


Shifting Autism Popular Fiction: Representing Asperger's Syndrome in Select Works of Mark Haddon, Jodi Picoult and Steig Larsson

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ABSTRACT

Increased disability awareness in the 21st century spurred a resurgence in autism popular fiction. Many autism fiction have emerged as International best sellers and have discussed Asperger's syndrome (high functioning autism). This paper analyses how contemporary fiction has gleaned the Asperger from the autism spectrum and its subsequent representational politics. The signification of autism as narrative prosthesis forms the focus of this paper as it analyses and explores how the condition of autism has been re-presented in popular autism fiction. The study looks at the term 'popular fiction' as indicative of works that have had a wide readership, works that have evolved as best sellers and predominantly works that have been shelved as 'popular fiction'. Mark Haddon's *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time* (2003), Jodi Picoult's *House Rules* (2010) and Steig Larsson's *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo* (2008) are the works under consideration here.

Keywords: *Asperger's fiction, Autism fiction, Representational Politics, narrative prosthesis, affect.*

Autism popular fiction intends to stimulate the reader's curiosity using the medical condition of autism. Writers take advantage of the cultural voyeuristic need to stare at and create fantastical autistic characters for the audience to feel intrigued by and sympathise. By making the character an autistic person, the writer straitjackets him to embody two extremes: a "brain-damaged fool" or a "brilliant weirdo". The narrative either embodies a quirky Asperger (who is a genius) or a severely low-functioning autistic person (who is a burden to his family). Such fictional representations of autism demand a productive space in the narration, where a metaphor should not damage disabled communities. Instead, fictional representations should be "subtle and meaningful in the way they speak of disability experiences and lives" (Representing Autism 246). The attempt is to call for a "re-negotiation of fictional space" (Gonzalez 7), which helps the writer break away from the adherence to fix the autistic into the realm of "idyllic innocence" (Iyer 133) on the one hand or devouring malignancy on the other. Instead, the paper

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implies that writers need to be open to reappraisal as a means of expression that does not ostensibly suspect the PWD (person with disability) as falling into the dichotomy but gives them a space to grow.

Christopher in Mark Haddon's *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time* (2003) has been consistently referred to as "an autistic adolescent" and "a person with Asperger's syndrome" (Berger 278). Haddon does not use the term autism or Asperger's in the text and is once quoted to have said, "I don't want him to be labelled, and because, as with most people who have a disability, I don't think it's necessarily the most important thing about him" (Haddon qtd. in William 2012). The text explores fifteen-year-old Christopher Boone's attempt to resolve two mysteries: the mystery of who killed his neighbour's dog and the mystery of his mother's sudden disappearance. Christopher eventually realizes that his father is connected to both incidents, and his quest leads him to his mother in London. Nevertheless, Christopher's pronounced motive within the text is to "prove that I'm not stupid" (44) by taking his Mathematics A level exam. Driven by the spectacular power of narration of young Christopher (Murray "Contemporary" 37), the text bifurcates into two, alternating between the chapters that develop the protagonist as an Asperger and the chapters that deal with the plot's progress. This study ascribes Christopher as an Asperger by evaluating the typical characteristics of the autism spectrum used in the text and looks into how Haddon has brilliantly constructed a first-person narrative of an Asperger.

In each fictional representation of autism, the writer encounters the challenge of depicting a disability condition as autism into a fictive text. This challenge is further intensified when the narrative is envisioned as a first-person Asperger narrative. Following medical and cultural conventions, Christopher loves prime numbers, has typical fixations and cannot relate to people. He is built under the cultural trope of the Asperger as a number wizard. He draws many a narrative analogy vis a vis prime numbers and life: "I think prime numbers are like life. They are very logical, but you could never work out the rules, even if you spent all your time thinking about them" (15). When Christopher shapes his book (that he has been asked to write) like a puzzle, makes his preference for numbers over words evident, such parallels, both by comparison or contrast, justify the stereotype of an Asperger as highly mathematically inclined and percolates generalized notions of autism.

The second characteristic feature through which Haddon signifies Christopher's Asperger's narrative is the frequent use of the conjunction 'and' within the narrative. Christopher's words on his interrogation by a policeman at the railway station notes:

Then he said, 'What's your name?'

And I said, 'Christopher Boone.'

And he said, 'Where do you live?'

