

Autistic Autobiographical element in the works of
Naoki Higashida and Eli Gottlieb

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Abstract

This paper focuses on the autobiographical works of Naoki Higashida and Eli Gottlieb. Autism narratives are not just stories or histories, it describes a given reality. They are creating a language which helps to describe their experience of autism. The autobiographical works show the readers that autism is from the 'inside' of the author. This paper proposes to study the autistic autobiographical elements in the works of Naoki Higashida and Eli Gottlieb. Autism narrative is a new genre, it is not the expert reports given by clinicians or reflections by theorists. It is the story told by the autistic either told by themselves or their families, or by novelists, or by writers.

In the last twenty five years, by contrast, there has been an explosion in the number of autobiographical accounts of disability. Indeed, the autobiography themselves contribute to the boom in life writing in which ordinary people's stories, rather than those of renowned public figures, have been written. An autistic autobiography occupies a unique place in literature. In recent years, the autistic autobiography has become its own genre with its own set of conventions and traditions. Grandin's groundbreaking work provided a sort of template for other authors on

the spectrum to consider. Most of the autistic autobiographies followed her autobiographical work.

Naoki Higashida and Eli Gottlieb's work are a dedication to their mother and to the family member. Higashida the author of the novel *The Reason I Jump* and *Fall Down 7 times Get up 8* is a bright and thoughtful person. He maintains a blog and has written other books. His American publisher describes Higashida as a person who can type on a computer and is able to read aloud what he has written as a "motivational speaker". Naoki Higashida's work has been translated into English by David Mitchell and KA Yoshida, parents of a severely autistic son. In his novel *The Reason I Jump* Higashida says that speech is not the only way to express ones thought. He uses a computer and an alphabet grid to express his true self. It is his mother who helps Higashida in all his means. It took a long time before he could finally start communicating with the help of the computer and it was all made possible only with his mother who supported him in all aspects. "Sure, it took a long time before I could finally start communicating via written text on my own, but on that first day when my mom supported my writing hand in hers, I began to acquire a new way of interacting with others"(6). This helped Higashida to do more independent communication with the help of his mother. The alphabet grid makes it possible for him to write them out one by one. This allowed him to anchor his works, otherwise he would have flutter off as soon as he tried to speak.

Psychologist Francesca Happe has argued that individuals with autism are not able to write their autobiographies without some kind of assistance. Dawn Prince Hughes sums up Happe's argument thusly "the most coherent, most relevant and revealing autobiographies of people on the autistic spectrum are of dubious value as they are, by necessity, edited with a heavy hand. Even translated, if you will – by 'normal' people who end up making the work

mostly their own” (5). Prince- Hughes is in “substantial disagreement” with this theory of Francesca Happe.

Higashida speaks about his gratitude and love for his mother at the end of the novel too. It was his mother who constantly helped Higashida in all his endeavour. Higashida in his novel *The Reason I Jump* speaks about his love for his parents. “Must have been Mom, I guess. She was always on my side. Dad gave me a lot of time too, mind but no more games of tossing a ball to each other now.... Shun looked up at the night sky and gave a small sigh (120) Higashida’s novel *Fall Down 7 Times Get up 8* opens with the Mother’s Day celebration, Higashida says that he always wants to convey his gratitude for his mother and is unable to do it as he is non-verbal. “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’ (23-24)

Higashida’s mother is portrayed as an unshakeable woman. Higashida says that his mother appreciates him for all his effort. He says that his parent love him truly. “She praises me and my sister to the skies when we’ve done or said something funny; if we’ve done housework or if we’ve been studying, all we’ll get is a ‘Thanks’ or a ‘Well done’ – though this, too, she says from the heart, so I’m still warmed by her words” (252). Higashida’s writing is transcribed with the help of his mother. Higashida battles hard with autism only with the support of his mother.

Higashida writes a great deal about his gratitude to his family, particularly his mother. He worries about how he appears to the outside world, apologizing and explaining his compulsions, physical behaviors and occasional melt downs. Higashida says that it is a horrible thought for those with non-verbal autistic family members. Higashida’s parent never discussed about his future. They accepted him as he was. “My own parents have never discussed my future

all that much since the time I was small, it seems. They never thought that because of my disability I had to follow such- and- such a route. Thanks to that for better or for worse, here I am, as I am (267). Higashida through these lines depicts the strong bond between him and his parent.

