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Endnotes

¹This stylistic device was first used in the disability context in India in the presentation "Are We All Alike? Questioning the Pathologies of the *Normate*" made at the "Inequalities in India" conference held at the University of Delhi on 28 November 2014.

² Although in a discussion following a book launch event for Anita Ghai's present book on 14 May 2015 at the India International Centre, New Delhi (see a report of the event in the Reports this issue), I had sounded a critical note about the activist/scholar

mix not being ideal. I have grown to appreciate it in disability writing by scholars who are themselves disabled.

³ From Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* III.1 retrieved web-version from <http://classics.mit.edu/Aristotle/nicomachaen.3.iii.html>

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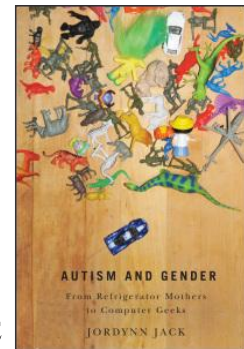
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Autism and Gender: From Refrigerator Mothers to Computer Geek. Urbana, Chicago, and Springfield: University of Illinois, pp 320.

Jordynn Jack (2014).

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Reviewed by: Santosh Kumar



Autism and Gender is the outcome of a workshop on "Science and its Publics" at the Rhetoric Society of American Summer Institute at Pennsylvania State University. The discourse on autism has so far been dominated by a medical perspective. The medical model of disability situates disability in the individual and suggests medical intervention, which leaves not only a gap between the knowledge of autism and the experience of individuals and people around them, "but stories as well: stories about children affected, about parents struggling to come to terms with a diagnosis, about autistic individuals and their lives" (pp. 1-2).

This book offers an engaging account of how gender intersects with other discursively

constituted factors such as parenthood (maternity and paternity), expertise (especially technical, medical, and scientific), occupation, social status (popularity and geekdom), and neurological conditions (p. 13). It also extends the argument of women's rhetoric in which gender has been understood to be enacted through writing. The author further explores feminist science studies which are entrenched within biased scientific knowledge about gender; she believes that gender analysis can strengthen the science (p. 15).

The book is divided into five chapters excluding the Introduction and the Conclusion. In the introduction, "Autism's Gendered Character", the author familiarizes the readers with the different nuances of definitions of autism. The aim is to examine the different models of definitions of autism and to see the ways in which gender has been used as a resource to constitute these definitions (p. 6). The chapter presents a survey of medical, psychiatric, neurodiverse, biomedical, historical and cultural definitions by taking into consideration the perspectives of the different stakeholders in the debate on autism. The author presents a rhetorical history of gender in autism discourse from which the subtitle of the book, *From Refrigerator Mothers to Computer Geeks* emerges.

In the first chapter, "Interpreting Gender: Refrigerator Mothers", the author traces the role of mothers of autistic children. The gendered character of refrigerator mothers provided an interpretive lens through which experts in the field perceived autism as a unique disorder when it was first diagnosed. During the 1950s, mothers of autistic children were often referred to as "refrigerator mothers" as they did not show enough bond or connection with their child. The gender axis became evident when doctors prescribed psychological consultation for such mothers. The author brings

forth the character of refrigerator mothers in contemporary autism research involving parent-child interactions, bonding, stress, and attachment. In the subsection "Interpreting Mothers", the author shows that the historical tendency to understand autism through the character of the cold and anxious mother stems from the vast range of literature which often decodes the stereotype of the cold mother.

The second chapter "Performing Gender: Mother Warriors" presents the history of mothers who took a stand on autism and its causes in public discourse and challenged the dominant understanding of autism as a genetic neurological condition. This was a kind of collective response by some celebrity mothers of autistic children to the previous interpretation of "refrigerator mother". Accordingly, mothers of autistic children were encouraged to envision themselves as fighters and superheroes. This chapter consists of four sections, the first section deals with total motherhood and its source, dissecting the character of the total autism mother and how it has been constructed and circulated. The second section presents memoirs of mothers of autistic children. The third section deals with the illustration of the image of the mother warrior character spread across blogs, magazines and websites. The final section talks about the importance of responding to mothers' arguments by the scientific community. There is an argument between the rhetorical force of mother warrior characters and paternalistic doctors that relies on emotional appeals. However, in the debate on vaccination, the mothers of autistic children and the doctors are often pitted against each other; they use the emotional and ethical appeal to provoke the readers into action.