And I said, '36 Randolph Street' and I started feeling better because I like policemen and it was an easy question, and I wondered whether I should tell him that father killed Wellington and whether he should arrest father.

And he said, 'What are you doing here?'

And I said, 'I needed to sit down and be quiet and think. (184)

The repetitive usage of 'and' gives a falsified notion of the Asperger as a repertoire of facts. This proves a mind that "works like a computer, continually producing and processing information" (Berger. *Alterity*. 276) an automaton, who is less than human or more than human.

An Asperger's world of routine and habit is also reflected in Christopher's narrative. Christopher does not allow any compromises to his fixities. While fixations are characteristic of the cluster of conditions associated with autism, they are almost always extended as a character trait intended to signify that the person in context is uncompromising. Christopher's adamant refusal to listen to his mother by repeating his need to write the Mathematics A level exam even while his mother stresses its practical difficulty translates him as a selfish person to the readers:

And when mother came into the spare room before I went to sleep, I said, 'I have to go to Swindon to take my A level.'

And she said, 'Christopher not now. I'm getting phone calls from your father threatening to take me to court. I'm getting it in the neck from Roger. It's not a good time.'

And I said, 'But I have to go because it's been arranged and the

Reverend Peters is going to invigilate.'

And she said, 'Look. It's only an exam. I can ring the school. We can get it postponed. You can take it some other time.'

And I said, 'I can't take it another time. It's been arranged. And I've done lots of revision. And Mrs. Gascoyne said we could use a room at school.'

And mother said, 'Christopher, I am just about holding this together. But I am this close to losing it, all right? So just give me some time...'

Then she stopped talking and put her hand over her mouth and she

stood up and went out of the room. (250)

Haddon signifies Christopher as an Asperger primarily to highlight his inability to relate to others. Christopher says, “When I was little, I didn’t understand about other people having minds”(16). In an interview with Dave Welch, Haddon states about Christopher, “The one thing he cannot do is put himself in someone else’s shoes” (qtd. in William 2012). Evidently, the metaphor of putting oneself in another’s shoes indicates the Theory of Mind. It can be noticed that Haddon has unconsciously extended and reworked the blanketed notion of the autistic’s lack of Theory of Mind which leaves him with an innate disability to predict, describe and respond to people based on their mental states. Christopher explains this by saying, "I find it hard to imagine things that did not happen to me" (4) and differentiates himself from others, “other people have pictures in their heads, too. But they are different because the pictures in my head are all pictures of things which really happened. But other people have pictures in their heads of things which aren’t real and didn’t happen (98)”. This difficulty in social imagination conclusively separates his mental state from that of others around him. From the incident mentioned above of Christopher wanting to take the A level exam and his mother voicing her difficulty, it is evident that Christopher cannot and does not try to understand her difficulty. He cannot think from the latter’s perspective, and looks into a particular situation only in relation to him, and how it would affect him. This has conclusively led to the Asperger’s being redefined as guilty of being emotionless.

Jennifer Marston William in “Against the Rhetoric of Sadness: Theory of Mind and the Writing Process in *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time*", incites another aspect of this and points out that readers must supply mental states to Haddon’s text to make meaning of Christopher’s narrative (2012). It increasingly makes the text challenging as the reader must unconsciously participate in the meaning-making. If this empathetic participation is not made, Christopher will not be conceived as a rounded figure, resulting in his portrayal seeming scheming and devious. For example, Christopher was warned by his father not to involve himself with Wellington’s (the dog) death. His book of records was also taken away from him, and Christopher is able to exonerate himself:

So, I decided that I would leave the book where it was because I reasoned that father wasn’t going to throw it away if he had put it into the shirt box and I could carry on writing in another book that I would keep really secret and then, maybe later, he might change his mind and let me have the first book back again and I could copy the new book into it. (94)

Such calculated thinking justifies him being described as a “more devious or more complex character than first meets the eye” (William 2012). If deception and empathy are interlinked

with the Theory of Mind, it is evident that Christopher seems to have both. Throughout the text, Christopher cannot empathize with any human being: he does not see his father choking but appears to be kind to his pet rat, taking care of it and feeding it regularly. Moreover, he is seen to be a constantly scheming and calculating person with a clear agenda of what he wants from everyone, which justifies his deception. Another instance of Christopher's lack of Theory of Mind (reread as callousness) is when his mother breaks down and desires comfort from her son:

And she didn't say anything for a while, and then she said, 'Oh, Christopher, I'm so sorry.'

