

Neurodiversity in Literature and Media

Project Report

Submitted by

Nikita Johny (SB22CE021)

Under the guidance of

Mrs. Allu Alfred

In partial fulfilment of requirements for award of the degree

Of Bachelor of Arts

St. Teresa's College (Autonomous), Ernakulam



College With Potential for Excellence

Accredited by NAAC with 'A++' Grade

Affiliated to

Mahatma Gandhi University

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Declaration

I do affirm that the project “Neurodiversity in Literature and Media” submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirement for the award of the Bachelor of Arts degree in English Literature and Communication Studies has not previously formed the basis for the award of any degree, diploma, fellowship or any other similar title or recognition.

Ernakulam

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B.A. English Literature and Communication Studies

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Certificate

I hereby certify that this project entitled "Neurodiversity in Literature and Media" by Nikita Johny is a record of bonafide work carried out by her under my supervision and guidance.

Ernakulam


Guide Name: Mrs. Allu Alfred

Date

Department of Communicative English

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Introduction- Understanding Neurodiversity

“neurodiversity”

/ˌnjʊərə(ʊ)dʌɪˈvəːsɪti, ˌnjʊərə(ʊ)dɪˈvəːsɪti/

noun

1. The range of differences in individual brain function and behavioral traits, regarded as part of normal variation in the human population (used especially in the context of autistic spectrum disorders). (Oxford Languages).

The sentence above defines neurodiversity and aims to clarify its meaning as atypical human behavior—behavior that differs from the norm but is still entirely natural. However, neurodiversity is more than just a medical or scientific term. It is not about diagnosing "disabilities" or differences in people; it is about understanding and accepting the different neurodevelopmental conditions of humans. Neurodiversity is a biological, social, cultural, and political framework that challenges the traditional ways we understand cognitive abilities.

Literature and narrative works shape people's perceptions of the world. We need to understand that some people think in nonlinear patterns, some have heightened sensory experiences, and some will struggle to understand the concept of language. Society has long been based on a strict definition of "normal" or the standard. However, what if "normal" is just an illusion?

This study examines neurodiversity, its significance, and its importance in narrative texts and literature. It will examine how neurodiversity shapes character development, storytelling, and the narratives people consume. This short study will evaluate neurodiversity as a lived experience and a critical framework for literary works. The Netflix series *Atypical* and the

book by Stephen Chbosky, *The Perks of Being a Wallflower* are two major literary works about neurodivergent protagonists. They represent various aspects of how people construct relationships, socialize, form self-identities, and develop personally, providing multiple portrayals of neurodivergence. Falling within the scope of identity, social constructs, and the role of narration in fostering inclusivity and understanding, this essay explores how these works portray neurodiversity. By analyzing these works, we may understand how the forums and fabrications of these stories shape the conversation on neurodiversity and the more significant neurodiversity movement.

An undergraduate sociology student, Judy Singer, coined neurodiversity in 1997. Conditions like autism, ADHD, and dyslexia were considered pathologies rather than typical variations of the human mind, and discussions regarding cognitive diversity were primarily considered in medical discourse. Singer, however, disputed this idea. According to her, neurodiversity is a civil rights movement that aims to promote acceptance and inclusion for those whose brains do not work like the "normal." Singer said, "I thought we need an umbrella term for a movement. I also believed this would be the final significant identity politics movement to emerge from the 20th century" (Judy Singer as qtd. in Harris, the mother of neurodiversity: how Judy Singer changed the world). She had a profound understanding. Like feminism, LGBTQ+ rights, and racial justice movements before it, neurodiversity challenged a deeply ingrained hierarchy- one that privileged specific ways of thinking and learning while marginalizing others.

The neurodiversity movement emerged from the efforts of disability rights advocates and academics to change the conversation about cognitive differences and support autistic self-advocacy groups. They wanted to change the emphasis from treating neurodivergence to embracing it. This change in viewpoint had a significant impact on literature, movies, and media, as well as politics, work, and education. Our understanding of the world is shaped by

the stories we tell. How would society see actual neurodivergent persons if neurodivergence is consistently portrayed as a problem to be solved or a tragedy to be endured?

