

ASPERGER'S FROM AN INSIDER'S PERSPECTIVE: A STUDY OF JOHN ELDER ROBISON'S LOOK ME IN THE EYE

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Abstract

People with Asperger's are regarded as abnormal by the normal people and many negative labels are attached to them. Even, in the literature written by non-Aspergian writers, they are misrepresented and occupy marginalised position. Further, their views on Asperger's serve as an outsider's perspective thus, offering an incomplete picture of Asperger's Syndrome. The present paper attempts to study John E. Robison's memoir *Look Me in the Eye* (2007) as it provides an authentic account of Asperger's from an insider's perspective. As a child with Asperger's, Robison's behaviour was always misinterpreted and he, even, felt excluded in social situations due to his inability to communicate effectively. While analysing the memoir, the disability theorist, Lennard J. Davis's concept of 'norm' has been taken into consideration. In a society governed by norms, people who slightly deviate from the existing norms are treated as disabled, deviant or abnormal. Due to his unusual behaviour, Robison became victim at the hands of the society. His behaviour was seen as deviation from the norm. The paper concludes that people with Asperger's have same desires, needs and aspirations as other normal individuals. It further concludes that Asperger's is not an inability and people with this particular disability can succeed in their life. The paper suggests that society should change its negative attitude towards people with Asperger's Syndrome. It further suggests that society should have friendly attitude towards them so that they can function properly in the mainstream society.

Keywords: *Asperger's, Norm, Inability, Communication, Behaviour, Excluded, Social Situations, Disability.*

Many discourses exist related to Asperger Syndrome (AS) from the point of view of those who do not have this condition. But very little has been written on Asperger's from an insider's perspective. Aspergian people are mostly described through the eyes of non-Aspergian people and as a result, they are often misrepresented. Such misrepresentations also contribute towards oppressive and discriminatory attitude towards them. To counter such misrepresentations, the Aspergians have started articulating their personal experiences through memoir writing. Thomas G. Couser, a disability theorist in his book *Memoir: An Introduction* (2012) regards the writings by the people with intellectual disabilities as one of the significant developments in the "memoir boom" as they are considered incapable of articulating their experiences. He writes:

Narratives of cognitive disability are still quite rare, but narratives of autistic spectrum disorders (which I'll refer to as autism for short), have been published in large numbers. Indeed they are so common that they have been given their own name: autiebiography. This phenomenon is significant for two reasons. First, at one time autism was represented in life writing exclusively in parental memoirs. . . Such memoirs continue to be produced, but they are now complemented by a wave of narratives issuing from people with autism. (151-52)

According to Couser, people, with autism spectrum disorders have started to describe about their experiences through memoir writing in order to counter the traditional misrepresentation. The memoirs written by people with Asperger's provide their personal experiences of living with this particular learning disability. The paper attempts to study Robison's memoir *Look Me in the Eye* (2007) in order to understand Asperger's from an insider's perspective. Through the memoir, Robison brings out his own personal reflections on Asperger's, thus countering the traditional misrepresentations by claiming his Aspergian identity as an affirmative one.

Asperger Syndrome (AS), also called as Asperger's is a Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) that affects communication and socialization skills. People with Asperger Syndrome (AS) have difficulty in reading social cues that make it difficult for them to interact with others. It is named after an Austrian psychiatrist and

paediatrician Hans Asperger who observed Autism like behaviour in boys who possessed normal intelligence and language development. Many professionals believe that Asperger's is a milder form of Autism and use the term "high-functioning autism" to describe these individuals. Further, individuals with this particular learning disability often possess average or above average intelligence. In his book *A Complete Guide to Asperger's Syndrome* (2007) Tony Attwood, a British psychologist describes this condition as:

A lack of social understanding, limited ability to have a reciprocal conversation and an intense interest in a particular subject are the core features of this syndrome. Perhaps the simplest way to understand Asperger's syndrome is to think of it as describing someone who perceives and thinks about the world differently to other people. (12)

In contemporary literature, memoirs have become increasingly popular to describe and represent oneself. To challenge the various misconceptions and misrepresentations, disabled writers have started articulating their experiences through memoir writing. The word 'memoir' is derived from the French word 'memoire' meaning memory or reminiscence. A memoir is a subgenre of autobiography/biography that deals with a particular period in someone's life. It is usually written on a specific theme. It is different from autobiography. An autobiography covers the whole life of a person whereas a memoir deals with a particular time in someone's life. A memoir follows a proper narrative structure, focus as well as subject matter.

