

Literary and Cultural Disability Studies: An Exploration
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Lecture – 26
Neurotypicality, Yet Another Catchment Area of the Bestsellers

Good afternoon all of you. This is the second lecture on Christopher Boone and our connect with him. I call this lecture ‘Neurotypicality, yet another catchment area of the bestsellers’. It is indeed a bestseller. How much? It sold 12 million copies and was translated to 36 languages, that is monumental!

I am not really going to say that all these 12 million people are ableists or that they are negative in mindset and all that; that is not at all true. But as I said in the previous lecture, we are going to analyze some of the building blocks of this catchment area of the bestseller. So what is neurotypicality? I would refer you to this wonderful book called ‘Divergent Mind: Thriving in a World That Wasn't Designed for You’ by Jenara Nerenberg. I found this book fantastic for many reasons. One, it gives so much energy and empowerment to people who read it, particularly women. And second, it is a great read. I picked up the e-book and could not stop; I read 3 full chapters without a pause. I am going to borrow many concepts about neurotypicality from this book. Before we get into neurotypicality, let us ask: why that concept at all?

Well, if anything is true about the human condition, one is vulnerability and the second is diversity. These are the only two factors that appear universal. So far in our course and beyond, through many identity based studies and so on, we understand diversity. But those diversities are based on external markers, maybe based on my physical disability, race while some are cultural such as caste and so on.

But there are many invisible diversities. Maybe one of you is sensitive, one of you is emotionally diverse -you can switch over to many emotions very quickly. One of you is acutely empathetic. Maybe one of you is very focused. One of you is quickly irritated. One of you is good at math and one of you may be good at fiction or painting. In our brains, we host inner worlds, or our

interiorities are very diverse. And understanding them is a great task, and understanding that diversity of the inner worlds is becoming a very important discourse these days, thanks to grassroots activism, literary activism, parental activism and so on. So, that activism you can call neurodiversity. Why 'neuro'? Well, acknowledging that our biologies are brute facts. On top of that, the way our brute and crude biologies interact with our social systems is also equally important.

Do you remember the medical model of disability? There are two views broadly about the medical model. One is that someone's condition is reduced to a word: Hem (the speaker), your condition is 'blind' - a five-letter word; and that is it, that is one view. The other view is innumerable ideologies that work around that condition. So, both can be accommodated into the medical model. Here, when people say neurodiversity, they have different makeups of the mind in place. And that different makeups have to be recognized as diversity rather than calling something normal or abnormal. Silberman's book, 'NeuroTribes' is very good in this regard. I also refer you to that. It is very good to understand this phenomenon.

This neurodiversity - the way we recognize diversity of the inner worlds - is also gender specific. You would readily notice how our notion of motherhood and fatherhood is wired in our society; father is strict and disciplined or strict disciplinarian, and mom is a provider and she is accommodative, emotionally diverse and sensitive and so on. So, this kind of hard found notions also involve this neurodiversity phenomenon.

However, it is important to understand that neurodiversity is an activist framework and it is all about the variegatedness or diversity of the inner worlds. What kind of inner world diversity are we talking about? Since neurodiversity as a movement, as an activism, as a framework of reference, as a gestalt, is not shy of the brute fact of biology, some labels do rounds in the neurodiversity movement. For example, Jenara talks about HSP - highly sensitive person; ADHD - attention deficit hyperactivity disorder; autism or Asperger's and synesthesia and so on. It is not important that we dwell on these labels extensively, but let's take a quick look at them.

Highly sensitive person or HSP. In 1980s, Elaine Aron came up with this beautiful book 'The Highly Sensitive Person'. Literally thousands of women suddenly felt, "I am always called sensitive, emotionally reactive and maybe I am called weak". So, suddenly many women felt this book exactly describes their condition; cultural condition, social condition, intimate condition, call it whatever you want. The important thing is that all of us have a different temperament. Some are highly sensitive, may be sensitive to light, sensitive to noise around, maybe sensitive to rough environments socially, sensitive to violence.

ADHD or attention deficit hyperactive disorder. People who have or who identify with this label sort of find it difficult to concentrate. They feel fidgety, maybe they feel fluctuating frequently.

Autism or Asperger's. Among other stereotypes, autism and Asperger's is about communication and social conformity problem. Synesthesia, where information meant to stimulate one of your senses stimulates several of your senses; for example, the sense of touch getting activated for sense connected to seeing, or certain kinds of food invoking intense visual images. Some synesthetes are very sensitive to pain of other. For example, if somebody cut their hand by accident, immediately a synesthete would feel the pain in her hand; this is true, this can happen.