And I said, 'It's not your fault.'

And then she said, 'Bastard. The bastard.'

And then, after a while, she said, 'Christopher, let me hold your hand. Just for once...Just for me...Will you? I won't hold it hard.'

And I said, 'I don't like people holding my hand'.

And she took her hand back and said, 'No. Ok. That's Ok.' (237)

Here, Haddon employs the characteristic features of people on the spectrum, such as being intensely hypersensitive, not seeking comfort from the proximity of others, and instead finding themselves disturbed when there is physical contact, even from intimate family members (including mothers). Many voiced autistic persons like Temple Grandin (an American Professor of Animal Science and a world-renowned autism spokesperson) have spoken extensively about the difficulties of autism and the reason why people with autism have an extreme "tactile defensiveness" (Grandin qtd. in Aboobacker 64) which restrict them from intimate contact. Hence, having a haircut, cutting nails, brushing teeth, or wearing scratchy woollen clothes are painful to PWD. This autistic tactile uneasiness is streamlined as an eccentricity and added to the lack of Theory of Mind. It is conclusively construed to stereotype Christopher as a person on the spectrum.

To render his narrator's autistic perspective, Haddon employs a systemic omission of emotive words and affects inductive language. To avoid the threat of monotony, he infuses the text with multiple narrative techniques involving graphics like The Get-Well Card (226), a wooden puzzle (263), maps (235), emoticons (2), pictures of objects (256), signboards (222), route charts (231) and graphs (126-127). Christopher's preference for map/diagram/algorithm over words is a deliberate attempt to re-chart the world as he sees it because it indicates clarity that verbal depictions lack (Berger 276). These forms of representations are stable indicators of communication for autistic Christopher as they depict pictures of a particular moment of

reality. Haddon translates the Theory of Mind and the triad of impairments in connection with Christopher's perspective to imply that while words are slippery and ambiguous for him, he would choose an alternative means of communication if he is given a choice.

Affect encoding linguistic devices are deliberately erased in the narrative. This substantiates a "detailed focused processing style" (Happe and Frith, the weak coherence account, 5), which characterizes people on the spectrum. Since Christopher's narration would aim at the precision of details, 'seemingly' accurate data is incorporated to recreate what Christopher saw/heard. This precision is purposely inserted (as when Christopher explains how he was temporarily kept under custody for attacking a police officer) to reflect Asperger's attention to detail:

It was nice in the police cell. It was almost a perfect cube, 2 meters long by 2 meters high. It contained approximately 8 cubic meters of air. It had a small window with bars and, on the opposite side, a metal door with a long, thin hatch near the floor for sliding trays of food into the cell and a sliding hatch higher up so that policemen could look in and check that prisoners hadn't escaped or committed suicide. (17)

Noticeable is the absolute lack of emotive words used in this narration that is replete with facts. Haddon makes Christopher give the readers the exact details of the cell but conveniently stops him from translating his feeling of loss during this time. The narrative is without ambiguity or imagination, which leads to visible lack of participation from the reader. Haddon employs such instances aimed to mark the narrative as a first-person autism narrative: Christopher's packing of his bag is described as, "I took the liquorice laces and pink wafer biscuit and the last clementine out of my special food box and put them in my pocket and hid the special food box under the fertilizer bag" (160), or the policewoman he sees is described as having a "little hole in her tights on her left angle and a red scratch in the middle of the hole" (7). Haddon's uses short sentences that break off abruptly, before a bond is formed between the narrator and the reader, or before an affect is translated from the text to the reader. Thus, the lack of bonding between the speaking object and the reading object leads to a swerved affect, if there is any, formed in the sequence. In the narrative that Christopher employs to describe the death of his mother, a visible lack of empathy can be found whereby the flat, detached, narration distances the reader from participating in the boy's misery and in the re-narration of the event (it is presumed that what the readers read is Christopher's murder mystery novel), the distance between Christopher and the readers is further impressed and indented. For example:

Father said that she died of heart attack and it was expected.

I said, 'What kind of heart attack? Because I was surprised.

Mother was only 38 years old and heart attacks usually happen to older people, and mother was very active and rode a bicycle and ate food which was healthy and high in fiber and low in saturated fat like chicken and vegetables and muesli.

