

Cosmopolitan Approach to Autism in Mukhopadhyay's Narrative



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Abstract

We, responsible social members, are tend to label differences and are less accustomed to take responsibility to discuss cognitive differences and diversity in behavioural traits. Discussions and literature about the differences may change attitude and interpretations and may lead to inclusivity. Narratives by the writer with autism can shape the perception of a reader about the neuro-diversity. This research paper critically examines the cosmopolitan approach of Tito Mukhopadhyay in How Can I Talk If My Lips Don't Move?: Inside My Autistic Mind. Mukhopadhyay, a non-verbal adult with severe autism, has written several short stories about his conversation with natural objects, his experience of his own autism and even he has also written poems that are mindscaping of a brain with autism. Cosmopolitan point of view of a writer with autism can serve as a compass in a world where narratives can interconnect individual experiences with larger arena of social and cultural concern. This paper is an effort to chart out new grounds to extinguish socially constructed stereotypical image of autism. Mukhopadhyay's representation of the self, entails respect for neurodiversity that may result in development or construction of a global ethic that considers people with autism as members of the human community.

Keywords: Autism, Neuro-Diversity, Cosmopolitan Approach, Mindscaping of a Brain, Stereotypical Image

Introduction

Garrett Wallace brown argues that Kantian cosmopolitanism can be understood as “being concerned with the cultivation of a global environment within which everyone can fully develop his or her human capacities” (31). Kant’s cosmopolitan belief makes it clear that a person should be considered the part of a larger human community and the foundation of this perception is based on the conception of “universal justice and the establishment of a global condition where the development of everyone’s capacities is to be considered as if they were equal citizens of the world” (32). Sanahuja and Ghia opine that “the broadest forms of cosmopolitanism underline human responsi-

bility for the rest of the *cosmos*, distinguishing the role of humans and their normative positions from those of the other beings” (13). In terms of the neurological diversity, cosmopolitanism is taken as the establishment of an inclusive global community. This research paper is focused on the cosmopolitan approach of Mukhopadhyay’s narrative toward autism.

Tito Mukhopadhyay is a non-verbal adult with severe autism and at the age of thirteen he moved from India to the United States, at the behest of Cure Autism Now (CAN). At the age of 12 he published his first book, *Beyond the Silence*. Success of *Beyond the Silence* received an invitation from Portia Iverson, the cofounder of CAN, USA which

later merged with Autism Speaks Foundation in 2006. At the age of thirteen he moved to the United States. Mukhopadhyay was not accepted by normal schools so he was trained by his mother and his mother got an opportunity to help other nonspeaking children with autism, including Iverson's son. CAN arranges a "60 minutes episode about new possibilities for autistic children, which only serve to increase Mukhopadhyay's and CAN's renown" (128 Wappett and Arndt). Mukhopadhyay's mother's constant efforts for her son's learning and cognitive development are the foundation of Mukhopadhyay's progressive approach that helped him to acquire basic social skills, language and a potential ability to adjust to neurotypical society. Tito is well trained and educated by his mother and special school. He is open to the world with a progressive approach towards autism which leaves no space for geographical borders and national affiliation. This sense of cosmopolitanism which constitutes awareness of belonging to autism, creates a space for the awareness for autism and special attention to special education. Ralph James Savarese referred to Mukhopadhyay as a "cross-cultural, cross-sensorial migrant: a neurocosmopolite armed with metaphor in a world quite hostile to the neurological other" (276). His narratives provide an intellectually constructive foundation to the notion of cognitive differences.

Sometimes fictional characterization of autism is done as destructive and harmful for care takers and other social members. Tito who himself is on the extreme end of autism spectrum try to challenge the deep-seated notion of autism which has been taken as human limitations. Tito is trained and educated by his mother to the level that he is able to understand his problem in clinical terminologies. He says, "due to the underconnectivity of my neurons or some alternate connectivity, instead of performing the socially required task, like smiling at a familiar person, I may perform an alternate task, like picking up a book or sniffing" (279 *How Can I Talk*). Children with autism have a tendency to distract from a task as they are not able to concentrate on one task for a long

time. Tito in his story "scattered Senses" admits that he experiences a scattered feeling of his senses, which makes perceptions, judgement and planning difficult. Fictional representation of autism may carry affective description and even can create values, understanding and perception but Tito's openness to his neurological difference reinforces the reader to move beyond the framework of normalcy.

