of the Symbolic order. This space prioritizes normalization, uniformity, and high academic achievement, while marginalizing those who are unable to conform to the expectations imposed by an already established, homogenizing learning environment. Drawing on a combined Foucauldian–Kristevan framework, this paper examines bullying as both a social barrier and a normalizing tool deployed by the classroom and its members to sustain the already established, inflexible standards of the classroom space, while simultaneously abjecting the disabled subject.

**Keywords:** *Fish in a Tree*, disciplinary power, surveillance studies, abjection, capillary power, resistance, dyslexia, bullying

## Introduction

Children’s literature holds great affordances in exploring and bringing forth diverse and complex ideas into a forum of discussion while claiming acceptance and visibility for several under-represented arenas. Thus, the works of literature which shed light onto the experiences of disabled protagonists who face bullying at various levels, within the structure of an institution like school, contributes in creating a profound and persuasive conversation regarding the exploration of a violent and demeaning phenomenon like bullying, while simultaneously studying the underlying reasons for the same. Lynda Mullaly Hunt’s bestselling novel *Fish in a Tree* (2015) becomes successful in creating such a space for a neurodivergent character, an eleven-year-old protagonist, who suffers immensely at the hands of her teachers as well as peers due to her undiagnosed dyslexia.

Ally Nickerson, a vibrant young middle schooler, is subjected to bullying by her peers on multiple occasions within a classroom which evaluates every student using homogenous and rigid evaluation techniques and criteria, in which Ally underperforms. The protagonist has attended almost seven schools but at every school she gets disciplined in one or the other way for failing to deliver effectively at her academic activities: “Whenever I do my best, they tell me I don’t try hard enough. Too messy. Careless spelling. Annoyed that the same word is spelled different ways on the same page” (Hunt 2). She is under constant surveillance from her teachers and peers like Shay and Jessica who bully her verbally for being “different”.

Ally’s school functions as a disciplinary space or a microcosm of the Symbolic order which teaches and monitors its students. As she faces bullying at the hands of her peers, her classmates like Albert and Keisha extend their support and encouragement towards Ally along with their new substitute teacher, Mr. Daniels. Drawing on a combined Foucauldian–Kristevan framework, this paper examines bullying as both a social barrier and a normalizing tool deployed by the classroom and its members to sustain the already established, inflexible standards of the classroom space, while simultaneously abjecting the disabled subject.

## Mechanisms of Power and the Politics of Abjection

Foucault conceives “modern power as an interactive network of shifting and changing relations among and between individuals, groups, institutions and structures” (Taylor 3). In his discussions on power, he introduces several models like sovereign power, disciplinary power, biopower and governmentality. Among them, the disciplinary power works at the micro level where power operates from the bottom to the top through ‘force relations’: “power comes from below...multiplicity of power relations exist; power emerges from a variety of overlapping and intertwined relationships rather than from a sovereign individual” (Taylor 22). Unlike the sovereign model of power, disciplinary power does not subject the bodies to torture or violence, but rather rearranges them in an enclosed space, subjects them

to rigorous training through schedules and eventually develop more useful or docile bodies in Foucault's terms. This process is carried out within structures like schools, hospitals and prisons. In addition to this, mechanisms like 'normalising judgement' which thrives on reinforcing norms and 'examination' are also used to prove control over the body (Taylor 88).

When it comes to an environment like Ally's classroom, which thrives on established norms, disciplinary power works at its best. Ally, being a dyslexic student, deviates from the norms, objectives and goals set by the middle school classroom, where students are expected to read and write effectively, for instance. In this case, Ally is subjected to 'corrective' measures from her teacher and principal and verbal bullying from her classmates — capillary intervention— in an attempt to construct Ally into a useful or productive body which aligns with the required attributes of the rigid classroom. As the bullying unfolds within the classroom and other academic spaces, a panopticon structure is revealed. Being relentlessly bullied and shamed by her classmates who keep track of her reading difficulties leaves Ally in a state of hypervisibility. As a result of this, the protagonist's state of subjection transforms into self-subjection. This is exemplified in an instance within the novel where she is asked to put away her sketches by the teacher, a situation which her bully – Shay– weaponises to shame her subsequently. Ultimately, Ally internalizes this gaze, repeatedly deeming herself 'useless' and scorning her artistic gifts.

