



## **SIGNS TERRIFY THE PEOPLE WITH DOWN SYNDROME: A SEMIOTIC STUDY OF MARK HADDON'S THE CURIOUS INCIDENT OF THE DOG IN THE NIGHT –TIME**

**Dr. A. Shahul Hameed**

*Asst. Professor of English the New College (Autonomous) Chennai.*

The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time is a 2003 mystery novel by British writer Mark Haddon. The novel is narrated in the first-person perspective by Christopher John Francis Boone, a 15-year-old Autistic boy who can't read others' faces and put himself in others' shoes. He can't understand anything more than the literal meaning of whatever is said to him. Autism is a cognitive disease that leaves those who have it struggling to perceive even the most basic of human emotions. It has become tough now a day's even for a normal person to predict the meaning of a word, phrase and a sentence as they signify different signified. It is even worse in the case of the people with Disabilities. One of the major characters of any language is its "arbitrariness", which simply means that there may not be any necessary relationship between a word's meaning and what it refers to. Also, there are no set rules that language follows for the combination of signs in order to produce complete thoughts which vary from one language to another. This is one reason why language can be quite difficult to learn and comprehend.

There is an acute failure to capture arbitrary signs in a language by individuals suffering from Down syndrome. This study brings out the difficulties faced by Christopher, a character with disability in the novel in different situations by the use of figurative language, emotions and language and logic.

### **Figurative language**

Even from the first few chapters of the novel, we are introduced to the protagonist Christopher's biggest hurdle in terms of communication - understanding figurative language. We get the first glimpse of this in chapter 29, where he cites the use of metaphors in conversations as one main reason to find people confusing to comprehend.

"I find people confusing. This is for two main reasons. The first main reason is that people  
Do a lot of talking without using any words..."

"The second main reason is that people often talk using metaphors:

I laughed my socks off.

He was the apple of her eye.

They had a skeleton in the cupboard.

We had a real pig of a day.

The dog was stone dead." (Haddon 19)

He then traces the origin of the word "Metaphor" to its Greek roots where it simply translates as, "carry something from one place to another". Following that he states his reason for finding this figure of speech a very unnatural device.

I think it should be called a lie because a pig is not like a day and people do not have skeletons in their cupboard. And when I try and make a picture of the phrase in my head it just confuses me because imagining an apple in someone's eye doesn't have anything to do with liking someone a lot and it makes you forget what the person was talking about. (Haddon 20)



From the above lines, it can be deduced that there is an acute failure to grasp the essence of the metaphorical expressions. This is predominantly owing to the inability to let go of its mere literal use. A similar instance can be seen in the preceding lines where he expresses his concern of identity with respect to the spiritual significance of his name. He knows that he shares his name with the name of the Saint who carried Jesus Christ across a river. This is again derived from the Greek equivalent and so is a metaphor too, according to him. He further raises questions on what his name could have been before the incident and believes it to be a lie too. In spite of his disability, he seems certain of his identity as an individual though as he says, “I do not want my name to mean a story about being kind and helpful. I want my name to mean me” (Haddon 20). A similar such instance can be seen in chapter 103, when there is a conversation between him and Mr. Rhodri, a friend of his father’s.

Then Rhodri said to me, ‘God, you do get the third degree, don’t you?’

But I didn’t know what *the third degree* was.

And I said, ‘I’m doing very well, thank you,’ which is what you’re meant to say.

(Haddon 84)

Here we learn as to how, in the failure to comprehend figurative language, individuals with learning disabilities resolve to respond to a question even without knowing what it is meant to imply. But, despite his limitations of figurative knowledge, it is indeed surprising that he understands, to an extent, a literary term like “rhetoric question” as expressed in chapter 127.

Then he said, ‘Holy f\*\*\*ing Jesus, Christopher. How stupid are you?’

This is what Siobhan says is called a rhetorical question. It has a question mark at the end, but you are not meant to answer it because the person who is asking it already knows the answer. It is difficult to spot a rhetorical question.

(Haddon 102)

This further validates the hypothesis that these individuals limit their response to the information pertaining to the subject and cannot alternate it easily based on their convenience. As a result, Children with AS appear to have particular weaknesses in the areas of non-literal language that includes humour, irony, teasing and sarcasm. A number of communicative problems Christopher encounters are due to his inability to identify and associate with these expressions alien to him.