Tito's representation of autism gives a clear picture of challenges people with autism face in their socialization and communication. Social theories do not do justice with the behavioural understanding of differences and deficits. Tito admits that he has a tendency of overindulging and underindulging with the things he sees around. He writes, "There are components in the environment that I can miss due to the overindulgence of one sense or an overindulgence toward one component of the environment to which my perception chooses to attend" (201 *How Can I Talk*) and how a child with autism is unable to identify things which he daily comes across to. He says it is because of the lack of practice. When his mother asks him to draw a Sun, he could not draw the one because "it was necessary to visualize real objects instead of situations of surreal entertainment. . . In order to do so, I needed to have a basic mental image of the objects and a map representation of my body's orientation in that environment. Things got better with practice" (209 *How Can I Talk*).

He says, "I expressed my wish to mother by writing it down. I had learned to write before I learned to articulate my words" (213 *How Can I Talk*). Tito unveils how he was not able to concentrate when Claude was reading. That time Tito was busy with some other activity. He was busy imagining his voice "transform into long apple green and yellow strings, searching under the tables for who knows what? Threads like raw silk forming from Claude's voice" (315 *How Can I Talk*). This hilarious narration is a clear depiction of what a child with autism imagines when he is instructed to do what he does not like. When somebody asks him to tell what he was reading

he again enters into a world of his own imagination. Tito's experience makes the reader aware of the fact that every child or a person with autism is different from the other person with autism. He every now and then in his stories narrates his own habits but at the same time he warns the reader that the other person with autism may react differently to the situation. He narrates how he reacts when he picks up a book. He sniffs each page. He further puts an effort to make the reader aware that "someone else with autism may tear a page or two for who knows which dominant unit of experience is taking place in his perception. Another person with autism may totally ignore the presence of that book because his perception would be directed toward some other aspect of the environment . . . Each brings forth a unique manifestation of overt action, which psychology defines as a behaviour" (317-318). Tito is more specific rather than being general and he is more interactive and grounded in his approach which makes him more engaged individually with the real-life challenges.

Throwing tantrums which is one of the traits of autism Tito talks about in his story (68 *How Can I Talk*). He says:

When I got puzzled, I got disoriented. And when I got disoriented, I got scared. I felt as if my whole existence depended on those staircases. 'What if I stop existing when I stop climbing them?' Panic took over my eyes, blinding them shut. It took over my ears, deafening me with the sound of a scream, which was my own, as I recognized it. My existence became the sound of my scream. And I heard that sound, I could not see anything anymore, not those staircases . . . My body and my surrounding were dissolved in the sound generated by my scream. Once it took control, I knew no one had any power to stop it. I had no power to stop it either." (68-69 *How Can I Talk*).

This is how a person or a child with autism thinks when he does not find the surroundings or people comfortable. Perry et al opine that the more we learn about human differences, the more we will have to discuss whether and how our policies should promote or embrace them (7). Tito

very beautifully speaks the heart of a child with autism out and it will certainly help the reader to understand the children and adults with autism. His

