



Narrating Neurodiversity: Reresentation Of Autism In Fiction: And Contemporary Perception

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ABSTRACT

In recent years, Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) has gained increasing visibility in mainstream discourse due to the increasing number of diagnosed individuals and the expanding representation of neurodiversity in fiction like literature and films. These are the factors that have contributed to the spread of information and knowledge about conditions such as Autism Spectrum Disorder. Neurodiversity is a concept that recognises the neurological differences, such as Autism, Dyslexia and ADHD, as the natural distinctions of the human brain. This concept promotes inclusion and acceptance of the neurodivergent individuals in the mainstream institutions, and treats them as any other person with equality and respect. This concept has also changed the question from “How to fix such individuals” to “How can we include and make them part of everyday life”. This paper intends to comprehend the awareness and understanding of the general public about autism, alongside examining and analysing the representation of autism in selected texts and movies. How autistic characters are portrayed in fiction and what implications of such portrayals.

KEYWORDS: Autism, Representation, Stereotypes, Public perception, Fiction analysis, Cinema, Literature, Misconceptions, Narrative Device

INTRODUCTION

Autism Spectrum Disorder is a diverse neurological and developmental condition that affects an individual’s ability to communicate or interact with people. It is called “Spectrum Disorder” due to its wide range of characteristics, support needs and abilities. People with autism display repetitive behaviour and restricted interests. They have difficulty initiating or maintaining a conversation, and they make limited eye contact. Autistic individuals prefer having routines, mostly plan their whole day beforehand, and any sudden change in their routine may cause distress. Symptoms of Autism are mainly visible in childhood, primarily within the first two or three years of life. There is a smaller number of cases that are diagnosed at a later stage of life, such as after adulthood. Genetic factors are widely known as the cause of the prevalence of autism, but that’s just one of many reasons that may cause autism.

Cinema and literature have been operating as a foundation to educate the masses on various subjects, from social and political to medical concepts. Making complicated ideas easy to understand with their simple writing and depictions. Cinema is a more powerful instrument that has the ability to influence people, as it can be understood even by people who have not received any formal education, especially in today's time, where people prefer movies as they are more efficient and less time-consuming in comparison to reading a whole novel. While film has the capacity to promote awareness, empathy, and social change, it can also perpetuate misinformation and one-dimensional portrayals through its narrative choices and characterisation. Oftentimes, Autistic characters have been used as a narrative tool; either their characters are developed according to the needs of the story, or they are simply there for the redemption or character development of the protagonist. Many writers use autism as a tool that serves many purposes in different narratives, for instance, portraying autistic individuals with childlike personalities, extraordinary skill in a certain field like mathematics or photographic memory, who are very innocent, heavily dependent on their families, and need constant supervision, evoking sentiments of the audience or readers such as sympathy, pity or protectiveness. Filmmakers try to mirror the reality of Autism, but fail to do so by limiting their perspectives. They merely focus on specific aspects by portraying autism as an illness that needs to be cured, people with autism need to be observed at all times, and they are an unfortunate burden on their families, or they are depicted as eccentric individuals in society, portraying them as they are different and not part of the normal.

However, portrayals like these also perpetuate stereotypes and misconceptions with their archetypal representation of autism. Creating unrealistic expectations of every other autistic individual in people's minds. The Savant Syndrome is one of the most repeated traits of an autistic character or pattern that is present in many narratives, highlighting deeply rooted cultural representations of autism. The depiction of savant syndrome reinforces the idea that neurological differences mean having extraordinary skills. In reality, there is only a small percentage of autistic individuals who actually have savant abilities, yet this trope is presented as a common occurrence, constructing a narrow and conventional image of autism. This paper examines whether Indian and Western depictions of autism in literature and cinema align with clinical realities and the lived experiences of autistic individuals, or whether they depart from these realities in significant ways. In particular, the research interrogates whether such portrayals tend to reinforce existing stereotypes and misconceptions, or whether they challenge them. The paper also reflects on the expanding role of cinema and literature as key cultural mediums that shape public understanding of issues such as autism. It explores whether these forms of representation sincerely raise awareness, foster empathy, and dismantle stigma, or whether autism is sometimes employed merely as a narrative device to advance the plot or generate emotional impact in the audience. By engaging critically with these questions, the research offers a nuanced account of the power and responsibility of cultural production in shaping social attitudes toward autism. The impact of fictional portrayals is significant as literature and media (cinema) work as the primary sources of information and knowledge for many people.