For many years, the medical field viewed autism, ADHD, dyslexia, and other neurodivergent problems as ones that should be identified, treated, and ultimately "fixed." This tells what neurodivergent people lack rather than what they are, reducing them to a collection of deficiencies. Advocates of neurodiversity, on the other hand, present an alternative viewpoint known as the social model of disability. According to this perspective, society's inability to accept cognitive differences is the issue, not neurodiversity.

Consider this perspective: a wheelchair user is not inherently "disabled"; instead, they become disabled when they encounter a staircase instead of a ramp. In the same way, a dyslexic learner is not naturally "disabled"; they are perceived as such if their educational environment prioritizes written language over aural instruction. The same reasoning holds for neurodivergent people, whose minds work differently but not incorrectly. For this reason, representation is crucial in media and literature. Stories shape public view. The concept that neurodivergence is something to pity over or conquer rather than understand reinforces that neurodivergent individuals are portrayed via a stereotyped perspective, frequently as troubled geniuses, social misfits, or liabilities for families. Nonetheless, authentically representing neurodivergent has the responsibility to question these assumptions and present a more inclusive view of reality.

Neurodiverse literary criticism has become a significant area of research in recent years. Traditional literary study frequently focuses on themes like race, class, and identity. However, what happens if we approach literature from a neurodiverse perspective?

The following are some of the main queries posed by neurodiverse literary critics:

- How are neurodivergent characters portrayed in media and literature?

- Are neurodivergent mental processes reflected in a text's structure? (for instance, fragmented narration, nonlinear storytelling, and sensory overload in descriptions)
- How do neurotypical and neurodivergent readers interpret texts differently?

A neurodiverse perspective, for instance, has led to a reconsideration of Virginia Woolf's stream-of-consciousness narrative style; her portrayal of time, memory, and sensory experiences connects with neurodivergence in current works, transcending neurotypical preconceptions and biases.

Similarly, Mark Haddon challenges readers to view the world differently in *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time* by using a narrative style that reflects the protagonist's autistic perspective. Literary critics can overcome neurotypical preconceptions and biases by using neurodiverse literary criticism to find fresh perspectives on classical and modern works.

Neurodiversity is not merely an abstract concept; it is the reality of many. It shapes the way people think, learn, connect with others, and express themselves. However, while being a component of human experiences, neurodiversity is frequently limited to the field of medicine. This study will look at how neurodivergence is shown in literature and culture. It will focus on two works: *Atypical* and *The Perks of Being a Wallflower*. These texts give important insights into how people understand, interpret, and sometimes misrepresent neurodivergence. We may dispel oversimplified stereotypes and gain a deeper understanding of what it means to be neurodivergent in a society that frequently prioritizes conformity over individual experiences by critically analyzing *The Perks of Being a Wallflower* and *Atypical*.

Chapter 1: Neurodivergence in Literary and Media Narratives

Neurodiversity has long been a part of human society, and how it is portrayed in literature and the media is constantly evolving. Current stories have started to examine these identities more thoroughly and objectively, whereas previous representations frequently leaned into stereotypes or pathologized neurodivergent individuals. In order to give viewers insight into experiences that differ from the neurotypical norm, works such as *Atypical* (2017–2021) and *The Perks of Being a Wallflower* (1999) try to center their narratives around neurodivergence. This chapter critically analyses the representations of neurodivergence in various works, looking at societal themes, narrative style, characterization, and the portrayals' wider ramifications.

The protagonist in *The Perks of Being a Wallflower*- Charlie, demonstrates characteristics that are frequently linked to social anxiety, PTSD, and possibly autism or another type of neurodivergence. Charlie uniquely sees the world. He often reflects on his feelings, is very aware of his surroundings, and struggles with social interactions. The story is unveiled in an epistolary format, consisting of letters written to his friend. These letters show that Charlie has deep feelings and understanding, but he sometimes does not understand social cues. Many neurodivergent people can relate to his character because of his nonlinear cognitive process, difficulties with friendships, and propensity for hyperfocusing on small details.

