

# Projecting ASD: A Study of Autism Spectrum Disorder in Mark Haddon's *The Curious Incident of The Dog in The Night Time*

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## **Abstract:**

*The human mind is one of the most complex organs when it comes to defining humanity. It is the mind that shapes not only the behaviour of a person but also gears up the society as a whole. The National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH) estimates that almost 28.47% of the human population has disorders when it comes to mental health as compared to other health-related problems. Besides science and psychology, literature is one field which has been dealing with the problems of psychology since times immemorial. This paper focuses on Autism Syndrome as projected by Mark Haddon in *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time* (2003). The main aim of this paper is to analyze how this concept of mental health, psychology and developmental disorder-ASD is projected by Haddon in the novel.*

**Keywords:** *Abnormality, Asperger, Disorder, Mind, Psychology.*

Asperger syndrome is an Autism Spectrum Disorder-ASD which is also known as 'dash of autism'. It is basically a developmental disorder which is "characterized by significant difficulties in social interactions and nonverbal communication, along with restricted and repetitive patterns of behaviour and interests." (Biomedical Journal of Scientific and Technical Research) Asperger syndrome however, is considered to be a milder form of autism. However, within the spectrum of the disorder, it can range from mild to severe. This paper will focus on the aspect of autism syndrome as projected by Mark Haddon in his book *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time* (2003). The novel presents a first person tale of the Christopher Boone a fifteen year old with Asperger's Syndrome- a form of Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) or Pervasive Development Disorder (PDD) characterized by abnormalities in social interactions along with restricted and repetitive patterns of behaviour and interests. Major events of the book are narrated through the eyes and point-of-view of Christopher. The narrative style of the book and the overall structure of the novel reflect Christopher's mindset and how he continues his life amidst all chaos. Thus, the main aim of this paper is to analyze how this concept of mental health, psychology and developmental disorder with reference to Mark Haddon's *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time*. Based on a close reading of the text, this paper also takes into account aspects of abnormality as a social construct outlined by O' Reilly and Lester and a take on 'Theory of Mind' outlined by Tony Atwood, as the basic methodology to support the arguments.

In the opening, we see Christopher, in the mid-night hours, his attention caught to a particular situation, the death of his neighboring dog named Wellington. Christopher narrates, "It was 7 minutes after midnight. The dog was lying on the grass in the middle of the lawn in front of Mrs. Shears' house. Its eyes were closed." (1) Thus, Christopher embarks on a journey, a journey which he calls a

‘murder mystery’ only to solve the case of the dog that has been murdered that night at Mrs. Shears’ house. Solving the murder mystery is taken up by a child who has ‘abnormalities’ in his mind. This makes the narration equally interesting. Tony Atwood in his book *The Complete Guide to Asperger’s Syndrome* (2007) points out that children with Asperger’s though are socially defective, yet they may possess interests in various fields. Though their linguistic and communicative abilities may be lacking yet they have a taste for some specific subjects and areas of interest in which they excel compared to normal children. Christopher finds mathematics and astronomy equally fascinating.

Christopher has been living with his father ever since his mother has been dead. “Mother died two years ago.” (28) However, his neighbor and father’s companion Mrs. Shears has been keeping them company. Mrs. Shears too has been living alone in the house ever since her husband had divorced her. Christopher’s father starts developing a soft corner for Mrs. Shears only to know towards the end that she loves her dog Wellington more than anyone else. Matters become worse when Christopher figures out the actual mystery behind the murder of the dog and what actually happened to his mother. This gives the narration a new turn. We move from the ‘murder mystery’ narration towards a ‘bildungsroman’ narration.

Christopher being the first-person narrator, the readers are plunged into the ideas, thoughts and feelings of Christopher directly and this makes the story-line interesting. However, there are many complexities while we try to understand a child suffering from Asperger’s or ASD. One interesting fact that Haddon puts forward is the ‘normal’ -‘abnormal’ dichotomy. In the book entitled *Examining Mental Health Through Social Constructionism* (2017) by Michelle O’ Reilley and Jessica Nina Lester observes a social constructionist position when it comes to distinguish the ‘normal’ from the ‘abnormal’. These are mere constructs through the use of language. Mark Haddon in the book not only presents the problem of Christopher as a child having serious developmental issues but also subverts the way Christopher thinks about the world. In the eyes of Christopher, the entire world, except him is abnormal. Thus, Haddon shapes not only the way the readers are able to sympathize with Christopher but also subverts what constitutes ‘normalcy’. Thus, by subverting what is normal, the readers get to know interesting facts through the mind of Christopher. An interesting example that Christopher cites in the text is regarding the constellation Orion. Orion, according to ‘normal people’ is Orion because the constellation somewhat looks like a hunter. “People say that Orion is called Orion because Orion was a hunter and the constellation looks like a hunter with a club and a bow and arrow.” (156) Whereas, Christopher finds this has no meaning at all. According to Christopher, this is ‘silly’ because it is just a group of stars. Thus, one can join the dots of stars and form a figure like anything they want. The meanings that we assign to different set of objects in this universe, is not fixed always, meanings always defer. This is just one way of looking at the world and observing the world through the mind of Christopher. And according to Christopher, that is the ‘truth’. (157)