This self-subjection experienced by the protagonist exemplifies Kristeva's concept of abjection. Kristeva elaborates on her concepts of the abjection in her work *Powers of Horror*, where she describes the abject as "what disturbs identity, system, order" and "does not respect borders, positions and rules" (4). Clifford Davis further explains that it "represents what is thrown out by the Symbolic", yet simultaneously "threatens and challenges the Symbolic from its banished, hidden position" (7). Irrespective of its banishment, the abject hovers around the subject's boundaries, threatening a collapse of its identity and meaning signifying the frailty of the Symbolic (Arya 25). Additionally, Kristeva argues that one is forced to confront the abject through "the artistic" and the "semiotic" (C. Davis 9). When subjected to constant social abjection, one internalises it and self-abjection comes into action, which is in conjunction with Foucault's idea of self-subjection.

Dyslexia is a neurological learning disorder that impairs an individual's ability to read and decode written language, despite average or above-average intelligence and proper education. This learning difference makes Ally a deviant and hence the victim of the bullying and disciplining from her peers and teachers. Within a classroom which has defined norms regarding the excellency of its students, Ally's learning disability marks her as the 'other', positioning her outside the boundaries of academic success and social acceptance. Lennard J Davis, a disability studies scholar, discusses the construction of "normalcy" and how it marginalises disabled individuals by treating difference as

deviation. This is true in the case of Ally who is ostracised and subjected to the various capillary interventions or corrective measures in an attempt to make her align with the classroom's objectives.

For Foucault, Schools are among the first disciplinary spaces to institute “enclosure, the specification of a place heterogeneous to all others and closed in upon itself, the protected place of disciplinary monotony” and is also partitioned in order to assign and track every individual's position “so as to expedite the need to supervise, to break dangerous communications” (141). School as an institution, functions as part of the machinery of power as Foucault puts it. The school set-up within the novel aligns with the several mechanisms embedded in the functioning of disciplinary power. Ally's middle-school classroom is an enclosed space (the art of distributions) where the students are subjected to homogenous training practices within a tight timetable or schedule exposing them to various reading and writing practices (control of activity). With the presence of Ally, and her inability to read and write effectively, the established rules, norms and the smooth functioning of the classroom are disrupted which results in her being subjected to all the verbal assault and reprimand.

Dan Olweus defines bullying as a phenomenon which occurs “when a student is exposed, repeatedly and over time, to negative actions on the part of one or more other students, and has difficulty defending himself or herself” (9). The bullies— Shay and Jessica— embody Foucault's productive disciplinary model, enforcing classroom norms through linguistic excellence as academic currency. Amid “academically sound” peers, Ally's dyslexia marks her as deviant—monitored by teachers and classmates via teasing and name-calling: “Shay and her shadow, Jessica, called me Alice in Blunderland all day” (Hunt 7). Here, bullying manifests as capillary power: micro-interventions building bottom-up structures while normalizing judgment.

To further the analysis, the school/classroom can be viewed as a microscopic representation of Lacan's Symbolic order, with established rules, regulations and standards. Kristeva modified Lacan's tripartite model of the Imaginary, the Real and the Symbolic and developed her own theoretical framework encompassing the two modes of signification— the symbolic and the semiotic— and the concept of the abject. These ideas are most notably articulated in her seminal works *Powers of Horror* (1980) and *Revolution in Poetic Language* (1984), where she reconfigures psychoanalytic theory to account for the affective and linguistic dimensions of subject formation, exclusion, and transgression.

