

**Anxiety, Trauma and Symbols:
Narrating Poetry for Disabilities through Group Literary Therapy (GLT)**

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ABSTRACT

This research is an interdisciplinary study that intersects disability, literature, anxiety, trauma, and symbols (semiotics). This research specifically aims to narrate anxious and traumatic poems written by people with disabilities through Group Literary Therapy and Semiotics. This research used qualitative methods; data were collected through in-depth interviews with 57 participants with disabilities and documentary analysis. The study utilized three therapeutic writing sessions: free-writing, in-depth writing, and dialogue-writing. Key findings include: (1) 46% of participants experienced emotional abuse-related trauma, which significantly influenced their writing; (2) participants found expressing traumatic experiences in writing to be therapeutic; and (3) during the dialogue-writing session, some participants were reluctant to engage in verbal storytelling due to embarrassment, preferring written expression. In relation to symbols, people with disabilities use symbolic language in their poetry as a form of anxiety and trauma.

KEYWORDS: writing, disability, psychology, group therapy, symbols

Introduction

Interdisciplinary literary studies have gained significant traction globally, with a marked increase in research output in recent years (Ahmadi, 2023). This interdisciplinary approach has drawn considerable attention from researchers and literary scholars, particularly in the field of disability literature. Existing studies have explored disability literature through various lenses, including: disability engagement across diverse societal segments (Worthington, 2025); educational contexts in schools (Worthington, 2025; Lie, 2024; Pineau et al., 2025); masculinity, focusing on men and male identity (Latipova, 2025; Sipungu, 2025; Hoshi, 2025); femininity, addressing women and gender equality (Hedgepath, 2021; Çakırtaş, 2025; Little, 2025; Kashyap & Chowdhury 2025); political representation, examining the roles of individuals with disabilities as leaders or participants in political spheres (Durso, 2025; Fox, 2025; Jeffries, 2025); social interactions within communities (Gabbard, 2025; Leavy, 2025; Gabbard & Schaffer 2025; Ullah & Saeed 2025); comparative analyses (Okunola, 2025); and psychological dimensions, particularly concerning therapeutic applications (Currie et al., 2025; John, 2025). Furthermore,

disability literature is often situated within cultural studies, exploring multifaceted identities shaped by socio-cultural factors, therapeutic interventions, and race (Gabbard & Schaffer 2025; King, 2025). This growing scholarly interest aligns with efforts to amplify the voices of individuals with disabilities through literature (Martino et al., 2025; Doan & Darcy 2025) and supports the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) related to disability justice across various life domains (Leiderman & Buchele 2025).

Disability literature encompasses works authored by individuals with disabilities and/or those that address disability-related themes (Ahmadi et al., 2024; Adomat, 2014), explored through perspectives such as masculinity, femininity (Betcher, 2010; Schalk, 2017; Quirici, 2015), or other lenses. As a critical and transformative form of literature (Hall, 2015), it seeks to promote equity in the representation of disability identities. In contemporary contexts, disability literature serves as a powerful medium for advocating justice for individuals with disabilities on a global scale. It can be analyzed through various disciplinary perspectives, including philosophical, psychological, sociological, anthropological, spiritual, and cultural studies (Blustein, 2012; Turner, 1992; Dunn, 2014; Shuttleworth & Meekosha 2013; Gulya & Fehérvári 2023; Prater, 2003). Moreover, disability literature offers a critical framework for interpreting literary texts that depict dominant or majority narratives while marginalizing disability, such as the character of Oedipus (with his "swollen feet") in classical literature, a disabled hero whose disability is rarely emphasized (Garland-Thomson, 2005). Within the current interdisciplinary framework, disability literature can be examined through the perspectives of the author, the text, and the reader.

Over the past decade, disability literature has been explored through various lenses by numerous scholars. Key studies include: literature addressing the cultural contexts of disability (Hurta, 2024; Murray, 2022); representations of disability to illness (Alshammari, 2021; Equestri, 2021); portrayals of disability in heroic narratives (Allan, 2022; Shek-Noble, 2022; Adéyemí, 2023); disability in educational contexts (Hansen et al., 2023); disability in science fiction (Callus & Grech, 2021; Bennett & Vijaygopal 2024); disability within LGBT narratives (Macheso, 2021); and psychological dimensions of disability (Venzo & Moruzi 2021). Additional research examines disability through affective-reflective frameworks (Cheyne, 2019);

postcolonial perspectives, focusing on representations of disability in literature from colonized nations as both central and peripheral characters (Barker, 2011); negative stigma associated with disability in literary works (Howard, 2015); and depictions of disability in children's stories and folktales (Beckett et al., 2010). These studies are significant for their exploration of disability across classical and modern literature from diverse perspectives, enriching the understanding of disability identities in global literary discourse.