Father said that he didn't know what kind of heart attack she had and now wasn't the moment to be asking questions like that.

I said that it was probably an aneurysm. A heart attack is when some of the muscles in the heart stop getting blood and die. There are two main types of heart attack. (124)

Active sentence construction induces effect, unlike passive sentence construction, which is largely impersonal and communicates an affective distance. As Niko Besnier observes in "Language and Affect", recreations of (one's own or another's) speech are effectively charged as they interweave different social entities and are, at times, fused with the replayer's moral agenda or even mark the speaker's emotional involvement (426). He states that replaying may also distance the reporter from the quoted message. The text of *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time* also employs a continuous usage of passive voice. The tone reads without modality and intonation. Short sentences and chapters overcome the threat of monotony that could have emerged through such a rendering. The frequent interspersing of the conjunction 'and' to connect individual clauses to form a complex sentence structure, as when Christopher says, "when I got home, I said hello to father and went upstairs and fed Toby, my rat, and felt happy, because I was being a detective and finding things out" (41) and the stress on causality, using cause and reason, to explicate each action and enhance the child-like narrative is equally prominent. Given below is a pivotal point in the text, where Christopher decides he should be living with his mother rather than with his father:

I decided that I couldn't go home again.

And I decided that I couldn't go and live with Siobhan because she couldn't look after me when school was closed because she was a teacher and not a friend or a member of the family.

And I decided that I couldn't go and live with Uncle Terry because he lived in Sunderland and I didn't know how to get to Sunderland and I didn't like Uncle Terry because he smoked and stroked my hair.

And I decided I couldn't go and live with Mrs. Alexander because she wasn't a friend or a member of family even if she had a dog, because I couldn't stay overnight in her house or use her toilet because she had used it and she was a stranger.

And then I thought that I could go and live with mother because she was family and I knew where she lived. (161)

Typical to Christopher's first-person Asperger narrative is the cause-and-effect narrative employed to render a childlike innocence in Christopher's persistent words. His father's killing of Mrs. Shear's dog and the lies about his mother's death doubly estrange him beyond reconciliation. Christopher does not understand that his mother's elopement with Mr. Shears

had infuriated his father to trigger the events. On his way to London to meet his mother, a scared and lonely Christopher ruminates:

And then I wanted to go for a wee, but I was on a train. And I didn't know how long it would take us to get to London and I felt a panic starting, and I started to tap a rhythm on the glass with my knuckles to help me wait and not think about wanting to go for a wee, and I looked at my watch and I waited for 17 minutes, but when I want to go for a wee I have to go really quickly which is why I like to be at home or at school and I always go for a wee before I get on the bus, which is why I leaked a bit and wet my trousers. (200 emphasis added)

Though the example above does not overtly state his fear or loneliness, “panic starting” connotes distress, which results in “tap a rhythm on the glass with my knuckles” (stimming), an autistic response to overcoming stimulations. The cause-and-effect narration explains why he wet his trousers using “which is why” as a point to the statement.

That Christopher cannot understand jokes or metaphors leads to “absolute literality in language” (Berger 274). It is because of this that he does not want his name to mean anything else (Christopher means ‘carrying Christ’). He says, “I do not want my name to mean a story about being kind and helpful. I want my name to mean me” (20). This aversion to metaphors underlines his narration, as the text indulges in few metaphors, again leading to a purposeful loss of an affective connection with the reader. As Berger observes:

Christopher's attitudes toward language and narrative appear to place him in the tradition of longing for a perfect, Adamic, Cratyllic, pre-Babel, pre-Saussurean language of pure correspondence in which signifier, signified, and referent are merged, and all slippage and ambiguity are banished. (274)

A sharp contrast in the narration becomes visible when Haddon introduces Christopher's mother's highly emotive letters. The conversational tone, usage of emotive words like “I just cried and cried and cried” (134) or detailed descriptions like “her desk is covered in little teddy bears and furry toys and pictures of her children” (139) immediately remind us of the disparity where a lack of an affective connect is palpable in Christopher's narration.

