

Literary and Cultural Disability Studies: An Exploration
Prof. Hemachandran Karah
Department of Humanities and Social Sciences
Indian Institute of Technology - Madras

Lecture – 25
The Most Popular Story of Christopher Boone,
A Fictional Aspergic Detective

Good afternoon, everyone. Today we are going to talk about a fantastic novel by Mark Haddon, *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time*. It is a great novel. It is a wonderful literary masterpiece and why it should interest us is because the protagonist of the novel Christopher Boone, a 15-year-old boy is autistic, Asperger's Syndrome in particular. Although the novel does not talk about it, name the condition; well the readers know it.

How do the readers know that is the point of this talk. So, the lecture is called “Witnessing Christopher Boone, witnessing autism, readers journey via the *Curious Incident of Dog in the Night-Time* by Mark Haddon.” Why do I call it witnessing and what is witnessing? Well, witnessing is not voyeurism. Voyeurism is kind of a peep show undesirable or peeping into somebody else's private affair and that could be an act of intimacy and many more. Observation; well a journalist observes society, a scientist observes a microbe that kind of thing where you get to see things with some objectivity in place. Darshan, it is not darshan; well the darshan is kind of looking mediated by bhakti or devotion. It is not gazing or staring. Then what else is? It is a kind of a personal touch with an event with a moral connection to the subject.

So, in some sense readers who will read the novel become hooked to the novel as though they were witnesses to Christopher's trials, tribulations and the way he navigates society. Alright, what is the story? Let us start that storyline. Christopher Boone is roughly 15-year-old when the story happens. His father Ed. He lives with his father Ed. His mom Judy is no more with him, but he has been told by his dad that his mom is dead by heart condition but that is a lie. So, Christopher knows it later on, but right now that is not the point. So, he grows up. He lives with his dad Ed. And one day he finds Wellington, his favourite dog in the neighbourhood. But when he finds Wellington, he is dead, speared by a garden fork like this and he is shocked, deeply

saddened and then he tries to remove the fork from the slit body. Then Mrs Shears, the landlady of the house comes out and ask him to get out.

What are you doing with my dog? And Christopher is shocked by her outrage. And she complains to the police. The police appear and the police ask him too many questions. This is where things become clear. What are the things that make this narrative different? Well, the page starts appearing in prime numbers: 1, 3, 5, 7, 11 and so on, quite odd. And Christopher's narrative is about everyday life.

For example, he is still good at observing things. For example, the policeman wears a brown shoe with 60 holes in it. When he looks from the window, he could spot 5 red cars passing by, when 5 red cars go by he can proceed with the day as though nothing happened, it is a good omen. On the other hand, when yellow-coloured cars, 5 of them go, past by, then he has to be careful.

He is unable to handle language which is beyond black and white. For example, he has problems with idiomatic expressions. He cannot handle metaphors, he cannot handle lies and so on. So, those kinds of things become clear. He is fond of math and science and concrete things. Things that sound elusive, metaphorical, figurative, idiomatic; all that sound too complicated to him. Back to the story, please. So, the police come and young man what are you doing and so on. So what happened to the dog? I said, your dog is dead. I know that, pa. But when the policeman tries to touch him, he is no more able to handle that kind of touch. So, he kicks the police. So, the police take him to jail and his father gets him out. But eventually what happens is his teacher Siobham says Christopher you have an important story to tell about Wellington.

Who killed him? Why that person should kill him? What circumstances led to his killing? What is the setting of that killing and it is kind of a murder investigation you can do that and that should help you handle a novel that you always wanted to write. So, in other words, the story that henceforth goes on is all about the unravelling or unfolding of the fiction that Christopher builds by way of systematic notes and so on.

So, when Ed discovers that his son is collecting notes for an investigation of the story, he throws it away and punishes him hard. But while recovering the notes that Christopher made, he also discovers letters written by Judy to Ed; Judy, his mom. And he discovers that her signature, date of letters and all that is much past the time of death which father told him, so that means she is alive.

And Christopher confronts Ed with that information and Ed confesses that sorry, I lied to you and I am the one who killed Wellington. So, naturally, Christopher is pissed off with Ed about all these things. And he sets out on a journey to London to meet his mom Judy, who now lives with Mr Rogers. So, he goes on a lonely journey by tube, and he picks up Toby his favourite rat to be travel with him.