As a contrast to the rigid classroom structure, Ally Nickerson—although a participant within the Symbolic order—disrupts its stability by failing to conform to its linguistic expectations. Her dyslexia, unlike the linguistic competence of her peers, hinders her ability to engage seamlessly with reading and writing, creating tension within the classroom's structured environment. This disruption is evident in Chapter 1, when Ally is instructed to write a page about herself. Unable to comply, she deflects the task through humour and off-topic questions about her teacher's pregnancy. Her resistance

elicits visible frustration from her classmates, who respond with exasperated “sighs” and insults such as “freak,” “dumb,” and “loser” (Hunt 3). These reactions reflect how Ally’s deviation from the classroom’s linguistic norm destabilizes the Symbolic order and invites disciplinary responses from both peers and authority figures.

Both Foucault and Kristeva delve into the process of formation of subjectivity. For Foucault, the subject is a historically produced “form” constituted through various power relations. He calls this process *assujettissement*, a double movement where power simultaneously suppresses the subject while creating new identities for the individual (Taylor 159-160). Being in a classroom which suppresses and controls Ally’s activities and gradually moulds her perception of herself through the various capillary interventions of reprimand and bullying, a new identity is generated for Ally where she becomes the dyslexic deviant of the classroom.

Kristeva discusses the formation of subjectivity through the ‘signifying process’ — where one’s self or subjectivity is developed through the use of language. The signifying process takes shape in the interaction between the semiotic and the symbolic. The semiotic refers to the bodily drives, tone and rhythm; whereas the symbolic refers to the rules, grammar and syntax when it comes to the use of language. While the dynamic interaction between the semiotic and the symbolic is essential for the signification process to occur, the repression of semiotic is seen as essential to make it possible for the speaking being or subject to emerge in a society. “For a subject to emerge as a social being, or for language to appear intelligible, the semiotic is suppressed but is still present, rendering the subject in a state en procès, which means in process...” (qtd. in Arya 160). The semiotic is maternal in nature and hence abjection (expulsion) is first experienced or exercised by the child when it tries to separate from its mother to find his or her own identity which aids in its entry into the symbolic. Hence, the semiotic and abjection are closely connected. Ally’s classroom demands precisely this repression which can be observed on several occasions.

Kristeva’s distinction between the semiotic and the symbolic—central to identity formation or subjectivity—helps illuminate how the classroom, as a representation of Lacan’s Symbolic order, is disrupted by the presence of a dyslexic protagonist. In the sixth-grade classroom of *Fish in a Tree*, authority figures such as the principal, Mrs. Silver, and the homeroom teacher, Mrs. Hall, enforce compliance with institutional rules and a fixed syllabus. Students are expected to read and write fluently, complete assignments, and conform unquestioningly to established norms. In this context, Kristeva’s symbolic—the domain of grammar, syntax and structured language—is strictly enforced, leaving little room for linguistic or cognitive deviation.

Ally’s expression of the self is rooted in the semiotic dimension of language, evident through her sketching, humorous exchanges and imaginative mind-movies. Kristeva argues that the “semiotic

potential of language is subversive,” describing it as “a poetic-maternal linguistic practice that disrupts the symbolic” or “culturally intelligible rule-governed speech” (Butler 104). In an effort to contain this disruption, Ally’s creative expressions are repeatedly dismissed by authority figures—such as Mrs. Hall, who instructs her to “put...away” her sketchbook and stop “doodling” so that her “work might be done” (Hunt 2). In this moment, Ally’s doodling symbolizes the semiotic’s interference with the symbolic, and the reprimand exemplifies how the classroom represses what deviates from the norm. As Butler puts it, “the symbolic remains hegemonic,” and “the semiotic [is] repressed by the symbolic” (107).