Haddon structures Christopher's narration on the understanding that people on the spectrum struggle to recognise nonlinguistic messages. When his mother reacts to the news that her husband had told her son that she was dead with a ‘loud heart-breaking cry’, Christopher translates it as “a loud wailing noise like an animal on a nature program on T.V” (193). Haddon's autistic protagonist invariably does not understand his mother's sorrow, but the reader quickly equates this lack of understanding to his lack of empathy. Christopher's distrust of his father, even after the latter admits to his lie, seems inordinate to the readers, as it is evident that the caring father is himself going through a difficult phase (a husband who loses

his wife to his neighbour). When he is viewed as an enemy by his son, the reader has every reason to put the son to blame.

Haddon signifies Christopher as an autistic person to make him different from the world. Mark Osteen in his work *Autism and Representation* observes how Christopher loves the way he is (216). Coincidentally, *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time* becomes one of the few texts where the autistic person does not despise himself. Christopher accepts his difference as who he is. The text sprints forward with the fifteen-year-old boy's narration, fixations and imagination. Though he knows he is different from others, he is also aware that he is very capable in certain areas as when he proudly claims, "And I know I can do this because I went to London on my own, and because I solved the mystery of who killed Wellington? And I found my mother and I was brave and I wrote a book and that means I can do anything" (268). To Haddon's credit, the narration also does not engage in the "rhetoric of sadness" that mourns autism and avoids "a language of differentiation and division that speaks to the strangeness, terrors, and desolating sadness of autism (Duffy and Droner, *The pathos* 211). Hence Christopher's objective, matter-of-fact narration makes him a very plausible character (despite of his temporary quirks), and his confidence unambiguously reaches out to the readers.

In Jodi Picoult's *House Rules* (2010), the writer introduces her protagonist Jacob Hunt as a clinically diagnosed Asperger. The narration includes multiple perspectives, including Jacob's perspective and draws the reader into the exploration of the murderer of Jess (Jacob's tutor). Picoult's Jacob is a prodigy unparalleled in his specific areas of knowledge. He is seen to give forensic advice (even while not being asked) to experts in the field and says, "I could tell you anything you ever wanted to know" about as specific and diverse things as "lightning, polymerase chain reactions, famous movie quotes, and Lower Cretaceous sauropods" (19).

In an interview, Picoult mentions that the thought of a disability which would make it difficult to communicate in the face of a legal procedure had inspired her to write this text and frame her asperger's protagonist Jacob (Smith 2010). There is a marked similarity in the conceptualization of Haddon's Christopher in *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time* and Picoult's Jacob in *House Rules*. Both Christopher and Jacob are teenagers who cannot tolerate physical contact and are more comfortable with animals than with people. Christopher and Jacob are very clear on the fact that they do not like some particular colours (Jacob worries if his prom date would wear an orange dress), are extremely orderly (Jacob arranges his underclothes in rainbow colours), require precise information (Christopher and Jacob know the

exact contents in their pocket) and have fixities which they cannot compromise with (Jacob insists on not missing a single episode of Crime Busters). Both have difficulty deciphering what another person is feeling and cannot read facial expressions. Christopher's teacher Siobhan, and Jacob's tutor Jess, spend endless hours teaching them to read from printed emoticons available at markets (Chapter Three of *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time* contains different emoticons and Christopher explains at length how each emoticon has a subsequent feeling that accompanies it). Both Jacob and Christopher do not understand figurative language. The writers have gleaned their protagonist's autistic characteristics from the triad of impairments associated with the condition, particularly stressing Christopher and Jacob's difficulty in social interaction.

Picoult's *House Rules* subtly revisits cultural stereotypes of autism. In addition to Jacob being visualized as a prodigy, the text covertly reminds the readers of autism as an abductor of Jacob's once-happy family. His mother, Emma, remembers her former husband's distraught words, "I want my house back, Henry told me. I want you back." (7 Emphasis added). Parallel references lay around the text, which is reminiscent of a narrative of loss in connection with the autistic body:

It was sometime around two years old when he began to drop words, to stop making eye contact, to avoid connections with people. He couldn't hear us, or he didn't want to. One day I looked at him, lying on the floor beside a tonka truck. He was spinning its wheels, his face only inches away, and I thought, where have you gone? (6 Emphasis added)

Added to such visible metaphors of abduction is the stereotype of autism and crime.