John Elder Robison was born in Athens, Georgia, on August 13, 1957. He was encouraged by his younger brother Augusten Burroughs to write about his experiences and challenges that he faced due to Asperger's. So, in the year 2007, his memoir *Look Me in the Eye* got published which chronicles his day to day struggles with Asperger's. Robison's memoir *Look Me in the Eye* (2007) provides an authentic account of what it means to live with Asperger's in a country like America that attaches too much importance to ability. Robison's memoir serves as a counter discourse to the traditional discourses that construct Asperger's in negative terms and thus breaks the various misconceptions related to Asperger's by offering his own insights on this particular syndrome. In the memoir, Robison describes Asperger's as "... not a disease. It's a way of being. There is no cure, nor is there a need for one" (6). He writes that his Asperger's has made him an expert in every field that has attracted his attention. His Asperger's has bestowed rare gifts upon him. He further adds that many Aspergian children grow up to be brilliant engineers and scientists. Asperger's is a spectrum disorder and people having it experience it differently. Julie Brown, a Professor of Literature and Writing in her book *Writers on the Spectrum* (2010) maintains that people having Asperger's Syndrome experience it differently but there are certain characteristics that are common in all as she writes, "No two people with Asperger's Syndrome experience it in the same way, but there are many traits that most of the individuals share in common" (13).

Robison recalls that being an Aspergian, he could not make eye contact with others and as a result, he had to hear from the people the phrase "Look Me in the Eye." He heard the phrase frequently from his parents, relatives, teachers, school principal and other people and gradually he began to expect this phrase from the people he came in contact with. His teachers got irritated with him when he did not make eye contact and sometimes he received a beating from them. He was regarded as a deviant when he failed to have eye contact with others. He writes, "The teachers would say, 'Look at me when I'm speaking to you!' I would squirm and continue looking at the floor, which would just make them madder. I would glance up at their hostile faces and feel squirmier and more uncomfortable and unable to form words, and I would quickly look away" (1). According to him, he felt perfectly normal when he did not make eye contact but people regarded his lack of eye contact as a deviant response. In his essay "Constructing normalcy" Lennard J. Davis discusses that "with the concept of norm came the concept of deviations or extremes" (6). He further writes that "in a society where the concept of norm is operative, then people with disabilities will be thought of deviants" (6). According to Davis, who fails to fit into the norm of the society is seen as a deviant. So, being disabled in making eye contact with people, he was seen as a deviant because maintaining eye contact while conversing with others is the norm of the society. So, lack of eye contact made him the victim of the society.

Robison was regarded as a bad child and could not understand why people felt agitated when he failed to make eye-contact with them. People looked down upon him and some of them even went to the extent of calling him 'criminal.' People around him who felt that they understood him fully came up with the conclusion that he was up to something as he was always a failure at making eye contact with others. According to people, he was not normal. Further, they equated his behaviour with a 'sociopath' and 'psychopath.' Robison writes: "'Sociopath' and 'psycho' were the two most common fields of diagnosis for my look and expression. I heard it all the time: 'I've read about people like you. They have no expression because they have no feeling. Some of the worst murderers in history were sociopaths'" (2). People also regarded him untrustworthy because of his failure to make eye contact with them. As he failed to behave according to the norms set by society, he became their target. Every society has set some rules or norms and individuals are expected to behave according to those norms. Those who fail to act according to those norms are treated negatively. Lennard J. Davis in his essay "Constructing Normalcy" writes, "... the 'problem' is not the person with disabilities; the problem is the way that normalcy is constructed to create the 'problem' of the disabled person" (3). According to him, the problem is the way the society builds the meaning of 'normal' in terms of behaviour, bodily functions and appearance and those who fail to meet the standards set by society are seen as 'abnormal.' Robison became the victim of the society because he failed to meet the standard set by the society. So, Robison's disability was not the problem but the norms set by

the society that he was expected to follow. At home, even his father felt agitated when he did not make eye contact with him. Luckily, sometimes his mother would come to his rescue but at other times he became victim at the hands of his father. So, his inability to make eye contact with others made him victim both at home and society. It was believed that he had some dark intentions to carry on.