Ally destabilizes the structured classroom being the abject: the abject is what “disturbs identity, system, order” and “does not respect borders, positions and rules” (Kristeva 4). Her dyslexia unsettles the classroom’s systems, hierarchies, and expectations. Her presence challenges teachers’ Symbolic methods of evaluation, which rely on standardization and conformity. For instance, when Mrs. Hall asks Ally to write about herself, Ally deflects the task by making circular scribbles on her desk (Hunt 4). Instead of complying or apologizing, Ally folds her arms and stares defiantly, prompting Mrs. Hall to send her to the principal’s office.

Ally’s circular scribbling can be further interpreted as a non-verbal, semiotic expression of her inner turmoil. She even reflects, “I wonder if I meant to draw a picture of my insides” (Hunt 4), suggesting that the act is more emotive than deliberate. This moment represents a semiotic eruption—an expressive, pre-linguistic impulse—that disturbs the Symbolic order of the classroom. Mrs. Hall, who “loves clean desks” (Hunt 4), reacts by spraying Ally’s desk with cleaner while “glancing at me like she’d like to spray *me* with cleaner. Scrub off the dumb” (Hunt 5). Her action metaphorically attempts to sanitize what does not conform—namely, Ally’s presence and her mode of expression.

In another instance, Ally unknowingly buys a sympathy card for Mrs. Hall’s baby shower. This mistake stems from her reading difficulty posed by dyslexia, not from a lack of care. She picks the card since it was “a bright card with yellow roses at the store. And a picture of flowers won’t dry up in a week” (Hunt 6). Her intention is kind, but once again, her action is misunderstood. Rather than recognising her dyslexia and the inhibitions she faces because of it, the mistake becomes another opportunity for ridicule and blame. Her classmate, Shay, mocks her by saying, “The world gets dumber every time Ally Nickerson speaks” (Hunt 7), and the principal adds, “If you’re looking for attention, this isn’t the way to do it” (Hunt 9). These responses reflect how Ally’s difference is constantly misread through the lens of a Symbolic order that values standardised literacy and behaviour. As Lennard J. Davis argues, “the problem is not the person with disabilities; the problem is the way that normalcy is constructed to create the ‘problem’ of the disabled person” (24). Ally’s dyslexia becomes a ‘problem’ only because the classroom refuses to accommodate alternative ways of thinking, reading, and expressing.

Kristeva argues, abjection is a process stemming from a fear of the other, by which a person draws a boundary between the self and what threatens to destabilize it (McAfee 46). Rina Arya expands this by stating that “the fear of this other stems from within and is a deep-rooted fear of the other-in-the-self that we want to expel” (7). Noelle McAfee similarly describes the abject as what one “spits out, rejects” and “violently excludes from oneself” (46). Ally, a character with “learning differences,” exists within an otherwise homogeneous classroom environment. Her presence unsettles the norm, and her difference becomes a site of anxiety for those invested in the classroom’s stability. Arya explains that such fear is often displaced onto marginalized individuals whose differences are not understood: “They are seen to represent a threat, a fact that legitimizes their exclusion from the social fabric. In their otherness they are regarded as abject, lowly and despicable and, to return to etymology, are ‘cast away’ (are outcasts)” (7). In this way, Ally is fashioned into an abject by both her teachers and peers, not only to maintain their own sense of identity but also to protect the perceived order of the classroom.

In Kristevan terms, Ally is a ‘speaking being’ (*Sujet en procès*) situated within the disciplinary space—the classroom. The characteristic feature of the speaking being is that it is a “subject in process” and always “under trial”, which is also an ‘open system’ viable to change when exposed to different kinds of interactions (McAfee 41). Foucault as well agrees to this idea that one’s subjectivity is ever-changing and not fixed. Hence, Ally Nickerson is a subject in process who is constantly exposed to both the semiotic eruptions as well as the symbolic repressions of language. When it comes to the symbolic modality, the verbal bullying Ally is subjected to by her classmates plays a significant role in the formation of her selfhood or subjectivity. The words her peers use against her – freak, dumb, loser—result in her internalising the shame of not being able to comply with the ‘norms’ of the classroom. The external abjection Ally experiences gradually turns into self-abjection, which results in self-subjection or self-regulation. Thus, Ally remains perpetually *en procès*, her identity formation under constant trial from classroom symbolic repression.