Higashida concludes his novel *Fall Down 7 Times Get up 8* with a token of love for his mother. He concludes the novel with the Mother's Day celebration. Higashida was not good at the practical aspects of buying things from the shop. Higashida with the assistance of his helper buys a carnation for his mother. "Giving flowers to my mom 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). Higashida at last expresses his love for his mother through his deed. Higashida drives home the point that true love need not be explained through words but by our action and deed.

Eli Gottlieb too expresses his love for his mother in his novel *The Boy who went Away*. Eli Gottlieb's brother was an autistic. Gottlieb uses imaginary names to depict as the autistic person. Eli Gottlieb through his novel *The Boy Who Went Away* picturizes the love of a mother, who keeps a map with galaxies of silver pins, on each of which was a tiny paper pennant where she maintained a list of doctors who she had to see and whom she had already seen. "She kept a map of the area around our house taped to a corkboard near the TV, and had salted the map with galaxies of silver pins, each of which flew a tiny paper pennant from its top: black for doctors we still had to see and red for doctors we already had" (12). Eli Gottlieb through these lines depicts the love of a mother for his autistic son.

Eli Gottlieb says that as a mother of an autistic son Harta suffers a lot, who in her anger says that she loves her son and he is the most precious thing in the world. "Harta, after

standing open-mouthed a second, blinking, was suddenly reaching for him, pulling his head toward her breast, and shouting. “Don’t you know I love you? I love you; don’t you know that?” She grabbed his bloody head by the ears and from an inch away cried, “you’re the most precious thing in the world to me, darling, don’t you know that?” (174-175).

Eli Gottlieb in his novel *Best Boy* speaks about the love of the mother and the autistic son even after death. Todd Aaron even in his fifty is reminded of his death mother. Todd Aaron visits his home after many years. He goes up the stairs and notices the room which had been changed completely. When Todd Aaron moves into the bedroom, he is reminded of himself as a small boy and he could feel the presence of his mother. “When I stood finally in the bedroom where I had been a boy, I didn’t recognize it. But I didn’t care that much because every few minutes I was taking tiny little sips of air through my nose, trying to snuffle the actual remaining atoms of my Momma from my nostrils and into my lungs so they could join the rest and the amount of her inside me could grow (228-229). Eli Gottlieb beautifully depicts the love of a mother and an autistic son even after her death.

Naoki Higashida and Eli Gottlieb’s novels deal with an account of early childhood marked by troubling symptoms of autism spectrum disorders, especially sensory sensitivities, communication problems, uncontrollable behaviors, and their withdrawal from the world. It also deals with an account of adolescence with increased feelings of anxiety, isolation and alienation. These novels also speak about the diagnosis, impact of education, medication and about varied therapies. Naoki Higashida and Eli Gottlieb has beautifully painted the life of an autistic person.

Daniel Tammet’s autobiography recounts that he grew older and started to reach out to the people around him, they often rejected him because he was different: “I am ten and know that I am different to them in a way that I cannot express or comprehend... it is perceived as

common knowledge that Daniel talks to the trees and that he is weird” (73). Eventually, a feeling of alienation set in. Relationships with other people prove to be challenging.

Naoki Higashida in his novel *The Reason I Jump* speaks about his early childhood days. Naoki Higashida was unable to talk, he was not able to share his thoughts and feelings with others. He was considered only as a doll who spend most of his life in isolation. “Not being able to talk means not being able to share what you’re feeling and thinking. It’s like being a doll spending your whole life in isolation, without dreams and without hopes” (6). Higashida’s mother helped him to write for the first time. He began to acquire a new way of interacting with others.

In the novel *The Boy Who Went Away*, Eli Gottlieb compares the autistic children to the normal children. Eli Gottlieb speaks about the difficulties undergone by the autistic children. Many children were trained to play tennis, some children learnt violin. Some parents instructed their children to identify birds, plants and various countries on the globe. Children who were said to be normal were trained in various activities. Children like Fad were taken to doctors and were given various therapy. Eli Gottlieb through his novel says that children on the spectrum are being isolated and are devoid of various other activities performed by the normal children. “These other mothers often had boyishly cut hair, they wore pointy sneakers and casual skirts. They seemed to exist in a quiet trance of understanding with their children to be softly nudging them forward, grooming them for a leading position in the race of life. Our mother? Our mother went to doctors” (13). Children on the spectrum along with their parents became a victim in the society. They were marginalized by the society.