People on the spectrum avoid locking gaze with others because they find the autonomic response unpleasant. This also partly explain their difficulty in reading emotions. Though medical texts clearly define gaze aversion as an involuntary physical reaction of the autistic body, fictional representations have conclusively sifted this and altered it to their convenience. Many texts dealing with characters on the spectrum highlight the lack of eye contact, where the character is initially perceived to be devious, scheming, dishonest, or potentially hiding something he has done because he cannot meet the questioner's eye. The irreconcilable traits of the aforesaid positive notions of eye contact create a chasm that disability cannot easily wedge. *Picoult's House Rules* is a typical example, where young Asperger Jacob's lack of eye contact during the trial to a murder is one of the things that prejudice the Jury members against him, adding more difficulty for the defense lawyer to win his case.

House Rules equates the protagonist Jacob's autistic lack of empathy to cruelty. During the trial for the murder of his tutor, Jacob's apparent antipathy is read by those around him as callousness. His lack of visible anguish marks him as a murderer. Oliver, his lawyer, says in exasperation, "Most people, confronted with photographic evidence of the autopsy of someone they loved, would get upset. Maybe even cry" (480). Thus, Jacob claims guilt because he does not display any emotion. In retrospect, the fictional representation of autism ironically depicts the person on the spectrum as selfish at best and ruthless or malevolent at worst.

Picoult's signification of autism in the text shows the backing of the cultural stereotypes of autism and crime that delineate an autistic person as embodying it. The readers are led to believe its plausibility when even Jacob's adorable mother, Emma, doubts her son of being a murderer. Jacob's autistic fixation on watching crime shows and his expertise in forensic science, added to his impulsive quirks, make him a prime suspect.

However, to set Jacob free from being sentenced for the murder of Jess, the text plays an "Asperger card" (430). For the jury to be convinced of Jacob's innocence, it is argued by Jacob's defense lawyer Oliver that Jacob had not consciously intended harm on Jess, but the murder happened because of the impulsive, uncontrollable rage of autism, which made him commit the crime:

At the moment an act was committed, the defendant- as a result of severe mental disease or defect- was unable to appreciate the wrongfulness of his acts...having Asperger's syndrome makes it impossible for Jacob to understand how his actions might cause harm to someone else... how having Asperger Syndrome might lead a person like Jacob to have an idiosyncratic interest that becomes overwhelming and obsessive. (529)

To Picoult's readers, autism, and not Jacob, is the murderer, for the text dangerously dangles autism as a conniving, scheming disability which traps innocent victims like Jacob into crime. Though the text finally vindicates Jacob, he deflects very close to being named an actual murderer.

Steig Larsson's *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo* (2008), a crime fiction, uses the characteristic features of autism and, once noncommittally, names the young protagonist Lisbeth Salander as autistic. This book distinctly stands out from the other two texts mentioned under autism popular fiction because Larsson employs only the most desirable qualities of autism for his protagonist. The first half of the text significantly suggests that Salander is different from others. Larsson compares Salander to Pippi Longstocking, an eccentric yet endearing, mildly autistic children's heroine, leaving a clear point of identification that he intends his protagonist

to fall under the autism spectrum. Michael Blomkvist, an investigative journalist who employs her discerns, “Asperger’s syndrome, he thought. Or something like that. A talent for seeing patterns and understanding abstract reasoning where other people perceive only white noise”(367). Holger Palmgren who was Salander’s guardian says:

She has an extremely hard time relating to other people. I thought she had Asperger’s syndrome or something like it. If you read the clinical descriptions of patients diagnosed with Asperger’s, there are things that seem to fit Lisbeth very well, but there are just as many symptoms that don’t apply at all. Mind you, she’s not the least bit dangerous to people who leave her in peace and treat her with respect. But she is violent, without a doubt,” said Palmgren in a low voice. “If she’s provoked or threatened, she can strike back with appalling violence. (414)

Larsson reinstates the idea of an Asperger heroine through contextual references, particularly her “dry as dust tone” of narration (33), her “astonishing lack of emotional involvement” (33), her perpetual disdain, her social inhibition, her dislike of looking into the eye of the speaker and her brilliant mind. She is introduced to the reader as not only being reclusive and temperamental but also as “the most able investigator” (32) the detective agency ever had and as the narrator remarks, “somehow, she had always had this gift” (32). Evidently, this ‘gift’ denotes her sharpness of perception as much as it connotes autism. The keen eye for detail characteristic of Asperger’s thus feeds into the trope of a detective. Hence, like Jacob in *House Rules* or Christopher in *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time*, who were amateur investigators, Salander is also a detective by profession.