In the memoir *Look Me in the Eye*, Robison writes that during 1960's, Asperger's Syndrome did not exist at all. The non-existence of Asperger's during his childhood added to all his miseries as people treated him inferior. The worst part of Robison's life was that not even a single medical professional mentioned that he might be suffering from Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) which existed during 1960s. The professionals usually misinterpreted his problems as laziness and hence no solution was offered for his problems. As a result, he became the victim of both medical practitioners and the ableist society. Stuart Murray, an expert in the field of critical disability studies in his book *Representing Autism* states that due to the invisible nature of their disability, people with Asperger's suffer a lot at the hands of medical professionals and society. He writes, "The history of abuse of those with disabilities is real and painful. Autism, because of its seeming 'invisibility' and its manifestations in terms of behaviour, has had more than its fair share of examples of such abuse, often emanating from sources of medical or social power" (17). Robison always wanted to make more friends in his neighbourhood and school but due to his unusual behaviour, he was always rejected by his peers. He desired that children would like him but when they resisted him, he was greatly hurt and became more withdrawn. Tony Atwood in his essay titled "Diagnosis in adults" stresses that people with Asperger's place great importance to friendship and being unable to succeed in some areas lead to internalisation in them. As a result, they begin to see themselves as inferior and hence alienate themselves from others. He writes, "Social ability and friendship skills are highly valued by peers and adults, and not being successful in these areas can lead some people with Asperger syndrome to internalise their thoughts and feelings, such that they become self-critical, overly apologetic and increasingly socially withdrawn" (33).

In the memoir, Robison counters the discourse that circulates in the society that Aspergians do not want to interact with other people and prefer to play alone. As far as Robison is concerned, he never wanted to be alone. The psychologists who said that he wanted to be alone were wrong. They aggravated his problems by misdiagnosing his disability:

Many descriptions of autism and Asperger's describe people like me as "not wanting contact with others" or 'preferring to play alone.' I can't speak for other kids, but I'd like to be very clear about my own feelings: I *did not ever want to be alone*. And all those child psychologists who said 'John prefer to play by himself' were dead wrong. I played by myself because I was a failure at playing with others. (211)

Being an Aspergian child, Robison's actions were always criticized in school. Whenever teachers ridiculed him, he really felt disabled and wanted to run off from school. In school, his academic performance declined. He got F grade in almost every subject. As he failed to fit in the norms of the society, even the school wanted to get rid of him. So, he suffered because of what Lennard J Davis in his essay "Constructing Normalcy" calls "the tyranny of the norm." According to him, the binary construction of normal versus abnormal result in the "tyranny of the norm" (6). According to him, in the society governed by norms, the imperative is placed on everyone to conform to the norms. In the American society, that places too much emphasis on norm, it was expected of Robison that he should conform to the norms which was actually the "tyranny of the norm." He painfully recalls that as his behaviour was not normal, his father and teachers had a low opinion of him. But Robison remained determined to prove everybody wrong who were not able to see his special abilities:

As I moved through school as another marginal kid, my dad and my teachers started forecasting my future. They told me I would never amount to anything. They said I was headed for a career pumping gas or jail or the Army—if they would take me I was contrary and I would not apply myself.

But I'd show them. (27)

Rejected by his peers, Robison played alone with his toys. He liked playing with more complex toys. When he got his erector set, he made his first machine with it. He was more comfortable in playing with his machines as they challenged him when he tried to figure them out. They never tricked him and never hurt his feelings. Slowly, machines became his obsession. Julie Brown in his book *Writers on the Spectrum* (2010) states that people with Asperger's spend a lot of time in things which interest them. She writes:

People with Asperger's Syndrome are usually known to have a "special interest" that absorbs much of their time and attention. Everyone seems to know such a child who is obsessed by either dinosaurs or trains to the extent that he can recite every available fact on the topic and will do so, with pleasure, whether the listener is interested or not. (67)