LITERATURE REVIEW

An Indian movie, *Barfi*, is about the portrayal of two different types of disabilities, first a young man with Hearing and Speaking impairment, and second a young girl with Autism. This film presents a sentimental connection towards the neurodivergent and disabled individuals. Narrative and trope of this movie made some changes in the perception of disability in Indian cinema and its audience. Many people criticised the movie for not showing the lived experience and daily struggles faced by families and by the autistic individuals themselves. Critics pointed out that the character of Jhilmil played by Priyanka Chopra was far from a real autistic individual; her fidgeting with her fingers, constant gaze aversion and long unblinking stares were seen as trying too hard. Jhilmil, abandoning her caregiver with whom she is deeply attached, when Barfi leaves her at the caregiver's house, she abandons her and goes after Barfi. An autistic individual does not leave people they are attached to easily. Another instance was when Jhilmil called her parents and told them about her whereabouts when she was kidnapped. These instances show her as far more intellectual than she is portrayed in the movie. At times, she is shown thinking and doing things in a way that is not possible for an individual with autism. Jhilmil's character was constructed in a way that people were compelled to pity her. She was naïve and quirky. Her character was developed around the need of the storyline, rather than presenting her as someone with a story of her own. The movie prioritises romance over authenticity.

The movie, *I am Sam*, directed by Jessie Nelson, portrays the character of Sam Dawson, an autistic man with the intellectual capacity of a 7-year-old child, who fights a legal battle to retain the custody

of his daughter against the social services, which deems him an unqualified and unreliable man to be her guardian. The film depicts Sam's dedication and love for his daughter. Director Jessie Nelson offered an intimate and sentimental depth to Sam's character. People argue that the representation of Sam's disability and his intellectuality was inconsistent at times, as he portrayed complex emotional and sentimental intelligence, and sometimes behaved opposite to that of a child. The story focused more on the melodrama and sentimental aspects rather than maintaining the authenticity of Autism.

The Curious Incident of a Dog in the Night – Time is a novel by British author Mark Haddon that gives a unique insight into the world of a neurodivergent character. The story is narrated by the protagonist Christopher John Francis Boone, a 15-year-old boy living in England, unlike other stories where someone else narrates the story for disabled people. Through Christopher's behaviour and habits, such as not liking direct physical contact and loud noises, we assume that he has Autism, but the novel never explicitly calls him autistic. The novel is written in first-person perspective, incorporating diagrams, mathematical problems, puzzles and illustrations, which allows the readers to experience the realm and imagination that Christopher perceives the world as and his thought process. Christopher values honesty and interprets things with logic. Christopher's character was made like any other archetypal autistic; he struggles to understand people's tone while they talk, does not like being touched, and does not trust the metaphors because a quote can have two different meanings, literal and metaphorical, which makes him confused and unable to understand the true intentions behind those words. The author follows the conventional traits associated with people with autism, such as Christopher's inability to lie, his struggles to understand sarcasm, his avoidance of eye contact, and his love for mathematics, prime numbers and order and logic make him an archetypal representation of an autistic individual.

Dr Kala states in her article that Autism Spectrum Disorder is a concern in India and across the world, due lack of awareness, social stigma and screening, thousands of cases go undiagnosed. Boys are more affected in comparison to girls, with an estimated ratio of 3:1. It is growing steadily. In many parts of India Autism is still misunderstood. Many cultures consider autism a curse, karma of past sins and bad parenting. These beliefs work as hurdles preventing families from seeking proper medical assistance in time. She further adds that the lack of paediatricians in rural parts of India is the primary reason that many cases go undiagnosed, and those who are pediatricians they are not trained or skilled enough to diagnose autism at an early age. RTE- Right to Education Act 2009 mandates inclusive education in mainstream schools and educational institutions, but many establishments failed to uphold this rule. Many schools lack properly trained teachers or they have high fee rates. She highlights the current condition of Autism in India.

Mark Haddon's popularity and other curious incidents in *My life as an Autistic*. (Abbot. B), Critics, Haddon's approach and representation of autism, he states that for Haddon Autism is a tool to move the story. The representation of Autism in *The Curious Incident of a Dog in the Night-Time* does not portray the real and lived experience of autism; the understanding of the concept of autism is not clear. Christopher's character is constructed with certain traits associated with autism, like an inability to lie, a lack of logical understanding, and a struggle to interact socially. Burks argues that the unrealistic/inconsistent representation of autism in a fiction novel by an unautistic individual limits the perception of authenticity and understanding of the concept. Due to such works, many original and authentic works like *Beyond the Wall*, *Autism and Representation* and *Thinking in Pictures* by Autistic writers don't get as much attention. Haddon's *The Curious Incident of a Dog in the Night-time* is a piece of fiction; it does not truly represent all types of autism and autistic people. He further debates that although the novel is acclaimed for raising awareness and bringing a somewhat accurate representation of people with autism, it also reinforces stereotypes, specifically the idea that autistic individuals are emotionally detached, have little to no social life and are exceptionally good at mathematics. Burks emphasises that readers consider the fictional protagonist as an accurate model of autism. Such representation creates unrealistic expectations and misunderstandings, which lead to prejudices and stereotypes in people's minds.

