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A Multi-dimensional Analysis of *To Siri with Love: A Quest for Acceptance and the Challenges of Autism and its Spectrum Disorders*

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Abstract

Literature has evolved from its prime purpose of ‘teach and delight’ to ‘inform and sensitise.’ World Literature is open to all discussion and new genres keep evolving and pre-existent genres are evolving with distinguished creativity. Literature, which was initially used as a tool to express emotions and ideas have now begun to accommodate those feelings that have been alien to the common public. Disability is often stereotyped with the victim, supercrip and villain model.

Most of the Young Adult fiction discussing Autism and its Spectrum Disorders are accompanied by the diagnosis of extraordinary intellect. They would be naturally categorised under the supercrip model. It is unfair to call these smart people as ‘dull’ or ‘weird’, just because the majority of the public think and interact in one particular manner. Literature, through its novel genre of Disability Studies has succeeded in bringing the life, experience, thoughts and desires of the people to the spotlight. It is vital for the acceptance of such people for the betterment of the society.

Key words: *World Literature, sensitise, Autism, Spectrum Disorders, intellect, Disability Studies*

Anything without a first-hand experience cannot be easily understood. For instance, the emotion, anxiety and desires of one is difficult for another person to understand. Such is the case of the varied shades of disability, which we would have seen in person or lived with, but what happens with them internally or with the people taking care of them is oblivious to most of the crowd. Works of literature, speaking about disability is now vast in number. Most books discuss disability, especially Asperger’s Syndrome as a nerd disease. In fact, it pains more to call it as a disease or disability, while considering the capabilities of the character. Most of the Young Adult characters depicted in the text seem to be like superhuman, smarter and intelligent in different aspects than common men.

Young Adult Autism and Asperger’s narrative is applauded by the public, but not well received by the people suffering from the disease. Judith Newman’s memoir – *To Siri, With Love*, is the author’s experience in bringing up her autistic son Augustus John (Gus). The book is a sincere narrative of a mother going through her tumultuous life with a blend of happiness and the quirks of the disease. The author is the mother of twins – Henry and Augustus John; Henry is a neurotypical teenager, whereas Gus is autistic. The depiction of Gus is quite different from Jodi Piccolt’s ‘Aspie hero’ Jacob Hunt in *House Rules*. The relationship between the mother and the son is one prime line in the plot of the novel. Emma Hunt, Jacob’s mom wants people to be sympathetic towards her son, when he is convicted for a murder, which he never committed. All through the narrative, Emma tries to be protective of her autistic son. On the other hand, Judith Newman clearly does not welcome fake sympathies and she herself does not

euphemise her son's behaviour. This lack of euphemism is the cause of controversy in the autistic community.

Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASD) such as Asperger's Syndrome, in the literary narratives seem more cool, knowledgeable and smart, except for the times that they experience meltdown. They are portrayed like possessing a photographic memory – which is a great talent academically and even otherwise. The obsession of the Autistic people towards a particular topic shows that much improvisation can be made in the different arena of life. If Jacob Hunt is employed in the crime investigation bureau, he would definitely crack up cases faster or offer valuable perspectives.

Newman's *To Siri, With Love* was boycotted with a hash tag on twitter, started by an autistic parent of autistic kids. The accusation is that, the way the author discloses her son's personality and the way she at times describes him is rude and offending to the autistic community in general. That maybe one side of the truth, but if one has to justify Newman, it may also be that the author is probably portraying her son through the eyes of the outsiders. Autistic readers may find it offensive, but the reality of how this world has been unjust and purely unaware of the sufferings of the people with different ability is a fact that we cannot deny. In the memoir, an autistic child's parent receives an anonymous letter concerning her son stating – "To the parent of the small child ...BRAT screaming his head off as he flaps his hands like a bird...he is retarded...wild animal it's utterly nerve wrecking...scaring my Normal children...you look like a moron...Do something about that Child!" (89) This shows how the society is inconsiderate and rude towards the autistic children, their behaviour and even their caretakers.

The second accusation is an incident in the book where Newman wants to sterilise her son and wants him to be deprived of realising sexuality or procreating. This seems rather inappropriate considering her description of her personal self, her difficulty in getting pregnant and also reasoning out for Gus being born with the diagnosis. Gus is around 14 years old and he has the realisation of his sexuality – "Today, I asked Gus when he thought he would be ready to sleep in his own bed for the whole night. He thought for a minute. 'I guess when I'm 21,' he said. 'Why 21?' I asked. 'That's when there will be someone else for me to sleep with'" (133).

