



## Think India (Quarterly Journal)

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ON

**DISABILITY, REPRESENTATION AND LITERATURE**

held on 03 October 2019 and Organised by P.G. & Research Department  
of English

S. T. HINDU COLLEGE, NAGERCOIL-2, Tamilnadu, India



### **Autism and Life Writing in the Selected Works of Naoki Higashida**

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#### **Abstract:**

This paper highlights the inherent lack of empathy and the state of “mind - blindness” undergone by Naoki Higashida. Higashida’s life writing throws light on the dehumanizing current behind the scientific discourse on autism and thereby highlights the humanity of a single person’s struggle to communicate with the world around him. Higashida’s work is a collection of reflection on life and it is the most illuminating insight into the mind of an autistic person. Naoki Higashida speaks about the need for social change. He points out the need for growing empathy and communication between people with autism and the people who help and support them. Though he is almost entirely nonspeaking, Higashida writes with lyricism and astonishing sensitivity about his struggle to connect with others. Naoki Higashida through his memoir has brought out the interior experience of nonspeaking autistic person and the limits of his capabilities. It depicts the way an autistic mind thinks, feels and perceives. It helps one to understand the curious, subtle and complex life undergone by the autistic person. The insights into the mystery of words, the wonders of nature and the elusiveness of memory are so startling, strange and powerful that one will never look at the world the same way again. It also discusses the social anxieties undergone, by the autistic people. It depicts the importance of self advocacy in the lives of people with autism.

#### **Introduction**

Life writing is the recording of memories, and experiences, whether one’s own or another’s. This applies to many genres and practices, under which can be found autobiography, biography, memoir, diaries, letters, testimonies, personal essays and, more



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recently, digital forms such as blogs and email. In the last twenty - five years, there has been an explosion in the number of memoirs and autobiographical accounts of disability. The memoirs themselves contribute to the boom in life writing in which ordinary people's stories, rather than those of renowned public figures, have been written, marketed and widely consumed in far larger numbers than even before. Literary critical approach seeks to recognize the power of disability life writing as a resource or protest and or self - expression for marginalized groups, while at the same time highlighting the richness and complexity of life writing.

People are less familiar with the idea that an autism spectrum disorder (ASD), including Asperger's Syndrome can affect those who work in the humanities and liberal arts as well. Professor Michael Fitzgerald in his work *Autism and creativity* speaks about certain features of ASD, such as persistence, single - mindedness, intelligence, and non-conformity, which enhances not only the analytical process, but the creative process as well. In the work *The Genesis of Autistic Creativity* Professor Michael Fitzgerald has identified and diagnosed several writers, musicians, and artists whose neurological differences contributed to their unique ways of using language sound, and colour. Identifying talented individuals with autism in this way has been an important step in creating an awareness of "autistic culture".

This paper throws light into how people with autism perceive the world and how they perceive themselves in the world, and the ways they translate their perception into a text for various purposes of self-expression and communication. Language makes us human. By studying the writers on the spectrum and their use of language to create art, one can gain a rich source of knowledge about the human mind which converts thoughts and feelings into story.

Autism is a unique developmental disorder that is characterized by impairments in social skills, communication, thinking patterns and sensory issues. It presents itself as a spectrum, ranging from severe to very mild. Asperger's Syndrome is a diagnosis given to certain individuals who are at the higher functioning end of the spectrum who also exhibit high intelligence levels. Since writing is a process that translates one's thoughts and feelings



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onto the page, the influence of Asperger's Syndrome on that process is undeniable and expresses itself in similar ways from author to author.

Leo Kanner, the pioneering child psychiatrist first used the word 'autism' in the 1940s in a context distinct from Schizophrenia, blamed the condition in part on 'refrigerator mothers' - a notion whose public credibility now is on a par with demonic possession, but which maintains some currency in France, South Korea and among an older generation of tenured experts. The 1960s and 70s saw eminent psychiatrists advocating autism 'cures' based on electrotherapy, LSD and behavioural change techniques that utilised pain and punishment. Autism is not a disease, so there are no 'cures'.

Looking closely at the autobiographical writings of people diagnosed with autism reveals a wealth of information about an autistic writer's motivation, use of genre convention, point of view, representation of self, content selection, themes and style. An autistic autobiography occupies a unique place in literature. As an autobiography, of course, it fulfills the reader's expectations by providing a sustained narrative of the experiences of one individual based on his memories. In recent years, the autistic autobiography has become its own genre with its own set of conventions and traditions. Autism narrative is a new genre, stories about people with autism, told by the people themselves, or their families, or by novelists.

Physical or cognitive impairments are not the primary focus for the author, the author documents the everyday relationships, prejudices, friendships, legal changes and cultural representations through which a complex sense of identity is constructed and maintained in a wider social context. Life writing is needed to educate and to protest but also celebrates certain minority identities. The recent rise in disability life writing, as well as literary writing by people with disabilities allows people to tell their stories who might, until very recently, have been rendered voiceless due to nonverbal autism. Naoki Higashida's *The Reason I Jump: One Boy's Voice from the Silence of Autism*, depicts traditionally individualistic ideas about authorship and highlights the ways in which digital technologies open up the act of



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writing to a far wider section of the population making possible a new range of literary and autobiographical forms.

Higashida is a Japanese teenager with autism, and his book, *The Reason I Jump: The Inner Voices of a Thirteen Year Old Boy with Autism*, has recently captivated the attention of both academic and popular audiences. It was published in 2007 in Japan and was translated into English in 2013. Since, *The Reason I Jump* has become a New York Times bestseller, been featured on The Daily Show, and named among the best books of the year. At the time of its writing Higashida was almost entirely non verbal. He composed the text by spelling out words with the aid of a printed table for forty basic Japanese characters. The majority of the book consists of very short chapters conceived as responses to questions.