Prior research on disability literature has frequently explored cultural, social, educational, LGBT, and science fiction perspectives. However, these studies have not specifically addressed disability in the context of Group Literary Therapy (GLT). This study addresses this gap by providing detailed and in-depth insights into the intersection of disability and GLT. Through this research, we aim to investigate how individuals with disabilities utilize GLT to create literature that mitigates anxiety and trauma associated with their disabilities.

Within the domain of disability literature, psychological perspectives are particularly compelling and warrant further exploration. Studies integrating literature, disability, psychology, and religion offer an interdisciplinary platform that amplifies the voices of individuals with disabilities. Such research is significant for several reasons: first, it represents an interdisciplinary resonance of disability perspectives; second, literature serves as a therapeutic tool for both writers and readers (Vijayan, 2021; Jung, 2024; Mikki, 2025); and third, it highlights the contributions of disability writers on a global scale. The novelty of this study lies in the following: (a) its interdisciplinary approach, combining literature, disability, psychology (through GLT and CBT), and religion, which has not been previously explored; (b) the development of a GLT model to foster unified disability identities; (c) the application of CBT to address trauma related to disability; and (d) the provision of a platform for individuals with disabilities to engage in literary creation.

This study integrates literature, disability, psychology, and semiotics within an interdisciplinary framework. By combining these fields, it aims to contribute to the advancement of disability literature in Indonesia, with implications for both national and international scholarship. The research objectives are as follows: (a) to develop a GLT model based on CBT to

address anxiety and trauma among individuals with disabilities in Indonesia; (b) to establish a standardized GLT model for implementation in Indonesia; (c) to generate data on disability literature in Indonesia; and (d) to provide frameworks for self-therapy, peer-therapy, and authority-guided therapy for individuals with disabilities.

Group Literary Therapy (GLT) is a model developed by researchers to offer an innovative approach for individuals with disabilities to address anxiety and trauma. This group-based model fosters collective solidarity among participants (Vijayan, 2021) while also serving informative and social interaction functions. In the psychological context, GLT facilitates collective therapy, promotes adaptive behaviors, and enhances social participation. The model categorizes actions into four types: purposeful, self-initiated, spontaneous, and group actions. For individuals with disabilities experiencing anxiety or trauma, GLT provides a medium for expressing these challenges through literature. Drawing on group models used in art therapy (Rubin, 1999) and psychotherapy (Spee et al., 2025; Marmarosh et al., 2025), GLT delivers therapeutic benefits through literary engagement.

This study employs CBT, a branch of behavioral psychology that emphasizes cognitive therapy to promote positive behavior and facilitate healing (Grossmark, 2025). CBT is grounded in the principle that cognition shapes behavior, which can be monitored and modified to achieve behavioral change (Taylor, 2005; Bojun & Kyei 2025; Dobson & Dozois 2021). Its applications extend across diverse fields, including education, socio-political-cultural studies, literature (Dozois et al., 2019; Barna & Androne 2012), and disability, encompassing both intellectual and general disabilities (Peterkin & Grewal 2018). Consequently, CBT attracts researchers from various disciplines interested in psychological contexts, spanning both physical and psychological domains (Martin & Pear 2019; Eysenck & Martin 2013). For assessment, CBT incorporates models such as Martin's framework of filtering, handling, and follow-up (Hansen, 2011) and Ellis's ABC model (Dryden & David 2008; Martin & Pear 2019). Additionally, this study adopts the ADDRESING framework (Hays, 2008), which accommodates multiculturalism, to guide its theoretical approach.

Regarding symbols, the study of symbols falls within the realm of semiotics, a science that examines signs that refer to aesthetic communication (Elias, 1991; Peyre, 2010). In its development, semiotics not only examines language jargon in everyday contexts (Chandler, 2022), but also includes socio-cultural contexts (Silverstein, 2022) and literature (Johansen, 2002). Semiotics seeks to uncover the meanings contained in language and literature. This unraveling requires in-depth interpretation so that the main meaning can be discovered. Therefore, in interpreting symbols, there are surface structures and deep structures. Surface structures are related to explicit meanings, while deep structures are related to implicit and essential meanings. In relation to this research, semiotic context symbols are used to unravel the meanings contained in poetic texts written by people with disabilities.