A major part of the novel focuses on the activities of Christopher, his interactions with others and his voice as the sole story-teller. Readers are thus, automatically drawn towards the cognitive and corporeal space of Christopher through the layering of various perspectives and reactions. He finds people confusing. According to Christopher, people talk a lot without using words. Any child with an Asperger’s Syndrome or ASD is unable to understand the non-verbal gestures that people make. This can be explained with the concept widely known as the ‘Theory of the Mind’. Tony Atwood in *The Complete Guide to Asperger’s Syndrome* states about this phenomenon in details. According to Atwood, “The psychological term Theory of Mind (ToM) means the ability to recognize and understand thoughts, beliefs, desires and intentions of other people in order to make sense of their behaviour and predict what they are going to do next.” (112) A ‘general’ person will understand

others through their voice, tone and non verbal communications which cannot be perceived at all by someone who has an Asperger's Syndrome. Secondly, Christopher finds the use of metaphors equally confusing. This is because he sees the world as it is and cannot understand the complexities that language and language ornamentation has to offer in this case. It happens purely in the imaginary level and when Christopher tries analyzing what is and what is not, it confuses his understanding. He is not able to distinguish the real and the imaginary. Whatever is said is perceived by his brain in the exact manner of expression. Language, which provides the base for communication and understanding, here becomes a medium of obstruction and impediment for Christopher to understand the world as it is.

Christopher's inability to unable the nuances of language and communication become more vivid when he reaches the railway station to collect the ticket for London. There is a constant struggle in Christopher's mind to fit the signifier with the signified and it very often slips off. Social connection in the case of Christopher becomes very different and difficult. He is unable to reach out to others and is unable to understand the expressions made by others as well. Christopher has only a handful of people with whom he interacts properly. Besides his parents, especially his father, his school-teacher Siobhan serves his needs, understands him and Christopher too can interact with Siobhan with comfort. It is Siobhan who teaches Christopher the various interactions and human emotions although Christopher is not able to comprehend everything. When it comes to meeting and talking with others in the society, there comes an impediment on the way.

Events take a turn when the so called 'murder mystery' is solved at the middle part of the novel when he finds out that it is his father who killed Wellington. From this point onwards, his focus shifts from solving the mystery to gaining independence. He wants to leave the home; he wants to leave his father because he feels no longer at ease with his father. The sense of comfort and safety has finally weakened and diluted. "I had to get out of the house. Father had murdered Wellington. That meant he could murder me." (152) From this point of the text, the novel takes a different turn in case of the genre. From a 'murder mystery novel', it becomes a 'bildungsroman' novel, focusing on Christopher's running away from the house for the first time, all alone. In general, by changing the genre mid-way, Haddon adopts a different method of narrating the story.

One important aspect of the novel is Haddon's portrayal of the contemporary family with someone having an abnormality. The novel presents a micro-family structure that is shattered in its being. Christopher's father is Ed Boone, the primary caretaker and caregiver of the family who is characterized by a dark temper but is a delicate father when it comes to parenting. Christopher relies heavily upon his father. He trusts and depends upon Ed for his living. For Christopher, a young boy with ASD, his father becomes the sole nurturer. He feels safe in father's company. But when Christopher realizes two mistakes committed by his father, which according to Christopher are 'crimes', the bond finally starts fading off. Christopher figures out that it is Ed who killed Wellington the dog and Ed reveals the actual truth which led him to murder the neighbouring dog. Secondly, Christopher too figures out about his mother's whereabouts and realizes that his father had lied to him regarding his mother being dead. Christopher finally confronts with Ed and decides to leave the house which brings in the major shift in the novel. However, Ed remains compassionate towards his son even after the hurdles that he had to face. Moreover, when the parents of Christopher were having a tough time, it was Ed who took up the charge of taking up and looking after Christopher, rather than Christopher's mother.

The character of Christopher's mother, Judy Boone is equally important. Haddon, through the characters of Ed and Judy, shows the way of parenting when it comes to handling a child with a

disability. Judy's narrative voice is the only actual narrative voice in the text that we have besides that of Christopher. As mentioned earlier, Haddon adopts a multiple genres to deal with the text. Here he brings in the epistolary form while dealing with the thoughts, words and speeches of Judy Boone. According to Christopher, his mother had died two years back, which was not the case. Through the epistolary form, Judy speaks directly to the readers as well as Christopher. She narrates about the problems she had to go through while trying to rise up Christopher and thus failing to do so. Judy comments in one of the letters addressed to her son,

I was not a very good mother, Christopher. Maybe if things had been different, maybe if you'd been different, I might have been better at it. But that's just the way things turned out. (113)

This shows her negative concern about her 'disabled' son. Out of some other reasons, this is one of the reasons for which Judy decided to break off the marriage with Ed and elope with Roger. The letters portray her simple, yet powerful emotional conflict, the dilemma that she underwent. She loves her son, has a concern for him but still unable to cope up with his daily tantrums. Judy is presented by Haddon as a mother who loves her son but is an inadequate caregiver, unlike Ed, who serves the purpose till the end. Towards the latter part of the letters, she justifies her act of leaving the son and the husband behind and moving ahead of the situation.

Mark Haddon, in the novel *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time* thus tries to develop the idea of what it is to live with a disability. Ranging from personal to societal interactions and day-to-day communications, it creates an impact in the life of Christopher Boone. Yet, Haddon tries to subvert the notions of 'normal' 'abnormal' dichotomies through the character portrayal of Christopher.

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