

Neurodivergent Protagonists in Modern Fiction through the Lens of Neurodiversity and Disability Studies

Abdusamiev Dilmurod Abdugani Ugli¹

¹Head, Department of Humanitarian Sciences and Pedagogy, Faculty of Humanities & Pedagogy, Turan International University, Namangan, Uzbekistan. E-mail: abdusamiyev1993@bk.ru,
Orcid: <https://orcid.org/0009-0000-0934-5783>

Abstract: Portrayals of neurodivergent heroes in modern literature have garnered increasing attention in the last few years. Representation of more nuanced, varied human experiences in literature has shifted the portrayal of neurodivergent individuals away from stereotypes and toward realism. The aim of the current study is to analyze the relevance of such representations, considering neurodiversity and disability studies. The current study intends to analyze the representations of neurodivergent protagonists in modern literature and the impact of such representations on the popular understandings of neurodivergence. The study also attempts to analyze the literary devices in the works of authors to describe the reality of neurodivergent experiences. The study consists of a literature survey of the key texts engaging with the neurodivergent protagonists and the narrative techniques of first-person, stream of consciousness, and non-linear narratives. The concepts of stigma, self-identity, social acceptance, and overcoming challenges as they relate to the neurodivergent characters are also discussed in the paper. Results indicate that neurodivergent heroes play a significant role in the process of dismantling social stigma and promoting empathy. These characters are developed in a complex way, showing individual development and overcoming social difficulties. The paper emphasizes that the application of certain narrative techniques can be used to better comprehend the neurodivergent experiences and to create a more inclusive representation. The mapping of neurodivergent characters in contemporary fiction is vital in changing the attitude of society towards neurodiversity. The paper recommends new studies on how neurodivergence intersects with other identity variables and the possibility of literature making an impact on culture and policy changes at large.

Key Words: Neurodivergence, neurodiversity, disability studies, literary analysis, stigma, self-identity, representation.

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Introduction

Neurodivergent characters, who have cognitive or neurological differences (such as autism, ADHD, or dyslexia), have become more common in contemporary fiction in recent years (Webber et al., 2024). These figures defy the conventional representations of disability and provide subtle, complicated examples of people who think, experience, and act in the world in different ways. This sub-section summarizes how neurodivergence has been depicted in modern literature and how the notion of stereotypical and simplistic characters has been changed to more realistic and multi-dimensional characters in various genres (Abad, 2021).

The theories of neurodiversity and disability studies provide an important perspective to study and analyze neurodivergent characters in fiction (Cormier & Boehning, 2025). Neurodiversity highlights the naturalness of human brain and behavior, disputing the notion that neurological distinctions should be considered as deficiencies (Creechan, 2025). Instead, disability studies critically analyze the ways in which

society constructs and responds to disability and it addresses issues like representation, accessibility, and social justice. In this subsection, I present these two important frameworks and describe how they are important to the analysis of literature and the representation of neurodivergent heroes (Gibson et al., 2025).

The study of neurodivergent characters in literature is both vital to the study of how fiction is a reflection and a driver of social attitudes and also to the discussion of the value of diversity in representation (Marks & Irish, 2026). Literature can be relevant concerning the perceptions of neurodivergence by those reading it, as well as developing empathy and understanding (Bailey, 2023). Through the lens of the way neurodivergent characters cope with the world and respond to others, this paper will highlight the importance of correct and positive representation in fiction, as well as its ability to break stereotypes and lower stigma (Morrison, 2019).

The main aim of this paper is to discuss how neurodivergent protagonists are represented in contemporary fiction through the prism of neurodiversity and disability studies. The article hopes to examine the characterizations, narrative skills, and thematic aspects that define these images. Lastly, it plans to see how these representations influence social attitudes and provide suggestions for literature to enhance considerate and inclusive understandings of neurodiversity. The goal is to evaluate the major works and analyze what impression these representations have made and contribute to the broadening discourse of representation of disability in today's literature.

This paper has several main components. Section II, Literature Review, will provide and analyze the historical context and progression of neurodivergence in literature. In Section III, Theoretical Framework, the author will offer and apply the concepts of neurodiversity and disability studies. Section IV, Analysis of Neurodivergent Protagonists in Modern Fiction, will evaluate some of the key works of literature that include characters who are neurodivergent. Section V, Discussion, will analyze how these representations affect society regarding neurodivergence. Lastly, the Conclusion, Section VI, recapitulates the results of the paper and proposes future research directions.