METHODS

This study adopts a qualitative-interpretive approach, leveraging narrative data to provide a comprehensive analysis (Saldana, 2011; Ahmadi, 2019). This method intersects with qualitative psychology, which emphasizes the narrative presentation of psychological data (Banister et al., 2011), yielding rich and detailed insights. Data were collected through (a) in-depth interviews with individuals with disabilities and (b) documentary analysis. Data analysis followed the Miles and Huberman model, encompassing the stages of identification, classification, reduction, and presentation (Miles & Huberman 1994). For the application of CBT, the study adapted Bolton and Delderfield's framework, incorporating freewriting, rewriting, dialogue writing, symbols, and safe space techniques (Bolton & Delderfield 2018).

The study participants were individuals with disabilities who had experienced trauma and expressed an interest in literary writing. They were recruited from various cities across Indonesia. The following section presents data on the participants with disabilities who were selected for the study after completing the screening process.

To enhance the objectivity of the study, a focus group discussion (FGD) was conducted with four experts: a literary scholar, a psychologist, a disability studies specialist, and a fourth expert in a related field. Additionally, data triangulation was employed to ensure the scientific

validity of the research. The research process consisted of the following steps: (a) field observation and recruitment of participants with disabilities; (b) development of a CBT-based GLT model; (c) facilitation of disability literature writing based on individual experiences; (d) implementation of CBT interventions, including filtering, handling, and follow-up; (e) data analysis through identification, classification, reduction, and presentation; (f) conducting the FGD with experts; and (g) dissemination of research findings. The research flow is visualized in the following Table 1.

Table 1: Type of Disability

No.	Type of Disability	Amount
1	Visual Impairment	21
2	Hearing Impairment	6
3	Physical Disability	9
4	Speech Impairment	10
5	Intellectual Disability	4
6	Mental Health Condition	7
Total		57

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

During data collection, participants with disabilities completed a form, writing short narratives about their experiences of anxiety and trauma. The process yielded responses from 28 participants across various disability categories. As illustrated in the accompanying figure, 53.6% of participants had visual impairments, 17.9% had physical or mental health conditions, 7.1% had hearing impairments, and 3.6% had intellectual disabilities, reflecting a diverse participant distribution. A detailed list of participants is provided in the subsequent table. In addition, the researchers identified the types of trauma experienced by participants, with details described in Table 2.

Table 2: Type of Trauma

Type of Trauma	Percentage
Physical Neglect	2.2%
Emotional Abuse	46.6%
Emotional Neglect	13.3%
Serious Accident/Disaster	8.8%
Physical Violence	11.1%
Psychosocial Trauma	2.2%
Loss of a Caregiver Figure	4.4%
Sexual Violence	2.2%
Other	8.8%

Emotional abuse was the most prevalent type of trauma reported, affecting 46% of participants. This high prevalence among individuals with disabilities is often linked to experiences of belittlement and harassment related to their disabilities. Participants reported feelings of inadequacy due to their inability to perform activities typically associated with non-disabled individuals. Additionally, some participants noted experiences of bullying and harassment by peers, which contributed to trauma when interacting with non-disabled individuals. The least common type of trauma was sexual violence, reported by 2.2% of participants.

Free-Writing Session

During the free-writing session, participants were encouraged to create literary works based on their personal interests, with the freedom to write poetry, short stories, or narratives reflecting their individual experiences. The session lasted approximately 5–11 minutes, with additional time provided as needed. Participants were given a simple and accessible prompt related to experiences of anxiety, fear, or trauma, which could stem from their own lives or from interactions with others that evoked these emotions. An example of a participant's narrative from the free-writing session is presented below.

The pain of an injection is often considered trivial by most people, but for me, the experience of receiving 19 injections during my paralysis was far from insignificant. My paralyzed hand was repeatedly injected by an inexperienced medical professional, resulting in trauma that lingered for three months. Despite the absence of psychological intervention or hypnosis, I confronted this trauma with the support of encouraging words from those around me. Although my peers sometimes dismissed or laughed at this experience as minor, the memory of those 19 injections, administered without expertise, remains deeply etched in my heart (MSA, 2025).

Loneliness, longing, separation, divorce, and silence envelop a solitary night. In search of friends and companions to share the burdens of the heart, tears fall (AS, 2025).

Participants were encouraged to write freely about experiences related to anxiety, fear, or trauma without concern for correcting their work, allowing uninhibited expression of their emotions through writing. The researcher provided feedback and guidance to participants who had questions or needed clarification on the provided instructions. In this first session, efforts were made to create a relaxed environment to facilitate open writing. For instance, participant AS used symbolic language to express her feelings about her divorce, conveying sadness stemming from her separation from her husband.