Similarly, Sam Gardner, the main character in *Atypical*, is a teenager with autism, not only because of his diagnosis but also because of his relationships, development, and growing self-reliance portrayed in the show. In contrast to Charlie, Sam's diagnosis is stated straightforwardly, and from there, the events unravel using internal monologues, a plotted act, and, of course, a recurring motif-penguins, which are his ultimate obsession in life. Sam's

character dispels stereotypes concerning autism with a more complex profile, molded by interactions, maturation, and growing independence beyond the diagnosis. His family struggles are often the background for framing his journey, but the focus is on the difficulty of existing in an otherwise neurotypical world.

The epistolary structure of *The Perks of Being a Wallflower* is one of its most remarkable aspects. Charlie's letters to an unidentified recipient are intimate but fractured, which mirrors his nonlinear thought process. His stories are told emotionally immediately, perhaps without continuity or context, reflecting how neurodivergent people may see and describe their situations. Through this technique, readers can experience Charlie's reality as he does, which is full of strong emotions, abrupt changes in perspective, bewilderment, and epiphanies.

As a visual medium, atypical uses various methods to accomplish the same goal. The show regularly uses voiceovers to provide viewers insight into Sam's thoughts and hear his literal interpretations of social situations. The show's pace and recurrent themes (such as his obsession with Antarctica) reflects his thinking. Even though this viewpoint occasionally seems repetitive, it also highlights how Sam's perception of the world differs from that of those around him and draws the audience into his mental processes.

Sam and Charlie both experience loneliness in different ways. Past trauma of sexual abuse, the horrific death of a close friend, and a general sense of alienation among friends are the leading causes of Charlie's sense of detachment. Despite his desire for connection, he frequently finds himself outside social circles. Though he feels like he fits in because of his friendships with Patrick and Sam, his incapacity to understand social signs or stand up for himself altogether emphasizes the difficulties neurodivergent people have establishing and sustaining relationships.

Sam finds social navigation just as difficult, but it is approached more methodically. He gets much support from his family, especially his mother, when dealing with the outside world. However, *Atypical* also highlights Sam's agency—his wish to be self-sufficient, date, and make his own decisions. His situation mirrors a typical neurodivergent conflict between aiming for self-sufficiency and requiring assistance.

The experiences of neurodivergent persons are shaped by their interactions with neurotypical people; they do not exist in a vacuum. Charlie's family and friends in *Perks of Being a Wallflower* frequently do not fully comprehend him. Although they tolerate him, Patrick and Sam do not always understand how difficult his life is. Similarly, despite their love, his family does not always know how to provide him with emotional support. Many neurodivergent people in the real-world face being misunderstood, even by those closest to them.

Sam's family has a more direct influence on his growth in *Atypical*. Elsa, his mother, is highly protective and represents the typical stereotype of the neurodivergent parent who finds it difficult to let go. Doug, Sam's father, finds it difficult to relate to him initially but eventually makes an effort. Although these relationships are interesting, they occasionally take attention away from Sam's viewpoint by portraying his neurodivergence as a problem for his family rather than a legitimate way of seeing the world.

The notion that neurodivergent individuals "take up space," as though the environment and those around them must continuously change or contract to meet their requirements, is another recurrent theme in the representation of these characters, and this is particularly clear in *The*, as Sam's sister Casey bemoans that Sam has always taken center stage in her life. She highlights the emotional and social sacrifices required of individuals in Sam's orbit during her admissions interview for her new school, explaining how those around

him must be "empty" for him to operate. This idea is further illustrated on her sixteenth birthday when her brother's constant needs take precedence over her special day; in another episode, Sam is shown as taking the attention away from Casey during her victory race, reinforcing the narrative that neurodivergent individuals inherently demand disproportionate attention from their surroundings.