Considering the title and also an incident-blurb in the book, about Gus wanting to take his iPod to Apple Store so that it might meet its friends, might be funny, but at the same time, it is contradictory to Newman's view that Gus is incapable of empathising. It is completely illogical to compare iPod with human beings, but it is also quite compelling to believe that a teenager, who is empathising with a machine, can definitely understand or at least learn to understand his partner or children. It is not that autistic people never marry or do not procreate. There are several autistic parents successfully parenting their children.

The author states – "It is very hard to say this out loud. Let me try. I do not want Gus to have children" (120). She also feels that he would not be a good parent and hence must be sterilised. In an interview, Tim Burton, the director of the movie *Alice in Wonderland's* wife believes that her husband is on the autism spectrum. She also adds, "...But that quality also makes him a fantastic father, he has an amazing sense of humour and imagination. He sees things other people won't see". This is one among the living proofs that autistic people are successful as well as good parents too.

The narrative maybe a funny take on her son's disparity, but definitely offensive, at certain moments. She speaks of her parenting methods and the other son's attitude towards his twin, where Henry ill-treats his brother by calling him names or unnecessarily identifying him as an autistic person for some commercial privileges. It may also be that siblings always pick fight, but here the mistaken identity is propagated much.

It is pivotal at this moment to accept people, irrespective of differences. In a world of multi-culture and due to certain aspects of being different, it is not right to label people as disabled and also treat them as inferior. It is hard for neurotypical people to accept the neurodivergent geniuses who are not

particularly engaging in gossiping or invading others personal life, which we have euphemised as ‘social interaction’. Reading the Asperger’s narratives and the increasing population of autistic people shows that the world is up for great inventions and developments with such great wise minds. It can be predicted that the future belongs to the smart autistic people and their persistence will pay off. It is evident from the conversation between the author and Dr Mark. She asks if he knew autistic people working in the Siri’s language development at Apple. He says, “...But, when you think about it, you’ve just described half of Silicon Valley” (145).

Research proves that people with autism or its spectrum disorders have been obsessive with certain things that interested them. This obsession and extreme passion has led to great invention and discoveries. Great scientists like Sir Isaac Newton, Nikola Tesla, Albert Einstein, Charles Darwin and many others are suspected to have had autism. In the current generation, Anthony Hopkins – famous movie director, Susan Boyle – Scottish singer, Dan Ackroyd – comedian have been proved to have autism or Asperger’s Syndrome.

Judith Newman’s memoir discusses different people with autism and its spectrum, whom she has met during her childhood and otherwise. She speaks of Darius McCollum, titled the transit bandit by the media whom she believe would do a great job in transport field. Isaac Newton, as Newman says, must have been persistent enough to bring out his greatest discovery. The good aspect about the book is that it features the advantage of artificial intelligence, the Apple assistant – Siri, which helped Gus to have some level of interaction and keep up with his interests.

The interview of Tim Burton’s wife about him being a good father must be little satisfying to Judith Newman. In the memoir, Henry says that Gus can be a good uncle to his children. If uncle, why not a good father? He might get into trouble with his partner, but if he gets a partner, it also means that the person wholly knows Gus and she is married to him not out of compulsion, but for who he is. Even the United Nations Organisation has formulated reproductive rights for disabled people. It quips, “Persons with disabilities have equal needs to access sexual and reproductive health-care providers as those without disabilities and have similar requirements for planning and childbirth”.

It is a widely prevalent notion in the minds of parents and caretakers, not to get their Autism and its Spectrum Disorder children to get married or have children. A team of psychiatrists from Eastern Virginia Medical School believe that, “...the developmentally disabled also go through sexual stages as they physically mature. This concept can be difficult to accept for some providers and caretakers, due to their tendency to view the developmentally disabled as perennial children [14]”. The reluctance of the parents has sometimes resulted in involuntary sterilisation, as the one that the author proposes to do in future, if she were given a chance. Certain case studies prove that autistic people cannot cope to the expectations of others, and there is another side too, where there are wonderful parents.

Judith Newman’s take on autism is not welcoming to the particular target community. It also must be the choice of any individual to have a stand regarding their sexuality. Choice is essential for peaceful and solemn existence. Hence, it is essential for people with autism, to speak for themselves and letting the world know who they really are. This may in future require another rewriting of the whole concept of Autism and its Spectrum Disorders. Autistic writers should be encouraged to publish their writings; John Elder Robinson’s *Look Me in the Eye* is his memoir about him being a person with Asperger’s Syndrome. The biased opinions in the society can be over thrown only through the voices of the affected.

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