Literature Review

Historical representations of neurodivergence in literature have changed a great deal and tend to include attitudes of society towards disability and mental health (Stimson, 2023). The initial manifestations of neurodivergence in literature were based mainly on stereotypes and negative images, in which neurodivergent characters were either villains, victims, or pitiable (Hagopian, 2025). As society started to comprehend mental health and neurological differences, the complexity and variety of such characters in literature also expanded (Montalti, 2025). This part follows this historical process, pointing out the important events in the history of neurodivergence representation in literature (Bergenmar, 2025).

Neurodiversity and disability studies provide the key concepts in the examination of neurodivergent characters in literature. The neurodiversity studies focus on the importance of neurological differences and promote a more inclusive concept of cognitive variation. Instead, disability studies analyze the ways in which literature shapes disability and interacts with the questions of representation, power, and social justice. This sub-subsection examines the primary works that interpret the literature employing these frameworks and how they have advanced the reading of neurodivergent characters and narratives (Battis, 2021).

Historically, the dimensionality of neurodivergent characters has evolved from basic to more detailed and elaborate. This section focuses upon the neurodivergence approaches in the Victorian, the Modernist,

and the Contemporary periods, and emphasizes the transformation in character treatment and the use of literary techniques authored as a result of changing perceptions around mental illness and neurobiological differences (Dall'Asta, 2021).

Literature is essential in determining societal viewpoints with regard to neurodivergence, both in terms of social attitudes and social acceptance of neurodivergent individuals. This sub-section provides a review of past studies that have done so with respect to how literary embodiments of neurodivergent characters influenced the neurodivergence awareness of readers, either positively or negatively. It discusses how fiction can be powerful to break stereotypes, create empathy, and add to the wider discussion of inclusion and disability rights.

Theoretical Framework

Explanation of neurodiversity and disability studies

Neurodiversity is a term that acknowledges the neurological disparities, including autism, ADHD, and dyslexia, as normal variations of the human experience instead of deficits and disorders. It promotes the embracing of these differences as human diversity. On the other hand, disability studies is concerned with social, cultural, and political consequences of disability and the necessity to confront the societal norms that marginalize the disabled. The following subsection describes these two interrelated models, their relevance to disability and neurodiversity re-conceptualization.

Key principles from these fields relevant to literary analysis

The major concepts of neurodiversity and disability studies are the concept of the social model of disability, which presupposes that disability is not inherent in a person but is the result of social limitations. Intersectionality is another key principle in the study of disability in relation to various aspects of identity (e.g., race, gender, class) and their interplay. Such frameworks play a significant role in the analysis of literary works because they prompt one to think critically about the way literary texts build disability and neurodivergence, providing other alternative ways of thinking that oppose the orthodox, ableist discourse. This subsection describes how these ideas underpin the study of neurodivergent characters in literature.

Application of these theories to modern fiction

This section applies the theoretical frameworks of neurodiversity and disability studies to the analysis of neurodivergent protagonists of modern fiction. This paper examines how contemporary authors depict neurodivergent characters as complete beings with agency and profound complexity, rather than relegating them to the status of mere clichés or tragic figures. The theories examine the different ways in which neurodivergent characters traverse their worlds, defy social conventions, and construct their identities. This subsection shows that these theories can illuminate the representation of neurodivergence, thus creating a more welcoming and understanding view of neurodivergent leads in modern literature.

Analysis of Neurodivergent Protagonists in Modern Fiction

Selection Criteria for Novels and Protagonists

The choice of novels and neurodivergent characters is made based on a number of criteria, among them the prevalence of neurodivergence in the narrative, the genre of the work, and its effect on literature and readers. The protagonists have been selected because of the centrality of their role in the narrative and

the depth of the neurodivergence that is developed. The critical response of the work, such as its impact on the discussion of neurodiversity, is also a major consideration in determining which texts to analyze.

