

Voice for the Voiceless: A Revelatory Insight of Autism in “Naoki Higashida’s” *The Reason I Jump*

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Abstract

This paper highlights the difficulties undergone by the people suffering from a complex developmental disability called autism. It deals with the way an autistic person thinks, feels and perceives the world. People suffering from autism face variety of challenges like social interaction, communication, restricted repetitive patterns of behavior, hyperactivity, short attention span, aggression, self injurious behaviors, odd responses to sensory stimuli, eating, sleeping, motor, mood abnormalities and difficulty in comprehending the environment. 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.

Key Words Disability, hyperactivity, environment, autistic

Disability is a kind of mental or physical ailment that prevents a person from being able to think, move, or do an activity that is essential for life. Fifteen percent of the world’s population has a form of disability. Disability is very often viewed as a punishment inflicted upon an individual or family by an external force. Disability is a social enigma. The autistic people are considered as outsiders and they are not expected to go to school, get jobs or support families. People with disabilities were seen as inferior to the rest of society. They were seen as lower class and were segregated from ‘normal’ people.

Disability Studies is an academic discipline that examines the meaning, nature and consequences of disability. Disability study focuses on increasing individuals with disability, their access to civil rights and the ways of improving their quality of life. Disability studies is a multidisciplinary field of inquiry which

states the experiences and perspectives of people with disabilities to address discrimination. Disability studies emerged in the 1980's primarily in the US, UK and Canada.

Autism is a developmental disability of the brain, much like dyslexia or attention deficit disorder. Autism comes from the Greek word *autos*, which means self, implying a narrowing of relationships to people and the outside world. Autism is the third most common developmental disability next to mental retardation and cerebral palsy.

“Autism does exist on a spectrum and there are so many manifestations of it, so many kinds of expressions of it, and every case is particular”. – Claire Danes

The work taken for this study is the thirteen year old, Japanese writer Naoki Higashida's *The Reason I Jump*. It deals with Higashida's experience with autism. Through series of questions and answers punctuated with other bits of insight and a short story that illustrates the isolation he feels, Higashida provide readers with a unique look into the mind of a person with autism.

Naoki Higashida was born in 1992 and was diagnosed with autism at the age of five. He graduated from high school in 2011 and lives in Kimitsu, Japan. He is an advocate, a motivational speaker, and the author of several books of fiction and nonfiction.

The book opens with an Introduction by David Mitchell, the father of a son with autism and the husband of the book's translator KA Yoshida. Mitchell describes how the author wrote the book by spelling out words and sentences in his native Japanese on an alphabet grid. Mitchell expresses gratitude for this work because the book has given him a greater understanding of his son and suggested ways to help him. The book also demonstrates that people with autism are just as bright and curious as everyone else.

Higashida who himself is suffering from autism is devoid of the faculty of speech. He compares his mind to a room with no door and window, where twenty radios, all tuned to different stations are blaring out voices and music. The radios have no off- switches or volume controls. “Now your mind is a room where twenty radios, all tuned to different stations, are blaring out voices and music. The radios have no off- switches or volume controls, the room you're in has no door or window.....” (VIII). His mind acts as a maze and his father speaking to him sounds as if he is speaking from cell phone. He is unable to comprehend his own mother tongue, or any tongue, to him all languages are foreign languages.

People with autism are considered as antisocial loners who lack empathy with others. Higashida reiterates that “he values the company of other people very much. But because communication is so fraught with problems, a person with autism tends to end up alone in a corner.....” (xv). Higashida understands the importance of having companions. He wants to spend time in the company of the other people. He wants to communicate with them and share his feelings, but is not able to convey his feelings because of autism. This feeling of fear of not able to communicate with his companions make him gets isolated from others.

Higashida explains that although he can read aloud and sing, has difficulty in conversing with people because his words disappear “I have no problem reading books aloud and singing, but as soon as I try to speak with someone, my words just vanish” (3). Higashida brings out to light that people with autism have the ability to read aloud and even sing but finds it difficult to convey their thoughts, ideas and feelings with other people. Autism makes them remain speechless.

Higashida expresses the frustration felt by the people with autism stemming from their need to communicate effectively and the difficulty of doing so, along with their inability to control certain behaviors. “It’s like being a doll spending your whole life in isolation, without dreams and without hopes”(6). Higashida compares himself to a doll, the doll can never speak its thought and feelings and has no dream and hopes, so it is isolated, in the same way Higashida who is suffering from autism too has no dreams and hopes, thereby remains isolated from others.

The difficulty of finding the right words at the right time is one of the greatest challenges Higashida faces, along with the uncontrollable violent reaction he often has when the smallest things go wrong:

How often have the strange sounds coming out of my mouth embarrassed me nearly to death? Honest, I want to be nice and calm and quiet too! But even if we’re ordered to keep our mouths shut or to be quiet, we simply don’t know how. Our voices are like our breathing, I feel, just coming out of our mouths, unconsciously. (9)

Higashida forgets things very quickly, which prompts him to repeat things over and over again as a means of remembering what he has been told. “ I very quickly forget what it is I’ve just heard. Inside my head there really isn’t such a big difference between what I was told just now, and what I heard a long, long time ago” (10). People suffering from autism tends to forget things quite often.