As Majia Holmer Nadesan in *Constructing Autism: Unravelling the "Truth" and Understanding the Social* points out, Salander’s irresistible appeal lies in her duality. She is threatening and fascinating at the same time (79). She is also representative of the ‘unreal’. As Armansky says, “Salander represented a life that was not real for him, that fascinated him though he could not share it” (*The Girl with Dragon* 38). Her sartorial choices like the T-shirt with the image of an alien with the words “I am also an alien” printed on it, are vivid metaphors that depict her non belongingness in the world around. Larsson’s *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo* is the first book in his Millennium Series, and was subsequently followed by its two sequels, *The Girl Who Played with Fire* (2009) and *The Girl Who Kicked the Hornet’s Nest* (2010). Noticeably as the books progress, Salander visibly transforms from being autistic to being ‘normal’. She sheds her autistic labels one by one, and the readers envision a different person emerging from the earlier reticent self.

Despite apparent autism like characteristics, Larsson furnishes a bold unconventionality in the depiction of Salander. Her appearance, highlighted by the tattoos pierced on her body “looking

as though she had just emerged from a week-long orgy with a gang of hard rockers” (39) distances her immediately from others on the spectrum who have been mentioned so far. If Picoult’s Jacob or Haddon’s Christopher had needed rigid consistency- were very particular about how they dressed or what they ate or did “the same things on the same days” (Moon 52), Salander distinctly differs in this respect. The routine was constraining to her, as Larsson states, “conventional work hours were anathema to her” (40). Salander through the course of the text travels widely, shifts residence, is not regular in her office and does not have difficulty in adapting herself to any new setting and this is clear divergence from the autism characteristics. Salander’s intentional lack of response (when questioned by officials) should not be seen as synonymous with autistic silence. Rather, by not participating in a discourse with power structures, she in her own way negates it. Salander’s undeniable power lies in her ability to peep into the life of anyone she wants to. The concept of gaze thus shifts from Lizbeth, the autistic, mentally challenged, and institutionalized object of gaze to Lizbeth, the computer hacker and invader of all privacy. It is evident that this manifestation of her return gaze is so very powerful that her oppressors cannot stand long before her, and hence in this role reversal, the hunted becomes the hunter. By invading the mailbox of her targets, by tapping their phone, she wields such power over her victims that she accesses deepest secrets and can weave catastrophe in their lives. In many ways, Salander’s position recharts the domain of the Foucauldian panoptic surveillance, where “one sees everything without ever being seen” (Discipline and Punish 202); only in Salander’s case, Larsson has endowed her with the ability to fight back the power structures that marginalize her.

The text substantiates Michael T. Hayes and Rhonda S. Black’s argument in "Troubling Signs: Disability, Hollywood Movies and the Construction of a Discourse of Pity" that disability is extricated from its concrete manifestation as a physical or mental condition and ends up being treated as a cultural sign (2003). Salander’s massive fan following in the official website of the novel who argues for and against her being autistic, posits the question of autism translated as a cultural sign. It can be argued that Larsson’s intention in the portrayal of Salander as an Asperger was only to give her the most desirable traits of the same (such as photographic memory and technological expertise), leaving the reader wondering if he has done justice to the trope of Asperger Syndrome. After Larsson’s untimely death, John Henri Holmberg, his friend is reported to have mentioned that Larsson initially did have the plan of an Asperger heroine, but:

Gradually reached the conclusion that Lisbeth would be a stronger character if allowed simply to be totally self-sufficient but with no ‘mental problems’. This would make her into a heroine and possible role model, not an ‘unfortunate’ towards whom at least the Swedish readers would automatically feel pity.” (Thatcher, 2011)

According to Holmberg, thinking of the books as a series caused Larsson to rethink several initial assumptions, including the possibility of Lisbeth and Asperger’s. Unfortunately, this ease of transition of a disability percolating into fictional texts leaves behind in its wake, a cultural spectacle and a distorted perception of disability.

