

The Other Side of Autism: Tito Mukhopadhyay’s Short Stories

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ABSTRACT

Autism is always talked about in terms of weak cognitive abilities, mentalizing impairments, lack of social communication and other developmental disorders. This paper presents the study of the working of a mind with Autism which defies, to an extent, all the preconceived notions about autism. For this purpose, Tito Mukhopadhyay’s short stories, “Impressive People” and “The Calendar” have been taken from his short-story collection *The Gold of the Sunbeams and Other Stories*. Mukhopadhyay has severe Autism but in spite of his low-functioning Autism Spectrum Disorder, he shows extraordinary talents and these positive changes are the pain-staking results of his own and his mother’s efforts. This paper aims at bringing awareness about the deficits as well as possibilities in children with Autism.

KEYWORDS

Autism; cognitive abilities; mentalizing impairments; developmental disorders.

Intellectual disability, rarely, finds a place in Indian fiction. People are not aware of the characteristics and behavioural patterns of cognitive differences. This is one of the reasons as to why society does not have an inclusive approach toward people with intellectual disabilities. This paper is an effort to understand both the deficit and the potential of Autism in order to make the readers aware about it. For this purpose, Indian English author Tito Mukhopadhyay’s short stories have been taken up. Tito Mukhopadhyay (b. 1989) was diagnosed with low-functioning non-verbal Autism at the age of three. Autism, a neurodevelopmental disorder, is associated with difficulties in communication and socialisation. According to the classification published by the World Health Organization in 1992, a child with Autism may show a lack of

emotional response and have difficulties in developing social relationships, adjusting to social contexts, and verbal and nonverbal interactions with others. According to Leo Kanner, Autism is “the children’s inability to relate themselves in the ordinary way to people and situations from the beginning of life” (41). As a child Mukhopadhyay could not look at faces: he had difficulty recognizing faces. This paper will study the mind of such a person with Autism. The two stories: “Impressive People” and “The Calendar” have been selected so that the writer’s world of imagination and creation can be studied. It will also help the readers to know what autism is and the potentialities the mind of a person with Autism holds.

Mukhopadhyay’s *The Gold of the Sunbeams and Other Stories* (GSOS) is a collection of the workings of his imagination. These stories do not have a

plot and setting but are a presentation of the creativity and fantasies of an Autistic mind. It is a communication of a non-communicative mind with the outside world. These stories present the powerful perceptivity and analytical strength of his mind. Uri Margolin argues that the study of literature related to deviant, rare or lacking cognitive functioning minds affects readers' perceptions of the workings of their own minds (287). Understanding the processes of the mind with Autism can have significant effects on determining their educational, socio-cultural, and psychological needs. If children with the Autism spectrum are trained and well-taken care they can respond in a better way. Dr. Michael Merzenich, a neuroscientist at the University of California at San Francisco Medical School, has run extensive tests on Mukhopadhyay and reports that he unhesitatingly responds to factual questions about books that he has read or about experiences that he has had, in detail and with high fidelity. His colleague, Dr. Samuel Smithyman adds that Tito defies the predispositions about autism (Blakeslee 2). This paper will explore this side of Autism in which a child has an extraordinary talent which can be identified and can also be developed in any child with Autism if he is taken care of and trained properly.

Children with Autism may have a particular talent and skill and if that skill is honed, the child can show extraordinary results. According to a study conducted by Francesca Happe and Uta Frith, some functions in children with Autism are notably impaired but (and this is significant) others are even superior or may show peak performance (1383). Mukhopadhyay, in his short story, "The Calendar" talks about his fondness for calendars and admits that he loves reading numbers and months on the calendars. Here he fondly talks about an office described by his cousin and relates the importance of calendars with discipline

and pending works. The noticeable thing about these stories is the world of imagination of Mukhopadhyay. He has an amazing talent of imagining a different world of even non-living things and characterizing them. O'Connor suggests that:

Autism has been linked with 'islets of ability': these include good rote memory and skill at completing jigsaw puzzles as well as savant abilities in calendar calculation, drawing, music, prime number calculation, and mnemonic (qtd. in Happe and Frith 1383).

Like Mukhopadhyay, every child with Autism can be motivated to do something of his own interest.

In children with autism, lack of communication is the core deficit. Children with Autism who have language skills, still fail to communicate with it. According to Tager-Flusberg, these children have echolalia which involves delayed repetition of whole phrases or even conversation (qtd. in Happe and Frith). Mukhopadhyay's short stories show all these deficits as he uses repetition of sentences and phrases. For example, in "Impressive People", he writes, "They read and you watch. They read and you get curious. They read and you look inside your shopping basket. . . (99). In "The Calendar" he repeatedly uses, "A date calendar", "month of March" and other phrases. Mukhopadhyay has all the traits of severe Autism but the strong determined efforts of his mother and his self-motivation brought transformational changes in him. The most striking aspect of Mukhopadhyay's stories is that he talks about a variety of subjects and the reader never gets bored with his short stories because while reading the reader not only finds an opportunity to read the mind of an Autistic but also becomes aware of the workings of his/ her own mind. The creativity and imagination of

Mukhopadhyay arouse a feeling of awe in the reader.