And the ways in which he inquires people, uses his knowledge of facts, how plain-speak helps him achieve the journey is a very interesting read here. Well, I strongly recommend that you all read this story. So, he reaches London and his mom is thrilled to see her young son, her young son returned to her and Rogers obviously does not like Christopher's intrusion, but Judy prevails. She supports her son to write the A-level exams, science exam because he is too good with math and science and so on. And toward the end of the story, Ed reconciles with his son by getting him a new puppy, a poodle. Right, so that is broadly the story. But as I told you, the novel is filled with plain speak, no metaphors, no figurative expressions. It is about being straight, it is about being descriptive.

It is becoming also factual and in some way it is about the facticity of our expressions, about figurativeness of our expression, that binary comes across very well in the narrative. So in some sense, the narrative forces the readers to become a witness to someone who can organize his social life, his mind, his mind cultures, his youthfulness, his study and so on in a very different way.

Alright, so what are the building blocks of such a witnessing? For a nuanced and at the same time very useful critique or review of what is autism, I would recommend you read the book "Autism" that is the name of the book by Stuart Murray. I strongly recommend the book because

it gives the medical condition, the details of the clinical condition of autism. That is the medical knowledge we have until now.

And then medical knowledge could be what is genetics say about autism. What is brain scanning technologies say about autism? For example, Stuart Murray goes on to say medical technologies such as scanning and other technologies have become more reliable than speculative stories that for example talk about the psychogenic origins of autism. So, medical technologies for example would imagine autism as a condition disorder or disease.

No matter there is enough evidence to say that the brain structure of children with autism, they are different. There are some distinct markers, but medical sciences also come close to saying, well there may be distinct markers, but they are not the final proof of the pudding. There is no way we are, we are not yet there to say. Because a brain structure is like this here, it does not mean that person you can declare that certain percentage of autism can be traced to that different.

No, we are not yet there. But Stuart Murray does not stop by criticizing medicine, it just states things as they are. And he goes on to give a sociological, psychological, cultural understanding of autism, even about historical, prehistorical, modern, postmodern interpretations of autism. So, therefore I recommend that. Coming back to the building blocks of the readership, now that we are told an interesting story by Haddon, we also go to the book.

First of all, Haddon has some building blocks. What should be an autistic novel look like? That is the heart of the question that I am raising now. What should a Dalit novel look like? What should be an autistic novel look like? What should be a black fiction look like? So, there are many building blocks that say well, they may look like these A, B, C, D, E, F building blocks. I am sort of running through those building blocks.

One, the building block is medicine. Well, the novel says here is a guy who thinks differently, he cannot lie. He can be jammed by too much information. So, therefore his mind that is hosted by him is different that is the first building block. The second building block is sort of built when

there is an encounter. When there are two people coming together; in this case Christopher Boone and you or me the reader.

When two people come together, one assumes that one is not autistic that is the reader, the other is obviously autistic. And that encounter, that point of conversation, readerly conversation if you like to witness is actually that block that conversational space between two people, two adults, well even nonadults. That model is also given by a person from the 1930s and 40s, Simon Baron-Cohen, let us call him Baron Cohen, a psychiatrist who developed an interesting conversational method or interview method for parents, the larger public, doctors, specialists and non-specialists to know for sure in some way that this person whom you are examining should be having autism of some kind. So, these are the questions that he would ask the specialist interviewers to look for, this is the advice.

Have they found it difficult to make and keep friends? They mean autistic people. Do they show a lack of normal social awareness? Does the person have trouble understanding nonliteral language such as humour, sarcasm, irony and metaphor? Does the person frequently say as well as do the wrong things in a social situation committing faux pas? Do they resist changes? The list goes on okay, but you get the point.

So, in a way, the way the novel moves on and the way the reader like me move on with this novel, somehow these questions come lingering by within the readerly bubble that the novel creates and also the minds of the readers, the cultural minds. By the way, the mind is not software written on the hardware called the brain, it is much more than that. It is spilt or connected in many directions.

For example, as a teacher my mind is shaped by my students, a child's mind is shaped by her mom, for a person who is browsing on net mind is shaped by a network of connectivities on the server and across servers that are spread around, dispersed across the cloud, across cultures and so on. So the mind is not simple stuff written on the brain and the brain is not just the stuff residing in a container there, alright.

So having said that these questions rhetorically make up our conversation, journey, and witness of Christopher's own investigations and his own conversations. Alright, what are the next building blocks? The next building blocks are the contemporary Bibles of mental health, the DSM, Diagnostic and Statistical Manual harnessed by the American psychiatry Association and the ICD, International Classification of Diseases from WHO and so on.