### **Difficulty in capturing emotions:**

Individuals with Aspergers may have an impaired theory of mind which makes it difficult to understand the thought, feelings and emotions of other people and how that relates to oneself. Aspergers syndrome is mostly associated with difficulties in social relationships and communications. Throughout the story, we are aware of the difficulties Christopher encounters because of his inability to capture people’s emotions which he thinks are not computable. We are introduced to this vital piece of information in chapter 3 first.

Eight years ago when I first met Siobhan, she showed me this picture.

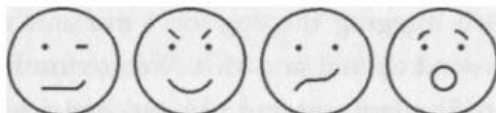




And I knew that it meant ‘sad’ which is what I felt when I found the dead dog.  
Then she showed me this picture.



And I knew it meant ‘happy’, like when I’m reading about the Apollo space missions, or when I am still awake at three or four in the morning and I can walk up and down the street and pretend that I am the only person in the whole world. Then she drew some pictures.



But I was unable to say what these meant. (Haddon 2)

In Chapter 13, as he explains the nature of his book, and again in chapter 167, he even confesses that he “cannot tell jokes” as he “does not understand them” (Haddon 150), following which he gives an example wherein he explains how different jokes have different meanings and so, he cannot focus on different things at the same time. Christopher further exhibits his frustration at his inability to understand sign language used by people during a conversation as expressed in chapter 29

I find people confusing. The first main reason is that people do a lot of talking without using any words. Siobhan says that if you raise one eyebrow it can mean a lot of different things. It can mean ‘I want to do sex with you’ and it can also mean ‘I think that what you just said was very stupid’.

Siobhan also says that if you close your mouth and breathe out loudly through your nose it can mean that you are relaxed or that you are bored or that you are angry and all that depends on how much air comes out of your nose and how fast and what shape your mouth is when you do it and how you are sitting and what you said before and hundreds of other things which are too complicated to work out in a few seconds. (Haddon 155)

Also, in chapter 73 we see the ultimate evidence of his eccentric personality as explained in his own words when he talks of his “Behavioural problems” (Haddon 59) some of them which include,

- C. Not like being touched
- K. Not noticing that people are angry with me
- L. Not smiling
- M. Saying things that other people think are rude.

(Haddon 59)

It is very challenging to talk about the feeling of love prevalent in the book as Christopher in all his ignorance, does not even understand what the term love means and so, reduces it to some kind of a transaction of favours. As he has a difficulty in understanding other people's mind with their gestures, it adds to our feeling of empathising with him. The fact that he doesn't much details to others is because he is incapable of understanding the working of others minds.

And father said, ‘Christopher do you understand that I love you?’



And I said, ‘yes’ because loving someone is helping them when they get into trouble, and looking after them, and telling them the truth, and father looks after me when I get into trouble, like coming to the police station, and he looks after me by cooking meals for me, and he always tell me the truth, which means that he loves me.

And then he held up his right hand and spread his fingers out in a fan, and I held up my left hand and spread my fingers out in a fan and we made our fingers and thumbs touch each other. (Haddon 109)

This description not only presents to us, a picture of a youngster torn between logic and emotion but projects his inability to empathise which is a key feature of this disorder. We even learn towards the end of the novel that; his sense of reasoning takes the upper hand as he concludes his dad to be very much capable of killing him as he killed the dog too. In this naive assumption, he oversees all those years of consistent paternal love that his dad showered upon him and resolves to an impulsive reaction owing to his lack of comprehending human emotions.

### **Language and Logic**

One of the major conflicts in the novel is the one between language and logic. His rules of logical reasoning don’t share accordance with the ambiguity of language and results in his distinctive responses which would otherwise appear disturbing to an observer. We find the first traces of this in chapter 59,

This is because I do not always do what I am told.

And this is because when people usually tell you what to do it is usually confusing and does not make any sense.