Table 1: Selection Criteria for Neurodivergent Protagonists

Novel	Protagonist	Neurodivergence	Genre	Impact/Critical Reception
The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time	Christopher Boone	Autism Spectrum Disorder	Literary Fiction	Highly praised for its authentic portrayal of autism
The Rosie Project	Don Tillman	Asperger's Syndrome	Romantic Comedy	Popular bestseller, positive reception for humor and depth
The Speed of Dark	Lou Arrendale	Autism Spectrum Disorder	Science Fiction	Nominated for several awards, explores deep ethical questions

Some important literary works featuring neurodivergent characters are presented in Table 1. The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time depicts the character of Christopher Boone, who has autism spectrum disorder, in a critically acclaimed literary work that is applauded as an accurate depiction of autism. The Rosie Project is a romantic comedy that stars Don Tillman, a man with Asperger's syndrome, and was well-received due to its humor and richness. The Speed of Dark is a science fiction novel that features Lou Arrendale, an autistic person with an autism spectrum disorder, which raises a number of ethical concerns and is nominated for various awards. The novels are chosen based on their effect, display of neurodivergence, and critical reception.

Close Reading of Key Texts Featuring Neurodivergent Protagonists

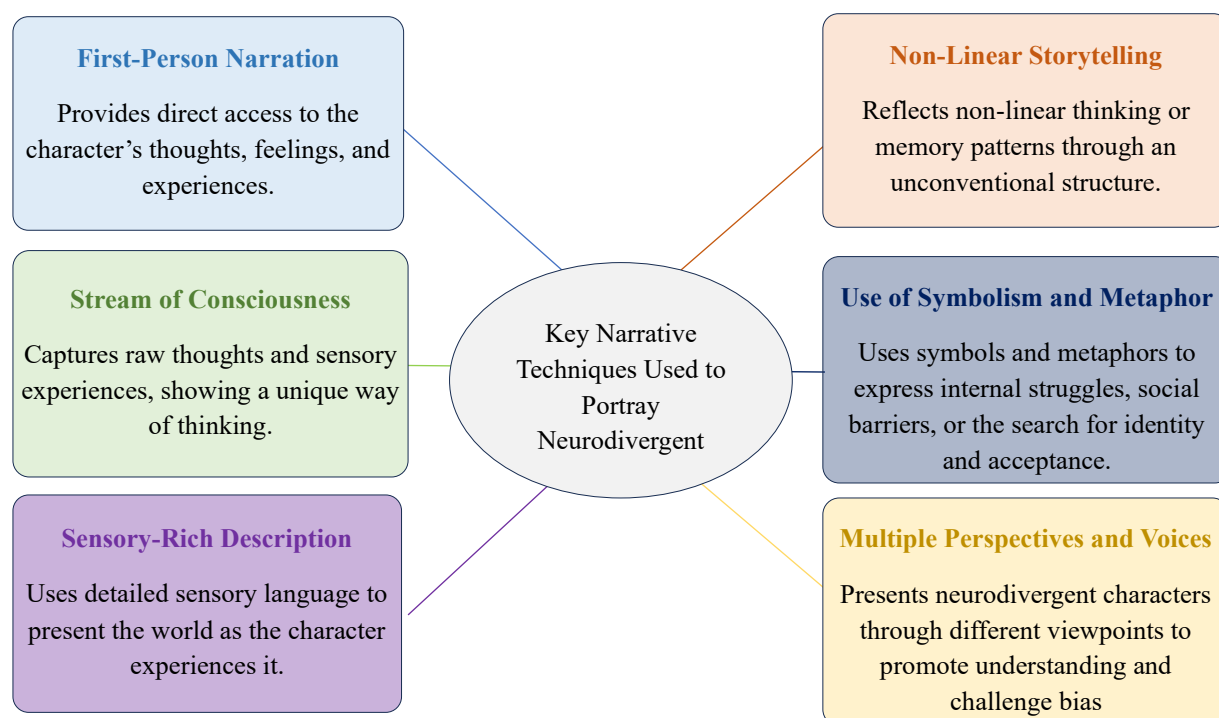


Figure 1: Key Narrative Techniques Used to Portray Neurodivergent Characters

Figure 1 presents a systematic map that demonstrates some of the prominent narrative tools to depict neurodivergent characters in contemporary fiction. The scheme has a central circle, which is linked to six rectangular panels, each of which brings into focus a different narrative technique. These include techniques like first-person narration, stream of consciousness, sensory description, non-linear storytelling, symbolism, metaphors, and using multiple perspectives and voices. Each of the panels presents the

technique, along with examples of renowned writings with neurodivergent protagonists. This diagram aims to show the positive impact of the above methods in constructing truthful and empathetic representations of neurodivergent characters and in encouraging readers to understand the nuanced and complex cognitive and emotional lives of these characters.