No matter what is your ideological orientation, your approach, you end up in these places or you end up defending, refuting, rejecting, mediating, whatever these twin Bibles of contemporary mental health say. So, that is the third building block. And the one that fourth I would say is about the notion that autism as a human condition is set by differences in communication, imagination and social interaction

So, no matter whether you call it disorder or disease, you see some deviance, differences and the way it is moving differently. So, if you want to call it an Aspergic novel in particular or autism novel in general, you end up saying well the communication system navigated by Boone Christopher is different. For example, he does not like to be hugged; my imagination is mathematical, concrete.

It involves ordering things, it does not involve elusive things such as metaphor. And social interaction is too orchestrated, it is not fluid. Oh, yeah, we like, fluid metaphor because that is how we like to think about social science thinking. But here is a chap whose social interaction is solid, rigid, predictable if you like. So, we end up either saying no or yes to this, but nevertheless, these building blocks still exist.

There is one more variant of the building block, which is very you can call it funny, but it does exist. Think about Christopher as a male protagonist. Well, we know that he is a boy, but think about him as a male protagonist with extreme intelligence, high acumen, mathematical acumen, scientific rigour, logic and systemic thinking, Well, did we not say all these things for centuries that women have emotional quotient?

They are from Venus and men are from Mars with logic, systemic thinking, mathematical precision, and mindful society-building and so on. Well, that is exactly Hans Asperger on whom the condition Asperger's Syndrome whoops name. Exactly he said that autistic personality is kind of an extreme variant of male intelligence. So, this building block also exists to form our readerly witnessing of the norm.

So, with extreme male intelligence, we sort of unconsciously and using the Freudian terms here unconsciously put in order extremely male, intelligent males like Einstein, Wittgenstein, Srinivasa Ramanujan, Mozart, and Christopher Boone, our fictional hero sitting in my Kindle. Alright, so again this system also troubles us and it sort of continues to inform us and if you like these male characters are withdrawn.

They do not have a love life or they are not capable of that. They are egocentric, full of themselves, they host autism. Well, I am blind, but I do not host blind. You have to understand the difference. I cannot see, but I do not host non-seeingness. But here in an act of readerly witnessing, we also unwittingly get into a framework where we are conditioned to think. Well, he is doing despite himself.

Somehow his body-mind, body-mind without space or slash somehow his muscle memory, somehow his habits are hosted by the I, hosted by the person, they somehow reside inside and that is our readerly conversation with Christopher. The final building block, I am afraid it has to do with parent blaming. Let me try reading out that section for you. This Leo Kanner, who among others helped you name the condition.

He said one of the facts stands out predominantly, in the whole group there are few really warm-hearted fathers and mothers. For the most part, the parents, grandparents and collaterals are a person strongly preoccupied with the abstraction of a scientific, literary or artistic nature, and limited in genuine interest in people, even some of the happiest marriages are rather cold and formal affairs. Three of the marriages were dismal failures.

Well, Kanner comes in the 1940s. We still say well his condition or her condition when talking about children, say that his cold or her cold mom did something during pregnancy or ate something during pregnancy that led to the condition or the way they have raised their children because that is why he is withdrawn. After all, her parents are useless people, they have withdrawn themselves, you can reflect such.

So, Kanner comes with the notion of refrigerator mother, a notorious notion which says, cold parenting will lead to cold children who are withdrawn. And there is enough flawed evidence in a novel that talks about marital discord and its impact on Christopher and so on. What is the point? The point is not to say that had not he is a useless writer who gave into building blocks, not at all, I started by saying it is a masterpiece.

I am only saying here that some of the building blocks drive the plot, the story as much as we connect with it. That said conclusion, what is the idea? Autism is a special ability. It is also a condition. It is also a challenge, a point of suffering and all rolled together. Parents, children' caregivers, people who have autism navigate through that bundle carefully. If somebody is a mathematical genius that is human too.

And if somebody is unable to handle metaphors that is a human condition too. So mathematical genius that renders prominent by autism is celebrated on TV channels, but on the other hand, somebody's incapacity to handle metaphors is not understood properly. So, it is time that we see autism in terms of the value bundle that it comes with.

A term such as neurodiversity is very useful in navigating the space created by the readerly space, the cultural space created by autism and that is the point of the next lecture, which is on the politics of bestsellers and neurodiversity, neurotypicality and so on. Thank you.