Deep-Writing Session

During the deep-writing session, researchers reviewed and provided feedback on the literary works freely composed by participants. The feedback focused on appreciating and enhancing the depth of content related to anxiety, fear, or trauma expressed in the participants' writings, rather than evaluating the accuracy of the content. Participants refined their work to improve its quality and aesthetic appeal. An example of a participant's narrative from the deep-writing session is presented below.

On a rainy morning, the drone of a fogging machine reverberated from the end of the alley. A white mist enveloped the houses, accompanied by a pungent odor that filled the air. As a child, I experienced a drastic shift in the household atmosphere whenever dengue fever fogging was scheduled. My family descended into panic—hastily covering food, moving belongings, and preparing protective coverings. My parents' faces were tense, their voices sharp, leaving me bewildered amidst the chaos.

As the machine's roar grew closer, my heart raced. The loud, growling sound, like a menacing beast, filled me with dread. I fled to my room, covered my ears, and wept silently. Though I understood the fogging was necessary, the fear persisted. Even now, the distant hum of a fogging machine triggers an involuntary tension in my body. The trauma stemmed not only from the sound but also from the surrounding panic that made me feel unsafe. This memory lingers, a subtle shadow that emerges in moments of calm (MSA, 2025).

If I ever reach the point of surrender, do not worry for me; I release you to follow your own path. Care for yourself, pursue the happiness you envision, and soar freely without me by your side. Forgive me for seeking your time, love, and attention, as I now recognize my imperfections and that I may not meet your ideals. Allow me to fade quietly into the enveloping silence, burying my pain to spare you its weight. With a breaking heart, I sincerely let you go, restraining my sorrow. Though I have fought to hold on, my efforts have gone unvalued. You need not look back; I will not impede your journey. My prayers remain with you, even as my heart aches in your absence (AS, 2025).

In the second session, participants received guidance from the research team to refine their writing, with feedback focusing on grammar and linguistic aesthetics to enhance the quality and appeal of their work. For example, participant MSA elaborated on their narrative with greater detail, following the instructions and feedback provided by the researchers. During this session, the researchers did not probe further into the content of the participants' writings, prioritizing stylistic improvements over deeper content exploration.

Dialogue-Writing-in-Group Session

In the dialogue-writing session, participants were guided to finalize their literary works, focusing on refining punctuation, sentence structure, and paragraph organization, as well as making substantial improvements to content. For participants requiring additional support, a mentor provided assistance. Subsequently, participants engaged in self-directed dialogue by rereading and reflecting on their writing to deepen their self-understanding through their literary creations. This stage emphasized self-reflection without pressure to write or interpret their work. Once comfortable with their self-dialogue, participants shared their literary works with peers in the group. Through this sharing, they were encouraged to find peace, relief, and joy by discussing their experiences with others in a supportive group setting.

The following presents the outcomes of the dialogues conducted by participants during the dialogue-writing session.

Participant ZM, who has visual impairment and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), has been blind since infancy. Since junior high school, ZM has engaged in writing as a form of catharsis. He describes writing as a therapeutic outlet, particularly for managing his PTSD symptoms. Whenever he experiences emotional distress, such as after arguments, loss, or unpleasant events, writing serves as a medium for relief. ZM prefers crafting first-person fiction, channeling his emotional pain into narratives that he transforms into creative works shared on platforms such as TikTok and Wattpad.

(...) I have been blind since childhood due to a bacterial infection that impaired my vision completely. As a young child, I felt profound sadness over my inability to see. Despite this, I remained resilient, learning to read and engage through listening. I enjoy digital books, as printed books are inaccessible to me, and I have also pursued music studies. These experiences inspired me to begin writing. Though frustration sometimes surfaced, I found writing to be a therapeutic outlet. My goal is to create works that are not only therapeutic for me but also meaningful and beneficial to others (ZM, 2025).

Participant IDE, who has experienced periodic total blindness since age 9, began writing poetry in the 1990s. He also serves as a mental health counselor, supporting colleagues who have recently lost their vision and often face significant emotional shock. After assisting his colleagues through their recovery, a process that typically spanned one to two years, IDE began exploring therapeutic approaches in 2004, including hypnotherapy and psychotherapy, which he continues to practice today.