Just as with any work revolving around minority identities and themes, the issue of authenticity vs. creative license arises. Charlie's neurodivergence is never explicitly identified in *Perks of Being a Wallflower*, allowing room for interpretation. This ambiguity makes it possible to talk about neurodivergent experiences more broadly, but it also risks making his difficulties appear to be a result of trauma rather than a natural part of who he is.

Conversely, *Atypical* offers a precise diagnosis but has come under fire for how it represents autism. According to some, Sam's character tends toward stereotypes, especially in the early seasons when neurotypical expectations primarily frame his experiences. Sam is shown as having every sign of a neurodivergent person, even though not everyone has every symptom. Even as the series progresses, it introduces other autistic characters who appear very similar to Sam and have very similar conditions and experiences as he does, which is quite ignorant and ironic for a show concentrating on neuro-diversity.

Atypical and *The Perks of Being a Wallflower* both show the evolving field of neurodivergent representation in media and literature. *Atypical's* (2017–2021) and *The Perks of Being a Wallflower's* (2012) timelines show how the representation of neurodiversity in media evolved. In *The Perks of Being a Wallflower*, the story hints at Charlie's neurodivergence without saying it directly and effectively explores his struggles. By depicting sensations of anguish and social isolation, he represents a previous era's reluctance to talk about and accept neurodivergent people and behavior. *Atypical* shows a

straightforward depiction of Sam's autism, but it emphasizes his viewpoint and examines how it affects his friends and family. This change aligns with a larger cultural movement favoring more precise, specific narratives of neurodiversity over ambiguous representations of neurodivergent people.

Atypical still contains representational challenges, such as the idea that neurodivergent individuals "take up space." This is seen in many instances, especially when his relationship with his sister is portrayed. However, later in the series, Sam's efforts to be independent and self-aware are embraced. A developmental mentality suggests that media narratives are now acknowledging the complexity of neurodivergent characters. Lately, there has been a tendency to give a polished depth to the vista, cultivating a perfect portrayal that embraces subjectivity.

Both texts considered in this study portray the challenges and strengths of neurodivergent individuals. Because it is not black and white, their depictions inspire viewers to see beyond the binary depiction of normal and abnormal and acknowledge the value of a range of cognitive differences. To ensure authenticity and depth in the narratives that have the power to influence public opinion, more stories created by and for neurodivergent people are necessary for real advancement in neurodivergent representation.

Chapter 2: The Role of Storytelling

Storytelling is critical in influencing perceptions of neurodiversity within society. It provides richly nuanced textures around neurodivergent individuals and their experiences. Through literature and media, people come to understand the cognitive, emotional, and social differences faced by neurodivergent people. Two significant works thus far included in this mix are *The Perks of Being a Wallflower* by Stephen Chbosky and *Atypical* on Netflix. Both are excellent neurodivergent protagonists who negotiate intricate social and emotional terrains.

The Perks of Being a Wallflower is an introspective, often confused narrative that demonstrates some qualities associated with neurodivergence-Charlie displays hypersensitivity toward emotions and has great difficulty interpreting social situations, compounded with trauma, which makes him present a very personal and real perspective of a very different functioning mental world from that of a neurotypical (Chbosky). The epistolary format allows the reader direct access to unrestrained "thoughts" from Charlie, mirroring the way some neurodivergent individuals process their feelings internally before externalizing them. That section is significant for creating empathy and understanding among readers, understanding the world through Charlie's eyes (Broderick et al.).

Likewise, *Atypical* makes a more overt, explicit representation of neurodiversity through the character of Sam Gardner, a teenager with such identification. Much can be left to interpretation based on the show's storytelling: Sam's internal monologues externalize his thought process, allowing audiences a direct window into his experience. Sam's very structured thought processes, reliance on routine, and focus on Antarctica are seen in many people on the spectrum, so it reinforces an accurate representation of cognitive differences for an autistic individual. This show, however, goes against the mainstream clichés by showing

Sam's process towards independence, relationships, and self-identity, proving that neurodivergence is not the hindrance people say it is but rather a different way of interaction within the world.