A child with autism needs to be understood in terms of assistance he wants and in place of expecting too big, caregivers should help them to solve the problems. Tito accepts in the story, "Those Building Blocks" which is one of the problems a child with autism face, "The task of sorting out blocks according to color was difficult for me. . . I have heard many children and adults facing similar problems, and caregivers or parents explaining that it is either a "motor-control problem" or a "hand-eye coordination problem" (73 *How Can I Talk*). Tito's mother helped him to build his own staircase with the help of colourful blocks and repetitively did the same activity with him. This is the way a child with autism can be train in a particular activity. Tito makes it quite clear in this story by affirming that "I was thankful to mother when, instead of asking my nervous hands to do the sorting all by themselves, she took my hands and helped me pick the blocks till I was confident with my hands. For I never can learn anything under stress" (74 *How Can I Talk*). Tito informs one more thing about autism that when a child with autism grows he is able to control his senses. He says, "since I was older, my impulses were more under my control" (78 *How Can I Talk*). However, it may vary with the severity of autism. Tito's short stories are the evidence of how a person with autism can change the stereotypes about autism and spread awareness about the possibility and potential of a child with autism. This is the study of relation of autism with the subject and environment. His works coerce the reader, either it is a common man or a scientist, to re-think and re-search low functioning end of the autism spectrum.

We, being a social member, have so many questions related to the person with cognitive differences. Do they feel like us? How do they think or perceive? The same questions were being asked from Tito and he replies, "I see with my eyes, I smell with my nose, . . . Do other people see

things the way I do? I needed to study neuro-typical people, and how they perceived things, to understand the answer before answering people . . ." (117-118 *How Can I Talk*). A person with autism thinks about a neuro-typical person the same way a neuro-typical person thinks about a person with autism. Here a person with autism thinks it necessary to read about neuro-typical people to answer them. He even asks his mother the same questions to know what neuro-typical people feel and think. This exactly means that a neuro-typical people should also read about them before questioning them.

Tito himself feels a need to write because he wants to organise his thought process into the form of stories. He says, "I had my words and I had my stories, which flowed between me and the mirror" (252 *How Can I Talk*). Tito was only six years old when he learned and developed his writing skills. His mother taught him to draw horizontal and vertical lines and taught him to write words. He flaunts his mother's dedication for his learning, "As a rule, Mother saw to it that I wrote every day, in the morning, before I did anything else. . . writing became a natural discipline for me. Slowly, I got used to writing down the letters from the memory instead of copying them letter by letter" (262 *How Can I Talk*). Tito develops a radical and relational interactive model that is based on the awareness and acknowledgment of the subject. When Tito was in India his mother taught him all the necessary subjects, science, maths, geometry and poetry appreciation as well. His mother is of the opinion that "If you really want to write, you must know everything from science to history to politics to religion." So she read Spinoza and Plato's *Republic* to me" (116 *How Can I Talk*). It is observed in the Tito's stories that differences are not always harmful and if trained properly it can be turned into any potential. Tito's cosmopolitan approach towards autism presents a unitary vision of autism which directs his readers to embrace diversity and even give strength to stand against structural injustice. Tito was also trained in the special school for autism in California "which was more aimed at

the behaviour development aspect than the cognitive aspect" (116 *How Can I Talk*). But the real growth of his talented writing depended more on his mother's training and teaching rather than special schools. Special schools are for behavioural developments they can enhance their mental and philosophical growth. His mother's teaching makes him more inclined towards Shelley and Byron in place of drawing. It is generally observed that children with autism or any other cognitive difference are not indulged in such a highly intellectual reading and writing but he is. It was all because of his mother's teaching.

Tito's mother taught him to tie knots to improve his motor movements. As Tito narrates in his story "A Grip on the Shoelaces", his mother brought multicoloured nylon ropes and taught him repeatedly how to tie the knots without pressurizing him. When he got learned tying, his mother replaced ropes with shoestrings. This is how she got him learned tying shoelaces. This story compels the reader to realise the importance of initial training at home and the role of caretakers. By the age of six, Tito learnt his basic baby skills at All India Institute of Speech and Hearing in Mysore where his mother and his mentor pathologist trained him to do basic routine works on his own such as bathing, dressing up and eating (104-105 *How Can I Talk*). In the story "Wish He Could Dress Himself" Tito narrates how he learnt to wear shirts and pants and to button up shirts which become possible only after repetitive practice of that particular work. He says, "Every successive try got this kind of mapping well established in my mind. I could do the sleeves independently" (110). It is assumed and even assured that practicing a certain habit may help these children to learn basic skills which make them independent. A 'normal' child also learns basic baby skills only through repetitive practices but these children may take time because of their hyperactive mind. Kristin Bumiller supports that "people with autism are empowered by constructions of their identity that are individualized, affirming of difference, reinforcing of personal dignity, and dynamically interpreted

in the context of everyday living situations” (5). When their energies are channelised they lead a normal life. Tito makes the reader understand these concepts related to children with autism.