Autism, Stereotype and Stigma: The Impact of Media Representations. (Hungerford et.al), This paper delves into the representation of Autism through media, how it affects the lives of autistic individuals and their families, and how such depictions and narrations can enhance or diminish the understanding of autism of the audience. Mass media is a crucial device to spread information or to convey complex ideas in a straightforward manner. Through the media, people have learned and understood various new concepts, such as ASD, which also helps in shaping perceptions and improving knowledge of the masses. However, the representation can have both positive and negative influences on the people associated with it.

The portrayal of Autism in the mass media, for example, novels, books, picture books for children, television, movies, etc. They serve as a medium to convey information and knowledge to the audience. The representation of autism is typically accompanied by stereotypes and speculation. Such portrayals often depict that the person or character having autism is usually shy, introverted, has difficulty interacting with other people and is unable to understand emotions and sentiments. The most common belief is that autistic individuals have savant-like extraordinary skill in a certain field, like mathematics, music and photographic memory. Misconceptions like these can have predetermined assumptions regarding all autistic individuals, not only that, but it can also negatively influence and stigmatise the perceptions about autism. Lack of understanding and awareness regarding autism can lead to stereotypes and judgment. Furthermore, stereotypes and misconceptions can affect the mental health of autistic individuals as well as their family members and carers, who may experience social exclusion and limited opportunities. There are various ways to support and include autistic individuals and their families by changing mindsets, learning, and being considerate to accept them as they are without any prejudice. It can be done through media by portraying positive and inclusive representation, and educating about neurodiversity.

Cinema on the Spectrum: The Importance of Representation of Persons with Autism in a post COVID-World (Kapoor) describes how mainstream media play a crucial part in shaping people's familiarity, awareness, and knowledge about a subject. How cinema, television and online streaming platforms have become an essential part of everyone's life and the power they hold to influence public opinion and perspective through their representations of a new subject, such as Autism Spectrum Disorders. She further argues that the representation of (ASD) in cinema is predominantly based on the stereotypes, oversimplification of the condition and not the clinical actualities and lived experiences. Autism has been used as a narrative device to fulfil the need of the story, emotional interest, or to gain sympathy of the audience for the character rather than as an individual unit. Lack of authentic representation, generally, movies based on autism are written, directed, and played by non-autistic people, so they lack accuracy and realism in the portrayal. Portrayal of extraordinary abilities, in cinema, autistic characters are widely depicted as "Savant", someone who has exceptional skills in a certain area, such as mathematics, photographic memory or the ability to crack codes. She further argues that such portrayals may create unrealistic expectations towards people with autism. Lastly, she explains how such representations can have alarming implications not only for the people who have autism but for their families as well. It may create preconceptions, and people may hesitate or find it hard to approach them.

"On The Ontological Status of Autism: the double empathy problem." (Milton), his essay explicates that autism is more than a disorder or pathology; he opposes the pre-existing, medical and theoretical understanding of autism, which explains autism as a neurological condition. He critiques the conventional psychological and clinical models, which present autism as an impairment in social communication, understanding others' feelings and emotions. These models also believe that autistic people are characteristically inadequate in understanding non-autistic. He states that such perceptions are one-sided, primarily embedded in the norms of non-autistic people. The central focus of the essay is the construction of the Double Empathy Problem; the communication breakdown between autistic and non-autistic individuals is mutual rather than unilateral. He further adds that both groups experience this breakdown in communication and difficulty in understanding each other because of different perceptual and communicative structures. Empathy in autistic individuals works differently from that of non-autistic individuals. Misunderstanding happens while interaction between the two groups as each group has their own way of interpreting and understanding social indications and emotions through distinctive intellectual and cultural lens as empathy is a social construction, and each individual has their own way to empathise.

Polly Morrice, in her essay, assesses how autism is being used in literature as a metaphor or as a narrative tool; not only is the representation of autism inaccurate, but they also depict the characters as some abnormal having wild animal-like tendencies. She further states that the portrayal of autism in literature that has inaccurate clinical legitimacy of facts reinforces stereotypes and misconceptions that lead to misunderstanding. She concludes her essay by questioning the authority of these writers who use ailments to their advantage and spread false information. Further, in 'Don't Mourn for Us', Sinclair explains how parents' grief over their child being autistic, how they describe having an autistic child as a tragedy. The grief stems from the shattered dreams and expectations of having a non-autistic (normal) child. Autism is not a shell that is hiding a normal child, and you cannot separate the person from Autism. He states that parents often try to bond with their autistic children as they do with their non-autistic children. Autistic individuals spend their lives trying to function, make contact in a

society/world that is shaped according to the needs, norms, and ideas of non-autistic individuals. Sinclair concludes his article by urging parents not to mourn or grieve over their autistic child; they should support them, love them for who they are and accept them. Sinclair further emphasises that parents should let go of the fantasy of a perfect child and accept autism as a part of their child. Children with autism may feel rejected and unwanted due to the behaviour of their parents towards them. Parents should encourage and support their children, rather than trying to fix or cure them.