Higashida is profoundly autistic. He has a number of autistic traits: he jumps, he has meltdowns when plans go awry, he cups his ears and finds it difficult to make eye contact. Only when his family discovered that he could communicate using text, on an “alphabet grid” and, occasionally, a keyboard, the richness of his inner life became apparent to others. The novel *The Reason I Jump* is not only for those with a special interest in autism, but for anyone interested in the sheer diversity of human brains. Higashida argues that people with special needs must be encouraged to grow and develop.

Higashida’s observations are moving and thought-provoking. Higashida recalls how, as a young child he would run away, because he hated himself so much that he didn’t want anyone else even to see him. It is clear that his achievements have only been possible with the help of his family, and several of the pieces are devoted to expressing his gratitude to his mother, who emerges as the book’s heroine. One of Higashida’s most striking ideas is that there is a reason why people with autism and other special needs exist.

Naoki Higashida wants the readers to understand why he loves asking the same questions over and over again. Repeating words again and again is a fun to Higashida. It is a pleasure for Higashida to play with sound and rhythm. Through Higashida’s eyes beauty, memory, nature and the passage of time all look suddenly, strikingly different, a contribution he makes both despite and because of his clearly evident struggles.



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Higashida hopes that his writing contributes to a better public understanding of autism. Autism is still Higashida's prism and lens, the chapters add up to a kind of collage - portrait of a young man learning to coexist with a mind and body not always at his beck and call, and he carves out a niche for himself in the neurotypical world. Higashida's book shows how disability can be turned into a field of endeavour and the pursuit of a purposeful life.

Until quite recently it was said that people who have severe autism could never express themselves. So a number of people might have been surprised to see Higashida setting out his thoughts through the alphabet grid and computer. Higashida has been conveying the story of his inner life to the wider world. Higashida in his book *Fall Down 7 Times Get Up 8* speaks about his thoughts and experiences as a young man living with severe autism. The book opens with Higashida's love for his mother whom he wants to wish on the Mother's Day in the year 2011. But he couldn't thank his mother as he was autistic. "Mother's Day is supposed to be the time of year when we show our appreciation for everything our mothers, who we love, do for us. In my case, however, I'm unable to utter even a simple 'thank you'" (23). Higashida feels sad for he cannot even thank his mother for all the love and affection he has been showered by her.

According to Higashida life is still more challenging for a person with autism. He understand that he is no longer a child and he wants to achieve greater things in life as any normal person. "People with autism might need more time, but as we grow there are countless things that we can learn how to do, so even if you can't see your efforts bear fruit, please don't quit. Our lives are still ahead of us. Some kind of success can be won by, and only by, sheer effort and sweat. We all have to bear in mind that adulthood lasts a lot longer than childhood"(30). Higashida brings forth the importance of hard work in one's life as one move from childhood to adulthood.

Higashida longs to speak like anyone else. To Higashida spoken language is like a blue sea in which he swims and dives and he even feels that he is stuck in a tiny boat. "Spoken language is blue sea. Everyone else is swimming, diving and frolicking freely, while I'm alone, stuck in a tiny boat, swayed from side to side. Rushing towards and around me are waves of sound. Sometimes the swaying is gentle. Sometimes I'm thrown about and I have to



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grip the boat with all my strength” (97). For people with autism, the pain of being unable to do what they like is already hard to live with. Pain arising from other people’s reaction to their mistakes even break their hearts.

Higashida feels that he is unable to express his thoughts and feelings and so he cannot make his own preferences. “Expressing preferences is tied to thoughts and feelings and because I have difficulties with my thoughts and feelings, it follows that I also had problems when it came to selecting my ‘well done!’ sticker. So as soon as a panda sticker jumped out at me, I unpeeled it and stuck it onto my snail” (112). Higashida says whenever he is told to make choices, his mind goes into a whirl, the same way his mind does when he can’t express his thoughts or emotions.

Higashida also depicts the positive side of autism. According to him children with autism are good at solving puzzle. “I suspect there are many children with autism who really love jigsaw puzzles. When I do puzzles, I pay more attention to the pieces than to the picture. All the pieces might look similar, but in fact, if you examine them closely, you’ll see that each one is minutely different in outline” (39).

Higashida loves playing baseball though he cannot play properly. He enjoys by throwing and catching baseball. He also likes playing badminton, hitting the shuttlecock successfully leaves him delighted. He strictly follows schedules. Higashida feels that he has a sharp memory than any other normal person. He says he never forgets what he was doing, a household chore, a leisure activity, before he switched to something else. Higashida says he can sing all kinds of songs from nursery rhymes to anime songs to Japanese pop music. According to him singing is easier than speaking.

According to Higashida the word for ‘autism’ in Japanese is ‘jiheisho’, which means people locking themselves up inside themselves. To Higashida it is a misleading statement. He adds people with autism aren’t good at interacting with others, but their hearts and minds are always open and ready to receive. He ends his book with a chapter which speaks about the Mothers’s Day celebration. Higashida on seeing bunches of red carnation longs to buy it for his mother with great difficulty he conveys it to his helper. He had coins only for a single flower, and he goes home and gives it to his mother who is elated by his sons deed. “Giving



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flowers to my mum on Mother's Day was a dream I'd been harbouring for years. Today, one red carnation in a room at home did all my talking for me" (269). This book is a collection of short chapters through which Higashida has developed rich inner thoughts, and he strives to learn more about the world around him. He begs teachers and others who work with special needs individual to provide opportunities to learn and grow.

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