Teachers discipline her as a means of preserving control, while classmates bully her to distance themselves from the discomfort her difference evokes. Her abjection serves to reaffirm the rigidity of the Symbolic order, which in this case is the structured, normative environment of the classroom. The bullying Ally experiences can be read as an attempt by this order to maintain its illusion of stability, where everyone belongs, conforms, and functions “properly.” Even so, the apprehensions the teachers and peers experience go beyond Ally’s dyslexia. It reflects a deeper fear of dismantling an already established system, namely the classroom’s teaching and learning methods. Susan Wendell argues that, “disabled people are constant reminders to the able-bodied of the negative body – of what the able-bodied are trying to avoid, forget and ignore” (268). In the first half of the novel, none of the teachers attempt to investigate the underlying cause of Ally’s resistance to reading and writing tasks, while she

excels in her artistic ventures. Instead, they either dismiss or discipline her. Ally's dyslexia inadvertently exposes the school system's limitations and threatens its established evaluation structure. It is a threat that the teachers and students resist, often by bullying Ally, as portrayed in the interactions with characters like Shay and Jessica. Ally Nickerson is fashioned into an abject by the underlying fear and insecurity of the other characters, enabling them to draw a clear boundary between their own identities and Ally's differences, which they find uncomfortable confronting.

Self-abjection of Ally is yet another idea to be further discussed. Ally internalizes the external rejection she repeatedly faces and begins to believe herself to be inherently inadequate and defective: "I expel myself, I spit myself out, I abject myself within the same motion through which 'I' claim to establish myself" (Kristeva 3). Her "mind movies" (a form of semiotic eruption) offer a vivid portrayal of this internalized self-abjection. Multiple instances in the novel illustrate Ally contemplating leaving school or imagining herself being "ejected" from it: "I've been drawing pictures of myself being shot out of a cannon. It would be easier than school. Less painful" (Hunt 2). Furthermore, she imagines herself bound and left on train tracks, fearing that her new teacher, Mr. Daniels, has already judged her harshly based on Mrs. Silver's account: "My mind is already spinning off. Wondering what terrible things Mrs. Silver has told him. The plans they've made for me. I see myself wrapped in rope and lying on the train tracks just like in Grandpa's old black-and-white silent movies" (Hunt 37).

Having been repeatedly disciplined by both her homeroom teacher, Mrs. Hall, and her principal, Ally has learned to anticipate punishment as the inevitable response to her difference. Her assumption that Mr. Daniels will behave similarly reveals the depth of her self-abjected state. With Ally's internalization of shame and lack, the objective of the panoptic idea of Foucault is achieved where the hypervisibility and constant surveillance force the subjects to self-regulate or police themselves.

### **Resistance and Rupture**

Foucault emphasizes on the evocation/presence of resistance amidst the exercise of power: "Where there is power, there is resistance, and yet, or rather consequently, this resistance is never in a position of exteriority in relation to power" (qtd in Taylor 24). Ally Nickerson is exposed to the power relations and experiences suppression in the form of bullying within the classroom structure. However, the classroom dynamics do not succeed in constructing a useful, docile body aligning with its definition of 'normal'. Rather Ally redefines and challenges the established norms with her presence and resistance. She becomes a symbol of resistance via her semiotic eruptions. Her sketchbook "The Sketchbook of Impossible Things" becomes the cathartic container of her turmoil and difficulties she faces within the classroom as a dyslexic individual. Her art becomes a piece of literature which evolves into an object of catharsis for the external as well as internal abjection she experiences. Kristeva mentions that "all

literature is a kind of catharsis, an attempt for the writer to throw off what is foreign and impure” (McAfee 54). By the end of the novel, everyone accepts Ally as she is with her learning differences. The power which flowed via capillary interventions within the classroom— in the form of bullying— was met with resistance from the bullied herself. The Symbolic order of the classroom which simultaneously functions as a disciplinary space deploying several disciplinary mechanisms fails to meet its objective of building a more obedient and useful individual but rather becomes a set up where power paves way for resistance as well.