Higashida explains many other facts of autism, including the gestures and vocal intonations people with autism often make. “We can’t read the story and imagine the story at the same time. Just the act of reading costs us a lot of effort- sorting out the words and somehow voicing them is already a very tall order” (17). Higashida says that he cannot read the story and imagine the story simultaneously. He puts in a lot of effort to read it, and to give voice to it is much more difficult for him.

People with autism never make eye contact with people with whom they are talking. “Voices may not be visible things, but we’re trying to listen to the other person with all of our sense organs” (25). Voice plays a vital role to the people suffering from autism. Though voices are invisible they try to listen to the voice with all their sense organs, thereby they never look into the eyes of the other person whoever they communicate with.

Higashida feels that people suffering from autism have limited facial expressions for they never criticize or mock at people. “What makes us smile from the inside is seeing something beautiful, or a memory that makes us laugh. This generally happens when there’s nobody watching us. And at night, on our own, we might burst out laughing underneath the duvet, or roar with laughter in an empty room.....” (31). Through these lines Higashida clearly states that people with autism have limited facial expressions for they never show their feelings and emotions outwardly to the people whom they communicate it. They never comment or criticize other people. They just ponder over the beautiful things stored in their memory. This beautiful memory of their make them laugh or smile. They never reveal their feeling of happiness outwardly.

People with autism are sometime too sensitive or insensitive to pain. “...there are some who make a huge fuss when they have their hair or nails trimmed, even though it shouldn’t hurt at all. At the same time, there are people who stay very calm and collected even when they’ve got an injury that’s obviously painful” (55). Higashida comments that people with autism fuss when they have their hair or nails trimmed. At the same time they stay very calm even at painful situations.

Higashida says people with autism perceive things in a different way. “ But for people with autism the details jump straight out at us, first of all, and then only gradually, detail by detail, does the whole image

sort of float up into focus” (59). Higashida says that autistic person first look at the details of the object and then the whole image of the object float up to their eyes.

People with autism wear the same clothing and eat the same food repeatedly. Throughout the book, the author laments the fact that he knows his behaviors are annoying to others and thus pleads for understanding and patience.

The book concludes with a short story called *Im' Right Here!* It is about a boy named Shun who is hit by car, dies and goes to heaven. His frustration at being invisible to his parents thereby he is unable to help them in their grief. This story mirrors the frustrations undergone by the people with autism and the miseries they face when they try to communicate with others.

The Reason I Jump is a one –of-a-kind memoir that demonstrates how an autistic mind thinks, feels, perceives and responds. His insights are so startling, so strange, and so powerful that we will never look at the world the same way again. Higashida feels that the selfish attitude of the people has made the planet a wrecked one filled with violence, and out of these crises arises autism. “However hard an autistic life is, however sad it can be, so long as there’s hope we can stick at it..... and when the light of hope shines on all this world then our future will be connected with your future” (136). Higashida apologizes that he is not like the normal person, but still hopes that, one day the world will understand them and people suffering with autism too would have a future.

Voice plays an important role in everyone’s life. Voice is the passport to the soul. Voices are unique. Voice carries its emotions and therefore determines how much one person can influence, move and finally lead another. Most important of all, every voice projects the personality of its speaker. We express our hopes, fears, excitement, fatigue, joy, anger, love and hate with our voice.

People with disabilities are exploited, especially those who cannot speak and communicate their feelings. In many developing countries there are certain traditional dogmas defining the causes of disability as a curse. Discrimination attitude towards youth with disabilities make it much more difficult for them to go to school, to find work or to participate in social life. These young people feel that their opportunities are being denied due to negative attitudes, discrimination and barriers. In this regard Ronald J Berger in his book *Introducing Disability Studies* is of the view that “...There also is a need to challenge conventional

typifications of disabled people as abnormal inferior, or dependent people who at best should be pitied, treated as objects of charitable good will, or offered ameliorative medical treatment”(29).

Higashida’s insight of autism helps to dispel myths and misconceptions about autistic person and autism. Through his work Higashida depicts that one’s disability can be turned into fruitful endeavour and one can also live a purposeful life. Higashida portrays autistic people as people having different interests than others, At the same time, however the difference in thought that autistic people have can even lead to revolutionary ideas.

In this regard Geoffrey Cowley in his article *Girls, Boys and Autism* is of the view that people with autism are exceptionally skilled at maths, science and computer. “They often become focused on specialized complex topics, which can be associated with a number of strengths, as people with autism can be exceptionally skilled at systematizing information, mathematics, computer programming, music and art”(10).

Julie Brown in her work *Writers on the spectrum: How Autism and Asperger Syndrome Have Influenced Literary Writing* says that people with autism have close relationship with science or math. “...Many people can point to Albert Einstein or Bill Gates as individuals whose place on the autism spectrum gave them skills they needed to reach new breakthroughs in physics and technology”(7).

It is important to raise awareness among the society on the necessity to include these young people in their communities by respecting them and treat them equally, to develop education and communication activities, to help them understand and assert their rights.

Works cited

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