Atypical and *The Perks of Being a Wallflower* illustrate storytelling as a means to dispel myths and enable assimilation. However, the narratives of Charlie and Sam challenge the common stereotype that neurodivergent individuals must conform to societal norms to be accepted. It is likely that different perspectives, emotional degrees, and thinking patterns shaped by it and the media would complement this turn of events. In order to enhance acceptance and understanding of neurodiversity, giving neurodiverse characters a space for representation and amplifying their voices to tell their own stories is valuable for the prevailing culture.

Chapter 3: Challenges and Controversies

Neurodiversity in literature and media has gained much momentum with works like Stephen Chbosky's *The Perks of Being a Wallflower* or Netflix's *Atypical*, which represent neurodivergent people. They are stories that create entry points through which neurodivergent characters interact with society. However, they also call for discussions about their beliefs, stereotypes, and representations. Besides the specific introduction of neurodiversity into the mainstream, they raise ethical questions of faithful portrayal and the obligations of the creators to such neurodiverse representations.

Such representation is one of the many demands neurodivergent activists make for hyperdimensional and authentic representations going beyond stereotypes. *The Perks of Being a Wallflower* depicts Charlie, a character possessing characteristics that could be interpreted as belonging to either autism spectrum disorder (ASD) or posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD). However, the state is never explicitly diagnosed; thus, allowing identification with an extensive range of neurodivergent readers puts one at risk of propagating vague or inaccurate assumptions about neurodiversity. Likewise, *Atypical* follows teenager Sam Gardner, who was diagnosed with autism and represented, but the audience of the early seasons criticized it as relying more on a one-dimensional cue- socially awkward and emotionally disassociated from autists (Rowe).

Research emphasizes how accurate such representation should be. Silberman's TED Talk "The Forgotten History of Autism" (TED 2015) demonstrates how mainstream portrayals often focus on savants or deficits in social skills and not on the entire spectrum of autism. Such a distorted picture affects the public's perception and consequently shapes the experiences of neurodivergent individuals (Baron-Cohen et al., 2013).

Treif portrayals of neurodivergent people considered by the media often go into the brilliant but socially clueless (*The Good Doctor*), the eccentric side character (*The Big Bang Theory*), or the troubled individual (*Rain Man*). While *Atypical* forged new ground in considering how autism evolved within families, it initially portrayed Sam in ways reinforcing stereotypical assumptions about rigid thinking and emotional unrecognition (Gillespie-Lynch et al., 2017). In addition, Charlie, in *The Perks of Being a Wallflower*, is described in terms of emotional detachment and social difficulties that relate to neurodivergent attributes but are insufficiently examined regarding cognitive formations and identity constructions.

One of the fundamental questions is whether a character should be labeled as 'neurodivergent' in a story. Charlie's neurodivergence is ambiguous, leaving him open to different interpretations by diverse readers. However, this ambiguity can also mean a lack of deeper discussion about neurodiversity.

The first season of *Atypical* attracted criticism for having neurotypical writers on board, with accusations of portraying autism solely with a neurotypical lens. However, later seasons, where the involvement of autistic actors and consultants increased, lent more authenticity to the storytelling. This aspect has focused on the importance of involving neurodivergent voices in story formation to produce realistic and respectful representations.

This issue has long remained at odds concerning media representation-"cropping up" neurotypical actors who portray neurodivergent roles. In *Atypical*, concerns arose about whether an autistic individual could instead have played Sam, who was acted here by neurotypical Gilchrist. The media have also received criticism for casting neurotypical actors in the roles of neurodivergent characters, such as Dustin Hoffman in *Rain Man*.

Authenticity in storytelling extends beyond casting. Misinformation comes from the misrepresentation of neurodivergent experiences. Such inaccuracies may alter social attitudes and affect policy-making. For example, a study conducted by Huws & Jones (2015) explains how media inaccurately drawing with stereotypical brushes contributes to misunderstanding and the social exclusion of autistic individuals. For instance, powerfully stereotypical representations of autism equating it with savant capabilities create unreal expectations while masking how a great many autistic people deal with daily challenges.