Tito refers social response to autism as “Their smiles were the color of jaundice yellow, and that yellow was so dense, every color could be choked by its strength” (29 *How Can I Talk*). According to Courchesne and Pierce autists’ brains exhibit more neural connectivity within regions than neurotypicals and less or “abnormally patterned” connectivity between regions (226). Wappett and Arndt appreciate that “In the hands of someone as skilled as Mukhopadhyay, English is at once familiar and unfamiliar: an autistic hybrid of Hindi, Bengali, and British and American English” (127). When he talks about his mind, he illustrates giving some examples which are metaphorical in nature. He says, “sudden situations, which invade my mental map, are like meteors hitting a sublime corner of a peaceful planet. . . It creates anxiety, and like a chain reaction of nuclear fission, it continues to blast all around my mind . . . all that happens is the combines destruction of one blast after the other” (303 *How Can I Talk*).

Tito has a great talent of connecting daily routine things with circumstances of his own life and interpreting them psychologically to a commendable philosophical level. Tito’s stories are a great source of inspiration for the people with autism and equally important for their caretakers and to the society as well. It is also surprising that Tito remembers his childhood incidences and narrates with a tinge of childish humour. Julie Brown comments that writers on the spectrum have huge problems in self-construction but “paradoxically, these massive struggles can help them in their creative literary works” (188). When Tito’s stories are read and thought about carefully, it is observed that his interests shift from one thing to the other after some time and he starts framing stories.

Tito gives the reader an opportunity to understand the mind of a child or a person with autism. Even sometimes he talks using medical terms and also talks psyche of the person with autism es-

pecially when he talks about his obsessions. He gives the reason for his strange and switching obsessions such as looking up at the blazing Sun, adjusting his belt and shirt collars, swing, riding a metro bus and train. But at the end of the trials and performance of all these obsessions he realised that he “needed a different environment. I needed a quieter and slower environment” (301 *How Can I Talk*). Tito is very philosophical and self-motivated which is quite evident in his story where he says, “photograph of the white Himalayas against the blue sky—a part of the earth reaching up to touch the sky, The cover became my source of inspiration, then it turned into an obsession” (268 *How Can I Talk*). Mettew Belmonte argues that a mind with autism creates “fallback cognitive strategies” and that leads to a new kind of narrative structure to form connections (11). This new way of narrative structures generates cohesive meaning out of their chaotic sensory world.

In his story “Final Words”, Tito concludes that autism cannot be cured but it can be cared well by educating a child. He says, “Education is that component which brings in a meaningful relationship between the happenings around us and how our senses experience them. It helped me and it helped many others” (333-334). He further defends the need of special education and says, “It is education that enabled me to record some of my experiences on paper with my pencil, so that my words might help some curious eyes” (334). “It was education that helped me enrich my imagination with all those probable and improbable reasonings based on science and philosophy, so that I could write my imaginings down as stories or as poetry” (335 *How Can I Talk*).

His story “When I Think of the Wind, I am the Wind” is philosophical in nature. He writes:

I see flying leaves around me, as I hear a powerful wuthering noise, which can invite those pirate clouds to fly and fight each other for territorial expansion across the sky. Sometimes I am the wing flowing across the desert of the Sahara, gathering bowls of the dust I order to build a huge crescent-shaped dune in the heart of no-

where for the stars of night to see. Sometimes I am the wind in the mountains, where the snow leopards roam in search of the blue mountain sheep. (196-197)

In this story Tito compares himself with strong wind and further in this story he compares himself with a wall and says that he feels “alive and all-powerful” (197) when he writes like this. He writes,

I am a wall
I was build to stand.
Vertical, all-
Enduring
Holding
a roof, above my head.
Responsible,
For I mark the boundary
Between the inside
And the outside—

His art of creative writing expertly captivates the reader and, in some way, or the other he meticulously addresses his readers as if he is talking to the readers. This communicative tendency of his narratives makes him social which one of the characteristics of his cosmopolitan approach to autism.