The third chapter, "Presenting Gender: Computer Geek" examines how a different character has been presented as an alternative explanation of the causes and nature of autism. This chapter

introduces the stock character of “computer geek” which “emerged from a rhetorical landscape in which commonplaces about masculinity, males, geeks, and technology are already in place” (p. 106), and came to the forefront in an economic context driven by the internet era of the 1990s. From Mark Zuckerberg to Bill Gates, this stock characterization of autism led to claims such as “there would be no Silicon Valley without autistic people” (p. 106). The author engagingly considers the rhetorical context for this stock portrayal in the rest of the chapter. She argues that the prominence of stock characters as male geeks and nerds in television, literature, and film led to making of these characters trope of autistic people mistaking the part for the whole (p. 153). This kind of approach ignores the reality of autism disorder spectrum (ADS).

Chapter 4, “Rehearsing Gender: Autism Dads” brings a fresh perspective on autism research. It shifts the focus on the male presence, especially that of the fathers in autism research which has so far been overlooked in literature. Instead, a skewed overemphasis on the role of the father created a character type—fathers of autistic children were marked as “obsessive, detached, and humorless individuals” and “perfectionistic to the extreme, occupied with detailed minutiae to the exclusion of concern for over-all meanings” (p. 155). This chapter is built on the accounts written by fathers who use autobiographical writing to rehearse new, authoritative characters in their own lives and in public discourse. The author however finds a lacuna in the existing research as there is an absence of narratives from homosexual fathers. It is important to note that autistic people often include alternative gender identification and sexual preferences in their accounts.

The last chapter before the conclusion considers how autistic people understand gender, identity, and sexuality which are contrary to the

contemporary theories on gender. Chapter 5, “Inventing Gender: Neurodiverse Character” rightly highlights the diversity of the cognitive abilities of autistic people. The author presents a different set of characters from the accounts written by autistic people who embrace multiple configurations of sex, gender, and sexuality through the lenses of rhetoric and neurodiversity. The chapter ends with advice which often seeks to shore up normative gender roles for autistic individuals, especially in the case of girls. However, this mainstream advice is not authored by autistic individuals, which means that it is a kind of policing of gender through a process of remediation which “limit the potentially transformative insights that might be gleaned from autistic individuals and their experiences” (p. 213). The author argues that the contemporary theories of gender are not sufficient to account for the range of insights autistic people offer. We might draw from autistic people “an understanding of gender as identification, as a neurological condition or capacity, as performance, and as idiosyncratic” (ibid). The subsection “Gender, Character, and Rhetoric” highlights the parts each concept plays in understanding autism. The concluding part of the book categorically highlights the implications of this contribution in the field of autism, gender, rhetorics of health and medicine. The author concludes by saying that the gendered characters examined in this study are in part responsible for making autism a target for remedy.

To summarize, this book thoroughly examines how gendered characters emerge in the discourse on autism in terms of the theories about autism and its causes, and the ways to treat it. It also involves people who speak and write about autism. However, these characters are interpreted, performed, presented, rehearsed and invented through rhetorical actions that approach autism as a problem that has to be

fixed. This book adopts a multidisciplinary approach, drawing on research in the area of feminist science studies, cultural and rhetorical studies of medicine, and disability studies. This approach is also helpful in understanding the role of language which shapes our conceptions of health and wellness. The author acknowledges that the focus on gender has narrowed the scope of other aspects of autism (p. 30). However, for educators, the enriched understanding of the rhetorical theory of autism challenges their pedagogies with regard to autistic students and their abilities. The author seeks to examine the ways in which rhetorics deploy gendered characters in discussions about autism through the history of gender in autism discourse. This book is a vivid journey of autism discourse with authentic accounts to understand autism. In India, autism has not got much prominence especially in mainstream educational discourses. The present contribution therefore enriches our understanding as teachers, and pushes us to consider the various aspects discussed in the book while dealing with autistic children in the classroom in particular and disabled children in general.

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