This study elaborates on the portrayal of neurodivergent protagonists in several selected works. It will analyse the focus of the most important scenes, the relationships between the characters, and the structure of the authors' plots in order to capture the ways in which the inner existences of neurodivergent characters and the unique challenges they face are represented. Particular attention is given to the language used to describe these characters, their relationships with others, and their social context, as they are instrumental in establishing the sense of neurodivergence for the readers.

Analysis of Character Development, Narrative Techniques, and Portrayal of Neurodivergence

This section will evaluate how neurodivergent protagonists grow throughout the narrative and analyze how that connects with the protagonists' struggles and the evolution of their relationships. Here, the focus will be on the elements of narrative that pertain to neurodivergence, such as structure, point of view, and dialogue. This section will also critique how the protagonist's neurodivergent behaviors are portrayed and analyze how their evolution and the transformation of the world around the protagonist are shaped.

Exploration of Themes such as Stigma, Acceptance, and Self-Identity in Neurodivergent Characters

Themes of stigma, acceptance, and self-identity are discussed in relation to neurodivergent main characters. This discussion examines the way these characters experience societal biases and prejudices, dealing with internal conflicts of self-acceptance, and the formation of self-identity. The paper also looks into the ways in which these characters are either defiant or submissive to societal norms and how their process of acceptance is shown in the story. The themes bring further insight into the psychological and emotional issues of neurodivergent people in literature.

Discussion

Interpretation of Findings in Relation to Neurodiversity and Disability Studies

The results of the analysis correlate with the main principles of the neurodiversity and disability studies, especially the redefinition of neurodivergence as a variation of human nature, not a deficit. The image of neurodivergent heroes in contemporary fiction is a response to the classical medical or deficit-based paradigm, and it focuses on acceptance, agency, and identity. It can be seen that these characters, as interpreted through the prism of neurodiversity, defy traditional narratives and provide a more inclusive account of disability in literature that is consistent with the modern trends in disability studies.

How Neurodivergent Protagonists Contribute to the Representation of Disability in Literature

The presence of neurodivergent protagonists adds a valuable contribution to the discussion of disability, as these characters provide an in-depth depiction of neurodivergence that goes beyond victimhood or other unflattering stereotypes. These characters are depicted as participants in their lives to overcome social, personal, and institutional obstacles. These protagonists enhance the study of disability in literature by focusing on their unique personalities and humanity. Moreover, their presence in the mainstream discourse can be used to prompt the narrowness of the disability representation and open up the spectrum of experiences and identities.