Children with Autism can concentrate on one thing at a time. Mukhopadhyay accepts that “I can concentrate either at what I am seeing or what I am hearing or what I am smelling” (Blakeslee 4). He goes on to add that people with Autism choose one sensory channel at a time and that he prioritizes hearing (Blakeslee 4). He mentions about the conversation of people in “Impressive People” and writes about some specific sounds like “the pages of the magazine flutter” (GSOS 98), and in “The Calendar”, he writes, “The calendar page flutters in the light breeze of the ceiling fan” (GSOS 191). Mukhopadhyay here is sensible enough to perceive from his surroundings and tries to communicate his thoughts and the processing of his mind. Hence, children with Autism have the possibilities and potential to lead a meaningful life if caregivers and society shoulder their responsibility and consider them a potential part of the mainstream.

A ‘normal’ person can read the mind and facial expressions of another person. Interpreting facial expressions and body gestures is defined as ‘mentalizing’ or ‘theory of mind’ or ‘mindblindness’ (Baron-Cohen 1). However, children with Autism have difficulty in reading the minds and expressions of other people. They also find it hard to convey their ideas. These difficulties lead to problems in communicating and in the correct channelizing of their emotions. Further, it is also difficult for people with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) to identify people by their faces instead they try to remember them by their clothes or what they possess. The research and experiments of a renowned psychiatrist, Dr. David Grelotti and his team have revealed that the brain of people with ASD responds more strongly to digital characters as compared to familiar objects of faces (380). If Autism is studied through

the lens of short stories of Mukhopadhyay, it is observed that in his short Story, “Impressive People”, he does not mention the outward and visible aspects of a person but rather he narrates body gestures and what he thinks about the other person he meets in a shopping mall or at a bus stop and other places. The remarkable thing about Mukhopadhyay is that he tries to gain knowledge and inspiration from every other person. He mentions that “Who knows how many more things they will teach you?” (GSOS 99). He also reproduces a conversation of his family friends at a social function - which he happened to overhear - regarding the technical functions of the body and furthermore portrays a person in a library whose inclination for reading and searching books impressed him a lot, making him state: “I watched him with keen interest and admiration. I had never seen a live inventor or discoverer before” (GSOS 103).

However, Dr. Grelotti, also argues that people with ASD have the ability for facial recognition but tend not to use it. One of the reasons is the lack of motivation to pay attention (17). Children with Autism thus need exposure to society and their surroundings so that they can learn little by little something from every other person as well as from nature. Hence, if a child with Autism is clinically and psychologically trained and motivated, he becomes able to learn from his surroundings.

Children with Autism also show variation in memory, their capacity to retain large information and take time to remember visual or verbal information. According to neuroscientist Torkel Klingberg and his fellow researchers, called this ability as ‘working memory’ which they define as, “the ability to retain information during delay and then to make a response based on that internal representation” (550). Daily life activities with multiple steps, such as grocery shopping, looking for lost items and

staying on track in a conversation are, according to Lisa Baltruschat and others, examples of working memory (550). The representation of these traits can be seen in Mukhopadhyay's short story "The Calendar" in which he starts talking about a calendar but then jumps to other topics like inefficiencies of the working class, Mr Rampani and Mr Wasim Khan, yawns, and teatime. It seems as though these are playing with the words of a child whose world moves around certain things. The remarkable thing about Mukhopadhyay's Autism is that while writing these innocent stories he unintentionally pours out some insightful thoughts when he mentions: "The month of June thus unveiled had been there for some time, cautioning one and all not to yawn till the rainy season was there, around you, around office" (GSOS 193). In "Impressive people" he says:

Everyone has so much to learn... I needed to sit close to him so that I could get a proper look at him and get the right kind of motivation to move in life. What was a life, after all, that did not even have any motivation? (GSOS 101, 105).

These insightful thoughts are the consequence of his involvement with books. Mukhopadhyay's mother used to read him stories like Aesop's fables, Thomas Hardy's novels and complete works of Dickens and Shakespeare (Blakeslee 3). Soma Mukhopadhyay, Tito's mother, also submits in the introduction of *The Gold of the Sunbeams and Other Stories* that she detected from his reactions that he understood everything that she spoke and thus realized at his early age itself that his cognitive abilities were good (Introduction viii). This awareness is expected from every parent, and caretaker as well as society so that these children can become a productive part of society.

To conclude then, people with ASD need educational, social, psychological and clinical intervention. Fictional studies of intellectual disabilities like Autism pave

the way to a better understanding of the disorder so that necessary interventions can be made available to the person on the spectrum. Awareness about Autism can help children with ASD in leading a productive life. In the present scenario, various technologies have been developed to train these children. The need of the hour is to spread awareness in society so that the use of advanced technology and various therapies can be utilised for the betterment of children with ASD. Fiction, which can create awareness about the potentialities of intellectual disorders, narrated in a simple and easy manner which even a lay-man can understand, is the need of the hour. Tito Mukhopadhyay's efforts are extremely appreciable and his stories should reach a wide-readership.

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