OBJECTIVES AND METHODOLOGY

This paper adopts a mixed-methods approach intended to fulfil the analytical and empirical objectives of the paper through the incorporation of literary analysis and public response examination. The primary objectives of this paper are to examine and analyse how autism is represented in selected pieces of fiction, to identify recurring patterns in narratives, misconceptions, and stereotypes associated with autism, and how autistic characters are portrayed to fulfil the needs of the narrative. Furthermore, this paper aims to understand the awareness and perception of autism in the general public and what their opinions are about persons with autism. The quantitative component evaluates and emphasises the public awareness, perception and how much they are willing to accept autistic individuals in mainstream society, while the qualitative components will focus on the close textual analysis of the representation of autism in fiction, and the absence of genuine voices.

LIMITATIONS

This paper acknowledges the limitations. The qualitative component focuses on a selected number of literature and media works. It does not represent all fictional representations of autism. The research does not include first-hand interviews or surveys of autistic individuals. The study relies on the secondary sources such as articles, essays and existing academic literature. Restricted sample size of the survey; the survey part is limited to assessing public perception of autism and does not include responses from autistic individuals. Self-testified survey responses and this study does not contain any direct or indirect discussion with medical experts or professionals, which limits the proficiency to verify medical accuracy.

FINDINGS

This section presents the results of a survey conducted to understand how young people perceive autism and their opinions, as well as an analysis of selected texts and movies. The data is analysed by using factual statistics, including percentages.



Figure 1

The survey was conducted among 30 respondents, of whom 90% were females, 6.7% were males, and 3.3% preferred not to mention their gender. The majority of respondents were above the age of 18, whereas only 16.7% were under the age of 18, (Figure 1).

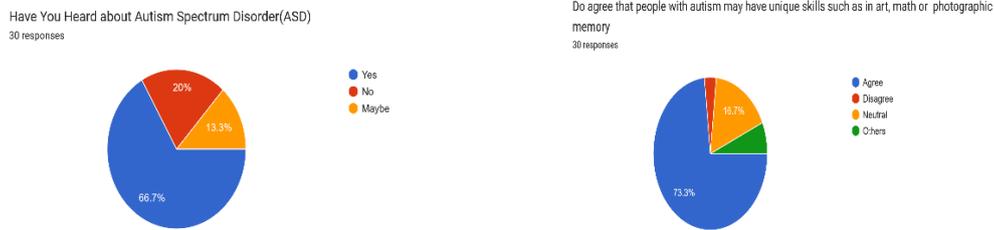


Figure 2

As shown in Figure 2, 66.6% of respondents stated that they had heard about Autism Spectrum Disorder, when asked, whereas 20% respondents did not know about it, while 13.3% respondents were not sure whether they had heard about autism or not. When asked, 73.3% respondents agreed that autistic individuals possess “Savant” ability, such as exceptional skills in a certain field, like mathematics or photographic memory, whereas 16.7% respondents had a neutral approach, and the remaining respondents either disagreed or preferred not to say anything.

We asked the respondents how they would feel interacting with people with autism. 56.7% respondents answered that they would like to know more about them, while 20% and 16.7% of participants responded that they would be curious or unsure how to interact with autistic individuals.

Overall, the results indicate adequate awareness levels in the participants, and their responses were positive. These results present the current understanding and awareness of young people about autism, and their thoughts on interacting with autistic individuals, showing their willingness to interact and have an inclusive approach.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, this study highlights that while there is an adequate awareness and understanding of autism in young people, through one of the survey answers, we also see that there is a presumption among the respondents about the misconception of autistic individuals having savant ability. We see this misconception not only in these answers, but in narratives such as *The Curious Incident of a Dog in the Night – Time*, as well, where the protagonist is portrayed as a mathematical savant. There are certain patterns and stereotypes associated with autism present in narratives such as *Barfi* and *I Am Sam*. Portraying the autistic characters as emotionally immature, childlike personalities and romanticising and infantilising the autistic characters and using them as a narrative tool to derive the story. Representations like these simplify the condition, rarely focusing on the complex and challenging aspects of the condition. Characters often have family, friends or a community of people who understand them and are well aware of their condition, but in reality, it is the opposite of such representations. People hardly interact with autistic people without any hesitation, and autistic individuals frequently fight to be understood. The novels and movies portray autism as a symbol of innocence and purity, and uniqueness. It shifts the focus from the lived experiences and limits the condition to a symbol.

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