Contemporary autism popular fiction deals with autism as a “prosthetic device” (Mitchell and Snyder 15) to enable discussions on various other issues. This paper has attempted to illustrate, through definite examples, how the multifarious significance of the medical condition of autism translated it as a representational tool on which the plot is structured. This has resulted in autism being used as a trope in quest narratives (*The Curious Incident of the Dog at Night-Time*), recovery narratives (*Daniel Isn’t Talking*), romance (*The Rosie Project*) or bildungsroman (*Broken as Things Are*), often found to extend to mystery (*House Rules*) and science fiction (*The Speed of Dark*). Evidently, the writers keep in mind the public taste and deem autism a suitable material as it provides a scientific explanation for the characters' discrepancies. Confabulating the experiences of a person on the spectrum leads to massive misrepresentations. What is agreeable is the stretching of the limits of narration to accommodate the autistic persona. What is disagreeable is the politics of signification in delimiting and fixing the autistic into known stereotypes. Often seen is that the limits of their identity are not just fixed by their physical conditions (lack of eye contact, lack of coordination, stimming) or economic conditions (dependent on parents or siblings) but circle the stereotypes of an autistic person as an alien or a prodigy or as an epitome of violence.

The texts analysed in the study are seen to reiterate the cultural stereotypes of autism implicitly. Haddon’s Christopher is a mathematical prodigy, Picoult’s Jacob is an expert on crime fiction and Larsson’s Salander is an unparalleled computer hacker. The writers, through situational proximity, at best refer to an Asperger as uncontrollable in his anger while having a meltdown (as in Haddon’s Christopher), or at worst, refer to an Asperger as a gruesome sadistic murderer (as in Picoult’s Jacob). It is noticeable that the trope of violence is never far in autism fiction, be it thrillers, mysteries or family sagas. The lack of belonging to a society that does not understand them extends the trope of alienation in each text mentioned.

Autism popular fiction generates less negative affect on an autistic person. Haddon's Christopher solves the mystery of who killed Wellington and proudly clears the difficult Mathematics A level exam. Picoult's Jacob is supported by an understanding family. This wholesome demeanour transferred intermittently through the text of a possible near-normal life for the person on the spectrum, is directly in contrast to the earlier depictions, which tend to circumscribe the autistic as useless or dysfunctional.

To Colin Barnes in *Disabling Imagery and the Media: An Exploration of the Principles for Media Representations of Disabled People*, disability is a “complex system of social constraints imposed on disabled people by a highly discriminatory society” (5). Quite often, these constraints not only include hostile authorities, unsympathetic systems or inhospitable societal rules but also the stigmatization due to the cultural stereotyping that has been associated with autism as a disability. Autism popular fiction, despite the disparity in the age of the narratorial voice, unanimously attempts to pronounce these difficulties that arise in the life of a person on the spectrum. Hence when Moon's Lou or Jacob's Emma critique the inconsiderate power structures that refuse to bend to accommodate the person on the spectrum, it also presents to the readers an unmasked plea for inclusive systems.

As Majia Holmer Nadesan rightfully points out, the influx of autism into fiction in the late twentieth century has consequently marked a change in societal perspectives (*Constructing Autism* 13). In comparison to the practised silences of classical autism fiction (*The Fifth Child* or *Shame*, where the voice of the subaltern is isolated and not deemed relevant to the text), much has changed in autism popular fiction. A deliberate attempt has been made to give voice to the person on the spectrum. By giving young Christopher a chance to speak for himself, the writer challenges the silence that conventionally surrounds the autistic person. Salandar's transition from the harassed victim to the feared, Jacob's and Christopher's symbolic journey in proving themselves to those around them, also underlines this paradigm shift in perspectives. By being given a chance to speak within the text, the subaltern can be interpreted as the writer's attempt to give voice to the voiceless. Though the extent of an honest representation is questionable, and though the politics of significations abound, it has to be noted that autism popular fictional texts critique conventional depictions of autism. No longer is the representation of the autistic subaltern as one who is devoid of consciousness, and no longer are they without an ability to speak for themselves.

Conventionally, suppose a narrative holds within itself a story to be communicated. In that case, it also presupposes the writer's/speaker's position of knowing the subject he is speaking upon. In a disability narrative, this assumption process is taken for granted by the reader that the speaker knows in depth about the particular disability he is speaking about. The discursive construction of the autistic subject as the speaker in popular fiction thus bestows seeming legitimacy to the narratorial voice. This, depending on the politics of signification of the writer, proves decisive to the transference of truthful and spurious notions of disability. Hence, even while first-person autistic narratives such as Christopher's, Jacob's or Lou's are applauded, it also needs to be remembered that such depictions can cause room for distortions.

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