So am I trying to put people into baskets of labels? No. It is about recognizing the diversity of human expressions. So, therefore using these labels beyond biological marker (or including the biological marker), neurodiversity activists keep going to talk about people's sensitivity, people's sense of interiority, people's sense of thought, emotion, reactivity, composure, withdrawal, focusing or not focusing, or just withdrawing into the dark room, being anxious and so on. People recognize that as diversity of approaches to everyday life. It is not just identity markers. It is about, "...my everyday life is different. I feel different in different situations. Do not suppress me for that. Nothing about us without us". This is the activist approach to neurodiversity. In fact, neurodiversity movement is not just a noise makeup, it is about making business possible, making classrooms possible, making families possible. It is about how to accommodate differences; how to peruse and make advantage human diversity if you like. So, therefore they take people like Jenara take language seriously and so on.

Why do I talk about all these things? In simple words, neurotypicality will involve nonrecognition of this diversity of the inner worlds or the inner worlds that impinge on the external worlds. It is a kind of cerebral parochialism. What does that mean? In practical terms saying that you need to have a particular emotion in a particular place, you need to have a particular amount of speech in a given situation, you need to have a particular amount of rationality to read this particular kind of book, as a teenager, you must do this and you must not do that, etc. It is about 'must and must not', 'do and do not'. It is a kind of life led by parochialism, replete with commandments about what to do and what not to do. Alright, that is neurotypical. So, when I come up with the topic 'Neurotypicality, yet another catchment area of the bestseller', I basically mean how that parochialism is in some sense made use of by this book or how that parochialism is challenged by this book. It is not an attempt to say this book is useless. It is about saying how it navigates that space. And therefore, one of the contentions is that all of us are so emotionally bound by this notion of rationality, notion of 'how to be' and 'how not to be' in a particular situation. Many of us are emotionally invested in that rigidity, in that parochialism. And the attempt is also about how this book navigates that neurotypicality? Since it does, it becomes a bestseller - that is the central point of this talk.

Let us see how. To give a flavor of this excellent literary masterpiece, I strongly recommend that all of you read the book and if you are familiar and have read the book hundred times, read it once more. It is a beautiful book. I am reading an excerpt for you from the book. It starts at page 11. (As I said in the previous talk, the book has odd numbers as page numbers: 9, 11, 13, 15, 17, and so on, again illustrating Christopher's mind). By the way, one more reason why it sort of became an authentic autoethnographic voice is because of this first person narrative. In some way, one may mistake this novel to be autobiographical because that is how it is written and that is one more reason why you can have some kind of affective witness to a teenager growing up.

Let me read the excerpt for you. Page 11; *"Then the police arrived. I like the police. They have uniforms and numbers. You know what they are meant to be doing? There was a police woman and a policeman. The police woman had a little hole in her tights on her left ankle and a red scratch in the middle of the hole. (Look at the details!). The policeman had a big orange leaf stuck to the bottom of his shoe, which was poking out from one side. The police woman put her*

arms round Mrs. Shears and led her back toward the house. (Mrs. Shears is the landlady whose garden Wellington is lying dead). I lifted my head off the grass. The policeman squatted down beside me and said, "Would you like to tell me what is going on here young man?" I sat up and said, "the dog is dead". "I got that far", he said. I said, "I think someone killed the dog". "How old are you?", he asked. I replied, "I am 15 years, 3 months and 2 days". (Would you have replied in a similar way or not? I am reading his reply.). "And what precisely were you doing in the garden?", he asked. "I was holding the dog", I replied. "And why were you holding the dog?", he asked. This was a difficult question. It was something I wanted to do, I like dogs. It made me sad to see that the dog was dead. I like policemen too. And I wanted to answer the question properly, but the policeman did not give me enough time to work out the correct answer. "Why were you holding the dog?", he asked again. "I like dogs", I said. "Did you kill the dog?", he asked. I said I did not kill the dog. "Is this your fork?", he asked, referring to the garden fork. I said no. "You seem very upset about this", he said. He was asking too many questions and he was asking them too quickly. They were stacking up in my head like loaves in the factory where uncle Terry works. (Observe that observation okay, 'like loaves in the factory'). The factory is a bakery and he operates the slicing machines and sometimes a slicer is not working fast enough, but the bread keeps coming and there is a blockage. I sometimes think of my mind as a machine, but not always as a bread slicing machine. It makes it easier to explain to other people what is going on inside it.