Eli Gottlieb even in his novel *Best Boy* depicts the sufferings undergone by the children on the autism spectrum. Todd Aaron, who is depicted as a thirteen-year-old boy is taken

to the autistic center. His mother never wanted his son to go to the autistic center. Todd Aaron on seeing the persons in the center loses all his control and starts screaming, as children on the spectrum are unable to convey their thoughts and feelings to others. “A man in a white smock holding an umbrella over his head was tapping his ring on the window. He showed his teeth and crooked his finger at me to get out of the car and instantly I felt the volts getting ready to burst and sizzle in my head and I began to scream (4-5). Children on the spectrum are taken away from their parents and are put into an institution or therapeutic center.

These novels also give an account of adolescence with increased feeling of anxiety, isolation and alienation. Higashida in his novel *The Reason I Jump* projects the difficulties of autism. Higashida worries whether he could come out of the autistic spectrum. He feels that he couldn't participate in all activities like the other people. “I used to be afraid that as long as I had autism, I'd never be able to live properly as a human being. There were so many things I couldn't do like other people, and having to apologize day in, day out totally drained me of hope” (136). Higashida says that many person in the autism spectrum lose hope for they are not understood by the ordinary people and they have to apologize throughout the day for their deeds.

Higashida in his novel *Fall Down 7 Times Get up 8* says that in his dreams he laughs, chats and jokes with his friends and family. To him his own life is just a dream. When he wakes up he comes to know that it is only a dream and not reality. “Then I would wake up and return to myself, but I'd be clueless about where I was or what on earth. I was doing in his place when I finally realised I'd been dreaming, I'd well up and tears would spill down my face” (179). When Higashida comes to know that it is only a dream he starts shedding down tears.

Eli Gottlieb too in his novels *The Boy who went Away* and *Best Boy* speaks about the difficulties undergone by Fad and Todd Aaron in their adolescence stage. They had to move

from their own home, away from their parent. They longed for the love of their parent. In the novel *Best Boy* Todd Aaron's brother makes a gesture and thus Todd enters the house. Everything in his own house had changed and he could only imagine out things. "Just like in town, everything around me was covered in new things but the older shapes below them made the memories come at me in rushes of feeling (221). Gottlieb has poignantly pictured the suffering of the people on the spectrum at various stages of their life.

Naoki Higashida and Eli Gottlieb concludes their novel on a positive note, though they give an account of adulthood and the miseries undergone by them the characters gradually progress toward self-understanding, they also exhibit more satisfying relationships. Naoki Higashida in his novel *The Reason I Jump* says that he feels as if he has risen out of autism. Though people on the spectrum differ from others in various aspects he feels that he has risen from the spectrum. "Autism has somehow arisen out of this. Although people with autism look like other people physically, we are in fact very different in many ways" (111). Though autism arises from the difference made by the human beings, yet one can come up out of it.

Gottlieb's work *The Boy Who Went Away* is a powerful drawn portrait of two brothers. Gottlieb beautifully pictures the love of a mother for his son. As a mother Harta fights for his son on the spectrum in order to make his son's life a more meaningful one. Gottlieb's work *Best Boy* is the part of the first novel. Todd Aaron is sent to the therapeutic community" at the age of eleven. Todd Aaron, is depicted as a man in his fifties. He has been considered as the Best Boy in the therapeutic community. He also wins the love of Raykene, the caretaker. Eli Gottlieb concludes that people on the spectrum too are made in the God's image as anyone else in this world. People who are on the spectrum must be given all the rights to lead a life like any other normal person. "She says that I was made in God's images and that I "reflect the beauty of his

Creation”(245). Thus Naoki Higashida and Eli Gottlieb concludes their novel with an optimistic note.

Looking closely at these novels, the autobiographical writings of people diagnosed with autism reveals a wealth of information. It reveals the autistic writer’s motivation, use of genre convention, point of view, representation of self, themes, metaphor and style.

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