Accurate representation depends on the storytelling inclusion of neurodivergent poise. Success stories of *Atypical*, especially in their later seasons, showcase the need to foster and consult neurodivergent voices. Likewise, neurodivergent voices- Naoki Higashida gave an important perspective that challenges the biases of mainstream media (Higashida, 2013).

Neurodivergence does not exist in a vacuum; intersectional concerns on gender, race, and socioeconomic background must also be weighed. *The Perks of Being a Wallflower* proposes insights into Charlie's experiences that do not account for how any potential neurodivergence interplays with his trauma and mental health. In contrast, *Atypical* does look into how Sam's autism affects his social relationships but largely neglects how race and class intersect in shaping neurodivergent experiences. Future representations in literature and media must embrace intersectionality in their quest for multidimensional and thought-provoking representations.

Chapter 4: Conclusion

The cultural evolution of neurodiversity in literature and media attests to its relevance in shaping societal ideas. As this research has analyzed, the art of storytelling acts as both a mirror and a mold; it reflects the dominant attitudes even as it has the potency to bring about change. *The Perks of Being a Wallflower* and *Atypical* are excellent case studies that show how the representation of neurodivergent characters sometimes defies stereotypes and other times perpetuates them. These mixed representations have increased visibility yet also reveal the challenges and issues in the media representation of neurodivergent individuals.

One of the key learnings for this discussion is the ability of authentic storytelling to build empathy and understanding. The epistolary form of *The Perks of Being a Wallflower* gives readers immediate access to Charlie's inner world, capturing both emotional and cognitive issues often encountered with neurodivergence. The same goes for *Atypical*, where the inside view of Sam's structured thinking and sensory experiences highlights the strengths and struggles of an autistic young man. These narratives express the importance of depth and nuance in representation so that neurodivergent characters are not merely regarded as stereotypes but are appreciated as real people.

Nevertheless, media representations of neurodiversity remain problematic. A common critique is the tendency either to romanticize neurodivergence or to paint it merely as a constricting foil character. Sam Gardner's character development began with the stereotype of someone socially awkward or emotionally detached, and by later seasons, more accurate portrayals were then included. Likewise, Charlie's portrayal is open to wide interpretations and may reinforce very vague or misleading notions of neurodivergence. Unfortunately, the lack of protagonists who are unambiguously diagnosed and known with neurodivergence in

numerous works of literature and media attests to the ongoing unwillingness to portray the realities of neurodiverse experiences.

The ethics of representation have been hotly debated. Concerns about validity arose when neurotypical creators, writers, and actors told neurodivergent stories. *Atypical* drew criticism for initially not employing neurodivergent perspectives for its writing, a situation that changed when autistic writers and actors were brought in for consultation. Historically, there seems to be an ongoing debate on neurotypical actors being cast to portray neurodivergent characters in *Rain Man*, *The Good Doctor*, etc. While these portrayals have the potential to foster awareness, they risk distorting views by expressing neurodivergent lives through a neurotypical lens. There is an urgent need to promote inclusion in storytelling, such that neurodivergent people are not only represented but also work to shape their narratives. Writers and filmmakers must deviate from mono-dimensional depictions and seek to engage with neurodivergent communities toward richer and more accurate representations. The presence of intersectionality must, therefore, be held in view. Neurodivergence cannot be examined in isolation; it intersects with race, gender, and socio-economic status. Future stories set in literature and media need to account for such complexity if they are to be understood fully in their representations of neurodivergent experiences.

Literature and media have made strides into the world of neurodivergence, but not enough. The conversation must be transformed from mere representation to active inclusion, where neurodivergent voices take charge of the narrative. With a commitment to authenticity, accuracy, and inclusion, media and literature can transform the climate around neurodivergence, correcting myths and advancing acceptance toward creating a society that celebrates neurodiversity.

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