What do you think about this excerpt? Do too many questions upset him? He says that when too many questions come, he feels like bread loaves from a machine that is clogging the way. This novel in some sense, auto-ethnographically through Christopher, walks us through that mind which is different; that mind which can process very quickly the picture of a policeman's shoes, but he cannot process words that seemed to be coming very quickly. I said in my previous conversation about his rare mathematical abilities and so on. Anyway, these are very stereotypical descriptions about Asperger's and autism and so on. And this novel writes itself into that cultural legacy, there is no doubt, but there is a lot going on. Lots of movies, My Name Is Khan and many others do portray Aspergers without empathy, but you find Christopher defining empathy differently.

In fact here, it is the police and other systems around him who do not have empathy, who do not imagine that the police are not trained to understand that investigation will involve different minds that react differently. When you keep poking someone very hard, that person gets clogged; and that can happen to all of us and it can happen to some people more naturally because their brute fact of biology and their situation in the society are designed that way.

One witnesses to such fine excerpts and many parochialisms of that kind and that is why that becomes a new catchment area of the bestseller. To elucidate that point let me borrow from Stanley Fish who talks about affective poetics. So, the catchment area of this bestseller is kind of made by an interesting combination of affective poetics and neurotypicality. Stanley Fish, one of the greatest critiques about reader's response criticism, proposes 'to relocate meaning in the reader by replacing the illusory objectivity of the text with the experience of a reading subject. He claims that a sentence is an event, something that happens with the participation of the reader. And it is this event, this happening, all of it and not anything that could be said about it or any information one might take away from it that is the meaning of the sentence'.

Alright, in simple words, what he is saying is that the act of reading or that which goes on in the reader's mind or reader's affective universe that is emotions, that decides the density of readership. We are all invested in one. For example, ableism; I can speak very well; I can think very well; I organize things, my day, my classroom and all that. In some sense, unabashedly we are all. But the point is if somebody struggles in that everyday management (like Christopher), then we become curious readers. Some kind of ableism in operation makes that affective poetics or affective bonding with Christopher Boone possible.

The second notion is aesthetic nervousness. I think you heard my conversation with Professor Quayson. There is this permanent battle going on in readerly attitude or readership; and also in the production and dissemination of literary pieces that involve disabled people or people who think and look differently. And what is that? How to represent them? How much of Christopher's autistic tendency I should show? Whether I should show Christopher's autism and its idiosyncrasies at all and in what form of proportion? It all leads to a crisis of representation, multiplied in the text and that representational conflict is something readers take to the book

affectively and emotionally when they witness or take on board people who feel and look differently. In this case, the reader's affective bonding with Boone comes from that fact.

I would call the third affective bonding with Boone that made it a bestseller as inner symptoms problem. For example, you go to a film involving a blind hero, then you look for his private life or her private life with the way she behaves with people, maybe how she conducts herself with a mobility cane or how he handles difficult circumstances involving villains and so on. So, the blindness of that person, the effect of blindness on his interiority is measured by the symptoms, symptomatic behaviors that the hero comes up with. Again, this book is very good because it walks through the inner life of the teenager who is growing up, who says 'my mind is like a slicer machine. Sometimes, when people throw up too many things on me, the sensitive person in me animates and I somehow clog and lie down. I withdraw, I cannot react'. Instead of saying Christopher could not bear police investigation and he fell down, the book walks you through that metaphorical representation about his sensitive inner mind that now feels to the teenager like a slicer machine of uncle Terry. What more does the reader want as a witness to such an autoethnographic read? It is very beautiful.

You have many more anecdotes like this and I bet you will enjoy them. The next possible thing that makes it a bestseller in that way is the binary view of the mind; good and bad mind, divine an evil mind, intelligent and foolish mind, clay-headed versus razor sharp mind and so on. There are billions of binaries like that across cultures. And after all, it is translated in 36 languages!

So, therefore the binary complex - structural binaries of that we have made about ourselves, our capacities and our mind - should have played into it; I say 'should have', I have not tested it.

Conclusion: Neurodiversity as a movement and as a grassroots activist framework, as a cluster of philosophical frameworks give us an opportunity to understand that neurotypicality can also be an effective bonding principle between readers and the text. And I wanted to try illustrating that through our connect with Christopher Boone. There are many other ways of doing it, I hope we will explore it in our own respective ways. Thank you so much.