For example, people often say ‘Be quiet’ but they don’t tell you how long to be quiet for. Or you see a sign which says KEEP OFF THE GRASS or KEEP OFF ALL THE GRASS IN THIS PARK because there is lots of grass you are allowed to walk on. (Haddon 38)

In the above cited example, we can presume that Christopher requires every order explained in minute details so he can work accordingly. To him language acts as a set of codes which need to be carefully discharged in order to ensure a loss of misunderstanding. This is perhaps one reason why he finds his trainer in school quite reliable when it comes to giving orders. He explains it in chapter 59, Siobhan understands. When she tells me not to do something she tells me exactly what it is that I am not allowed to do. And I like this.

For example, she once said, ‘You must not punch Sarah or hit her in any way Christopher. Even if hits you first. If she does hit you again, move away and stand still and count from 1 to 50, then come and tell me what she has done, or tell one of the other members of the staff what she has done.’  
(Haddon 39)

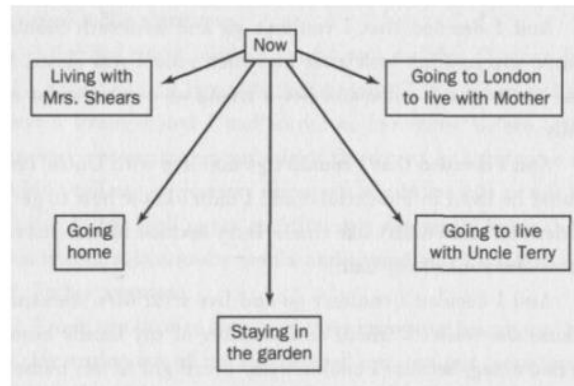
Also, in many ways logic takes precedence over instinct. At no point in the novel does he ever rely on his intuitions to confront a problem. There is a certain reference throughout the book to logical puzzles, maths problems and maps which to him provide means to a clear solution. Because Christopher suffers from a form of OCD (obsessive compulsive disorder), his tolerance for disorder is unbearable. To him, an orderly life is his only solace, ensuring his survival in an otherwise disoriented world. So when confronted with a chaotic encounter, his reliance on escape mechanisms becomes apparent.



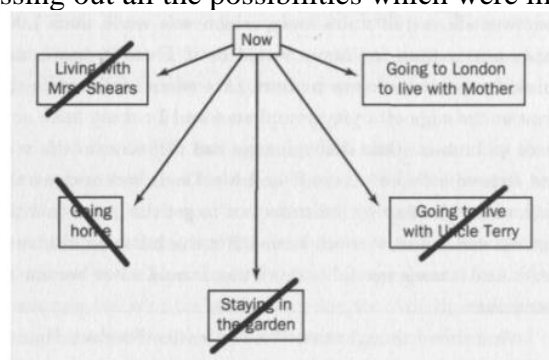
And this shows that intuitions can sometimes get things wrong. And intuition is what people use in life to make decisions. But logic can help you work out the right answers. (Haddon 238)

Also, on more than one occasion, he resolves to carefully scheduling his every move and action. In times of crises, he executes to check the probability of choices and choose the best option among it. By doing this, he is certain of a good consequence that would aid him through the crucial phase.

And then I realised that there was nothing I could do which felt safe. And I made a picture of it in my head like this



And then I imagined crossing out all the possibilities which were impossible... And it was like this



(Haddon 238)

Also, the fact that he takes refuge in analytical subjects like maths and sciences is proof enough that he enjoys their rules, accessibility and puzzle like qualities which may not apply to language. He is used to organizing his thinking all times. So much that he draws timetables to ensure following a perfect plan. According to him, this tool represents a part of a world where ambiguity is not possible and there is an answer for all question. By planning in advance, he feels secure of his actions.

And then I Formulated a Plan. And that made me feel better because there was something in my head that had an order and a pattern and I just had to follow the instructions one after the other (Haddon 238)

### Conclusion

Mark Haddon's "The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time (2003) and provide information given by the protagonist Christopher Boone to validate the point that language and sings terrify by keeping him inaccessible to the language and making him failed in communication. By learning his character, intricacies, language skills and the way he functions in the society, we could perceive the working of a disabled mind and thereby understand the truth that he is terrified by the nuances of



capturing arbitrary signs in a language. By carefully analysing the narrative style employed by him, his idiosyncrasies and descriptions of both himself and others around, it enables readers to comprehend the working mind of an individual with learning disabilities and suggests the inference that the protagonist suffers from Down syndrome.

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