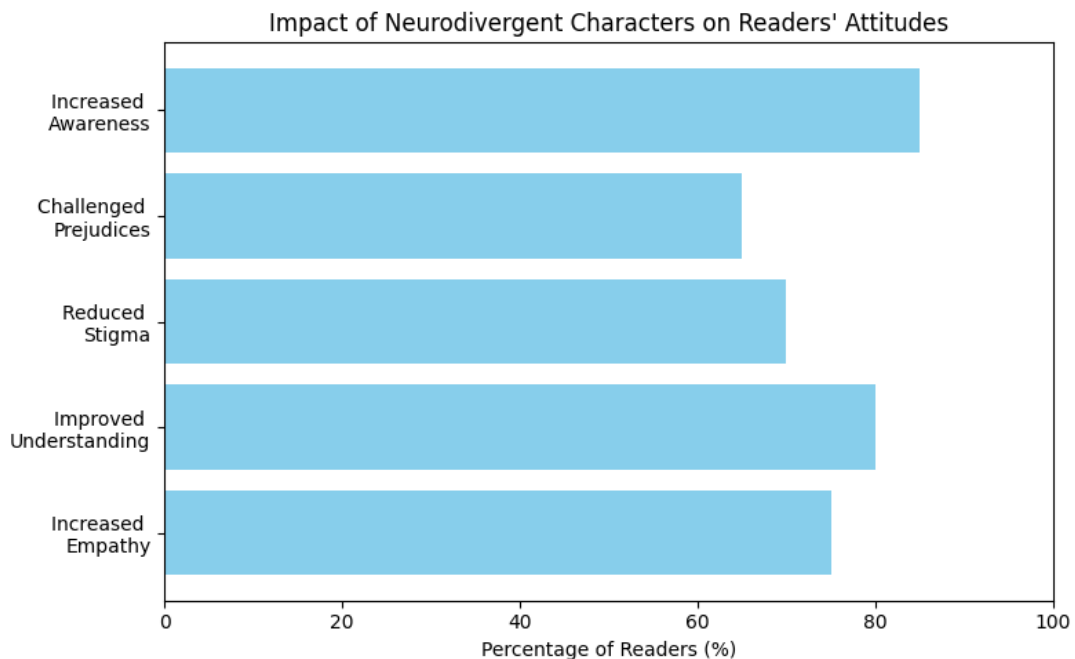


Figure 2: Impact of Neurodivergent Characters on Readers' Attitudes

Figure 2 visually illustrates the effect of neurodivergent characters on the attitudes of readers, demonstrating how their presentation affects empathy, understanding, stigma reduction, challenging of prejudices, and heightened awareness. The information is represented in percentages, showing the favorable shifts in the attitude of readers.

The Impact of These Portrayals on Readers' Perceptions of Neurodivergence and Disability

The representation of neurodivergent characters in literature is highly influential in the way readers perceive neurodivergence and disability. It is through viewing characters who mirror their experiences or represent novel approaches to disability that readers are welcomed to approach disability more compassionately and in a more nuanced way. These depictions help create a better comprehension of neurodivergence, confront negative stereotypes, and lead to acceptance. Also, the stories help readers acknowledge the heterogeneity of the neurodivergent community and break the notion of a homogenous experience of disability and, instead, embrace the heterogeneity of identities and abilities.

Table 2: Themes in the Portrayal of Neurodivergent Characters

Theme	Novel(s) Addressing the Theme	Relevance to Neurodivergence
Stigma	The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time, The Rosie Project	Highlights societal prejudices against neurodivergent individuals
Self-Identity	The Speed of Dark, The Rosie Project	Explores internal conflicts related to neurodivergence and self-acceptance
Social Acceptance	The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time, The Speed of Dark	Depicts the protagonist's struggle to fit into societal norms
Overcoming Challenges	The Rosie Project, The Speed of Dark	Shows how neurodivergent characters face and overcome personal and social challenges

Table 2 identifies some of the central themes of novels that feature neurodivergent protagonists. Stigma (e.g., *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time*, *The Rosie Project*) revolves around the

prejudice against neurodivergent people in society. Self-Identity (e.g., *The Speed of Dark*, *The Rosie Project*) deals with self-conflicts and self-acceptance. Social Acceptance (e.g., *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time*, *The Speed of Dark*) deals with the difficulty of fitting into society. Overcoming Challenges (e.g., *The Rosie Project*, *The Speed of Dark*) depicts neurodivergent characters facing both personal and social obstacles. These themes enhance the insights of neurodivergent experiences in literature.

Potential for Positive Change in Societal Attitudes Toward Neurodiversity

The increased use of neurodivergent protagonists in fiction has a high potential to change the ways in which society views neurodiversity. These characters grow in prominence, inviting the reader to perceive neurodivergence as a variation and not an anomaly or disadvantage in human experience. Positively, diversely, and multi-dimensionally representing neurodivergent characters in literature can help reduce discrimination and stigma, fostering a more inclusive society. Neurodivergent individuals can live in a more supportive, equitable, and safe environment when literature inspires change and compassion.

Conclusion

This study analyzed the contemporary fictional characterizations of neurodivergent people from both the neurodiversity and disability studies perspectives. The findings reveal that neurodivergent characters become more complex, less problematic, and more empathetic. Moreover, the stories become more literary rich and contribute to the wider field of advocacy and acceptance of neurodiversity. The article analyzed the effect of the real-life experience on the audience's perception of empathy and suspension of cultural norms. The inclusion of neurodivergent characters is vital to the restructuring of both the cultural and the literary domains. Neurodivergent characters offer an innovative lens that diversifies both the experience of disability and the concept of neurodiversity in literary characters. The inclusion of neurodivergent characters in fiction goes beyond the literary fusion and provides an insightful challenge to the perception of neurodiversity and the advocacy for its inclusion and acceptance. Literature of this nature instigates the audience to develop and implement more complex criteria of neurodiversity. Future studies should analyse the representation of neurodivergent characters in new literary forms, such as graphic novels, interactive media, and digital storytelling, to evaluate how these new literary forms construct and shape the perception of neurodiversity. In addition, researching neurodivergence in relation to other identity variables, such as race, gender, and socioeconomic status, would help show the spectrum of experiences of neurodivergent individuals. The stress that literature can be a means of influencing policy and advocacy, and that literature, along with the advocacy, can help create better spaces for neurodivergent individuals in and outside the literary community.

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