Tito accepts in his story “Magazine Pictures” when he talks about memorizing people’s face, “my auditory sense is more powerful than my vision, and usually takes over in a dynamic situation filled with sound and sight” (188 *How Can I Talk*). Exposure to various objects leads to memorizing of that particular thing. In his story “Exposure Helps Shape Visual Perception” accepts that his repeated exposure to various things made his interaction with his surrounding better. Once Bill Hirstein, a scientist who tested him, asked him to name the objects he was showing. He could remember the exact name of the object but it was surprising that instead of that particular name he was recalling various synonyms for the objects and finally he did the test successfully by describing and defining the object. From the various tests conducted on him he concluded that

he “might have trouble with the higher converging zone” of his brain which is “responsible for storing images of one particular face and recalling that face at the right moment from the past experiences” (195 *How Can I Talk*). Every child with autism has a different dominating sensory organ. Tito’s dominant sensory channel is hearing. He accepts, “It dominates to such an extent that I dream in sounds most of the time, even when I sleep at night” (309 *How Can I Talk*).

Tito composes a poem on this particular behaviour and it is to bring to the notice of the readers how a person with autism is sensitive enough for understanding his own mindscapes and has courage and potential to bring it to make it understand the society. He writes:

They paralysed all my
Other thoughts, . . .
They left havoc, . . .
They powered me up,
With a prolonged pain, . . .
They left me no mind,
To think or realize,
They did their dance
Of some dreamless delight. (79-80)

These are the aftereffects of strong waves of obsessive moments of a child with autism which leave them drained. On reading Tito’s this collection of short stories, it can be assumed that autism is highly potential developmental disorder. Rosqvist et al suggest that “neurotypical language relating to autism inevitably reflects neurotypical perspectives on autism, societal understandings of autism will benefit from autistic perspectives that reflect the lived experiences of autism” (49). A neurotypical representation of autism may constitute a cluster of similar opinions or a generalised perception about all the cognitive differences. In his concluding “Final Words”, he gives a strong message which shows both sides of autism, positive and negative. “Do I regret being what I am? Yes and no. yes from the viewpoint of my social pride, when I wonder about the humiliation I will face in the future, when I am at the mercy of

others. I may overcome certain hurdles by acquiring certain skills over the years, but I may never overcome some perpetual hurdles. . . No . . . For a part of me feels comfortable with this state. When I realize my ability to interact with the shadows around me or the world of stories that appear to be forming behind a mirror, unbound by the laws of the physical world, when a little girl's giggles color the walls and ceilings with rainbow foam when she is amuse by my echolalia because I am a mirror to her words, I feel blessed for being what I am" (338-339 *How Can I Talk*). By evoking a notion of difference Mukhopadhyay constructs the assumption of autism as a difference and a natural deviation which may bring potential with it.

Conclusion

These stories are the evidence of a continuous flow of imagination in the mind of a child or an adult with autism. Tito frames a story from everything he confronts in his life either it is significant or not, rarely matters. Tito was not able to speak till the age of six and ever later on his speech was difficult to understand but his imagination had words. It can be assumed that a child with autism is always busy with his own imagination and this is the reason he is not very social and his has his own world to enjoy. Society and caretakers need to understand the alternative uses of social and communicative differences associated with autism. Caretakers and every social member should understand their working of their mind and behave patiently to bring them to this global society. Tito's narratives provide a compelling thought-provoking notion that autism cannot be categorised as a disabling disorder. Tito's stories compel us to think that differences can be converted into potential by giving proper training

and improving social behaviour. Writer's cosmopolitan approach focuses more on inclusivity and also claims each person as an individual deserves equal socio-cultural and political treatment irrespective of their differences.

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