While Ally embodies the abject—her learning difference perceived as a disruptive element that unsettles the stability of the Symbolic order—Mr. Daniels operates as a counterforce within the same system. Unlike other authority figures who enforce conformity through standardized teaching, he recognizes and affirms Ally’s differences, thereby challenging the classroom’s dominant pedagogical logic. From the outset, his approach stands apart: he enters the classroom wearing a tie with images of planets (Hunt 36), immediately capturing the students’ attention and signaling his unconventional style. Addressing the students as “Fantasticos” (Hunt 38), Mr. Daniels sets a tone of encouragement and warmth. What further distinguishes him is his pedagogical flexibility—he makes use of more engaging and responsive teaching strategies.

His teaching methods slowly break away from the rigid and uniform strategies used by other teachers, especially in the way he interacts with Ally. He uses teaching techniques that make learning more accessible for a student like Ally by blending multiple senses rather than relying solely on sight. This multisensory approach helps her connect sounds, shapes, and movements in the process of reading and writing. Mr. Daniels makes Ally write on a huge metal sheet covered with shaving cream, which will eventually help her to learn the alphabets well. Experts acknowledge that engaging with multiple sensory pathways can help in developing the reading and other language skills in dyslexic students. Research by Shaywitz and Shaywitz (2004) found that children with dyslexia benefit significantly from instruction that combines visual, auditory, and kinesthetic-tactile activities. By seeing, hearing, saying, and touching letters and words, students are more likely to internalize and retain the information, leading to improved reading fluency and comprehension (Fujita). Another instance of his creative pedagogical method can be witnessed in Chapter 8 where he teaches addition and subtraction using a classroom game called “Bus Driver.” Instead of using paper or pencil, students are encouraged to do the calculations in their heads (Hunt 39). This activity stands out because it makes learning more playful and less stressful, especially for someone like Ally who struggles with traditional instructions. She reflects that she used to enjoy math when it was just numbers, but as the lessons began including letters, it became difficult for her. “But in school, math now has letters. Like what does x equal? There are also long stories with characters, and although the story is supposed to end with some number, all the words block my path to getting there” (Hunt 39). Mr. Daniels’ methods

help create space for Ally to feel more comfortable with learning and aids in rebuilding confidence against capillary normalisation.

## Conclusion

*Fish in a Tree* (2015) proves to be a disability narrative portraying the power relations existing within an institution like school, which according to Foucault is a part of the machinery of power. Within the school the students are categorised and arranged on the basis of their age and curriculum with several rigorous evaluation techniques laid out before the students. In such an environment, which thrives on norms, the presence of a deviant student like Ally Nickerson threatens to destabilize the system which is designed to construct docile, useful bodies. The power relations work from the bottom to top and unilaterally through the capillaries — students/peers in this case. Even though teachers and principal initiate the abjection of the main character, it is the classmates who further this practice and reinforce the norms of the classroom by name calling and teasing Ally for her linguistic shortcomings. Bullying thus becomes the mechanism which hinders and controls the protagonist, which eventually leads to self-subjection and monitoring within the dyslexic protagonist. However, the protagonist resists the suppression with the aid of her teacher, Mr. Daniels, who himself belongs to the top tier of hierarchy. Ally redefines the norms of the classroom, instead of getting constructed as yet another ‘docile’ or ‘useful’ body. Thus, in the novel, the school becomes a disciplinary space where several disciplinary mechanisms are exercised over the subjects, via different modes of power relations which leads to resistance and freedom at the end.

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