In the memoir, Robison recalls that he faced difficulty in naming things and persons that sounded illogical to the normal people who regarded him abnormal. According to him, the names he gave to persons or things were logical. He named them according to their function and the names that best described them but that names seemed illogical to the normal people. He recalls that when his younger brother was born, he named him 'Snort' while his parents used to call his younger brother Christopher and his mother kept on telling him that his brother's name is Christopher. The name 'Snort' made no sense to her mother but as his brother was small and kept on sleeping and did not bother anybody, so he felt that it was best name that described him. He writes, "She (Robison's mother) had not yet realized that I would never call him Christopher or Chris. I didn't know it myself

at that time, but for some reason I had a hard time with names, unless I made them up” (23). When his brother grew up and began to play with Robison’s toys himself, he began to feel that he had become a nuisance. So, he decided to give a new name to him and called him ‘Varmint,’ which means a troublesome and mischievous child. Marcia Eckerd, a psychologist in her article titled “Are Asperger’s People as “Logical” as They Think?” (2018) maintains that people with Asperger’s are logical and they have strong point of view. She writes, One of the hallmarks of Asperger’s Syndrome (AS) is that individuals often have strong points of view, and they have trouble seeing other points of view as equally valid. Most see themselves as extremely logical and therefore right in their conclusions; for them, the points of view of others can seem illogical. (Web) Being Aspergian, Robison felt that he was logical in naming the persons and things. He was never bothered by others when they felt that his naming was illogical. He never changed the names even when people protested against him.

In the memoir, Robison further brings out the fact that as a logical person, he is a failure at carrying out successful conversations with others because ordinary conversations do not proceed logically. Robison writes that he has found that normal people have conversational capabilities far beyond his and their responses often have nothing at all to do with logic. According to Robison, the conversation of normal people does not follow any logic. When they meet someone they ask questions such as “How is your wife?,” “How is your son?,” “You are looking good?,” etc. He writes, “How normal people know which of these questions to ask is a mystery to me. Do they have better memory than me, or is it just luck? It must be social conditioning, something that I am completely lacking” (193). Robison adds that when he meets his friend, he is more interested in talking to him rather than talking about his wife or his son.

As he grew up, Robison began to attend shows with local bands and felt much comfortable there. He helped the bands in keeping their sound equipments going and worked hard with equipments. Further, Robison got the big opportunity when he was hired by Britannia Row Audio, formed by Pink Floyd to fix the amplifiers. Pink Floyd was the largest sound system in the world and it was known by the name of Britto in United States. He also worked with the KISS band, one of the largest bands in the world and was successful in making different types of guitar. In every show, his new innovation with the guitar was appreciated by people. As cars always attracted him finally, he quit his job in 1989 and became a car dealer. He began to buy second hand European cars, fix them and sell them. In the business he had to incur losses but he kept on motivating and reminding himself that he has to succeed. He further acknowledges that it was due to his Aspergian trait that he was able to succeed in the business of cars. As an Aspergian, he would want to know everything about the things that gained his attention. So, cars attracted him and people really praised him when he fixed them up for people.

In the memoir, Robison brings out his own understanding of Asperger’s Syndrome. He does not regard it a disability but a special ability. He even believes that Aspergians are better than normal people. Through his extraordinary journey, he proves to the world that people with Asperger’s possess special gifts and can lead successful and satisfying lives.

CONCLUSION

Robison’s memoir provides an in-depth understanding of the world of Aspergians. Through the memoir, Robison brings out a new knowledge related to Asperger’s by explaining why Aspergians act in certain way. He defends his every action in a very logical way. He counters the discourses that regard people with Asperger’s as burden, failure, criminals, and so on. Through his personal journey, he brings out the fact that Aspergians are like other normal children having same desires, feelings and aspirations. He calls himself as an “Aspergian” because he does not see his disability in negative terms. According to him, his Asperger’s is his strength. He admits that his Asperger’s has bestowed many gifts on him. He regards his Aspergian identity as a positive one. He is highly critical of society that discriminates against people with Asperger’s. His memoir provides very useful suggestions to teachers, professional and parents of children with Asperger’s so that they can better understand them and help them in leading successful lives.

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