Through the dialogue-writing session, participants expressed profound satisfaction, discovering alongside their peers that writing can serve as a therapeutic tool for healing past emotional wounds. For instance, some participants, reflecting on their childhood, had grappled with existential questions about their visual impairment, such as why they experienced blindness. Over time, these questions began to find resolution through the lessons embedded in the poetry they crafted. Participants also expressed a desire for their writings to inspire others, particularly those who, like themselves, experienced blindness during adolescence. Furthermore, they emphasized the importance of supportive peers in their healing journey, noting that achieving long-term mental and emotional recovery requires communal support rather than solitary effort.

Participant ER, who is deaf and a schizophrenia survivor, began writing actively in 2021 after enrolling in a writing class supported by his psychologist and psychiatrist. Following the publication of several anthologies, he paused his writing due to limited family support. Encouraged by a writing community, ER resumed his creative work, subsequently publishing additional anthologies and earning recognition as the author of the most favored manuscripts. In one of his works, ER explored his recovery from schizophrenia, which strengthened his belief in overcoming the condition. An excerpt from his dialogue is presented below.

I have enjoyed writing stories since junior high school. During my senior high school years, lacking close friends, I frequently wrote in a diary, using a simple notebook. That period, before my schizophrenia diagnosis, was marked by profound depression, particularly in my first year. In my second year, classmates borrowed my diaries, likening them to short stories, and even seniors read them with interest. Years after recovering from schizophrenia, my psychologist and psychiatrist encouraged me to continue writing, affirming its therapeutic

value. Writing brings me calm and joy, allowing me to express myself and share my experiences with others (ER, 2025).

In the final dialogue-writing session, participants openly shared and discussed their personal experiences with the writing process and their journeys with disabilities. They reflected candidly on initial feelings of sadness, stress, and trauma associated with the onset of their disabilities. Participants acknowledged that their abilities were significantly limited compared to those of non-disabled individuals. For some, even after recovering from schizophrenia, social isolation persisted due to being shunned by peers. Additionally, many noted that their parents became increasingly protective, shaping their experiences further.

Disabilities, Poetry, and Symbols

Symbols appear in language, requiring a deconstruction of their meaning to understand them. Regarding symbols, narratives of anxiety and trauma in poems written by people with disabilities emerge in the following segments. First, the symbols of anxiety and trauma are depicted through the following poetic diction.

I'm human.

You're animals.

You're destroyers of universal civilization.

I'm so important that you're like that.

Hahaaaaa.

I'm crazy, and you're crazier than me.

(LA, 2025)

The respondent shows that he is a person who actually experiences anxiety and trauma. He shows his anxiety by using symbols related to his own 'madness'. However, on the other hand, he also shows that 'he is human, while others are animals'. This symbol shows that the writer feels

extraordinary trauma to the point that he considers others to be animals. When other people are metaphorized as animals, it indicates that he is a person who is traumatized by humans who become animals. In the world of symbolism, humans who are turned into animals are the worst humans. They, as animals, are also symbolized as evil.

CONCLUSION

This study explored therapeutic writing as a tool for individuals with disabilities, encompassing a diverse range of disability types. The research was structured into three sessions: free-writing, deep-writing, and dialogue-writing. All participants engaged actively and effectively across these sessions. In the free-writing session, novice writers initially experienced confusion regarding the task and identifying their anxiety or trauma. Researchers provided guidance, encouraging participants to write freely about any experiences—positive or negative—based on their interests. In the deep-writing session, participants received feedback to enhance the quality and depth of their writing, leading to improved outcomes. However, some participants expressed apprehension about the dialogue-writing session, citing discomfort with public exposure or their introverted nature. Despite these challenges, participants in the dialogue-writing session reported that writing served as a therapeutic outlet, fostering feelings of comfort and calm. Moreover, they expressed a desire for their writings to serve as a source of therapy for others with disabilities who have experienced trauma.

This study was conducted on a limited scale, focusing on a broad range of disabilities. Future research should explore more specific disability categories to deepen the understanding of therapeutic writing's impact. These findings are intended to serve as a foundation for future studies in psychology and writing, particularly in addressing trauma management among individuals with disabilities. In relation to symbols, the poetic language written by people with disabilities gives rise to symbols related to anxiety and trauma which appear in certain diction, including animals, humans and crime.

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COMPETING INTERESTS

The authors declare no competing interest.

AUTHOR'S CONTRIBUTION

Anas Ahmadi was responsible for material preparation, data collection, testing, and analysis. Yulianeta prepared the manuscript and conducted subsequent revisions. Muhammad Turhan Yani conceived and designed the study. All authors reviewed and approved the final manuscript.

ETHICS APPROVAL

This research has received ethics approval from Universitas Negeri Surabaya: No. 013/UN38.III.1/DL.01.02/2025

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