

Investigating the Spectrum: Mental Health and Autism in Kathryn Erskine's *Mockingbird*



التحقيق في الطيف: الصحة العقلية والتوحد في رواية *Mockingbird* لكاثرين إرسكين

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المخلص:

تدرس هذا البحث الطيف المعقد للشخصيات التوحدية، مع التركيز بشكل خاص على تمثيل متلازمة أسبرجر من خلال شخصية كيتلين في رواية كاثرين إرسكين "الطائر المحاكي". يستخدم البحث منهجية وصفية نوعية، باستخدام الملاحظة وتدوين الملاحظات الشاملة كطرق أساسية لجمع البيانات. تعمل مقتطفات من الرواية كعينات للتحليل، مع التركيز على تحديد السمات المحددة المرتبطة بالتوحد. يهدف هذا التحليل إلى تحديد الأعراض والتحديات التي يواجهها الأفراد المصابون بالتوحد، وبالتالي إثبات تصوير كيتلين كشخصية مصابة بمتلازمة أسبرجر. تكشف نتائج هذا البحث أن كيتلين تظهر العديد من الخصائص المتسقة مع متلازمة أسبرجر، وهي حالة على طيف التوحد. وتشمل هذه ضعف المهارات الاجتماعية، والسلوكيات المقيدة والمتكررة، والاضطرابات في مجالات حرجة من الأداء. يقدم سلوك كيتلين وشخصيتها طوال الرواية دليلاً على هذه السمات. على سبيل المثال، غالباً ما تعكس تفاعلاتها افتقارها إلى المهارات الاجتماعية، مما يجعلها عرضة للتمتر. وعلى الرغم من التحديات الكبيرة التي تواجهها

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كيتلين، فإنها تظهر إحساسًا ملحوظًا بالذات والقدرة الإدراكية. وتعمل شخصية كيتلين كتذكير مؤثر بالطبيعة المعقدة ومتعددة الأوجه للأفراد المصابين بالتوحد، مع التركيز على كل من نضالاتهم ونقاط قوتهم. وفي الختام، يؤكد البحث على أصالة كيتلين كشخصية ذات سمة توحديّة تسمى "متلازمة أسبرجر"، مما يوفر فهمًا دقيقًا لحالتها. تساهم هذه الدراسة في فهم أوسع للتوحد في الأدب، وتقدم رؤى حول التجارب الحية لأولئك المصابين بالتوحد وتعزز التعاطف والوعي بين القراء.

Abstract:

This paper examines the complex spectrum of autistic personalities, with a particular emphasis on representing Asperger Syndrome through the character of Caitlin in Kathryn Erskine's novel "*Mockingbird*". The research employs a descriptive qualitative methodology, utilizing observation and thorough notetaking as primary data collection methods. Excerpts from the novel serve as samples for analysis, focusing on identifying specific traits associated with autism. This analysis aims to outline the symptoms and challenges faced by autistic individuals, thereby substantiating Caitlin's portrayal as a character with Asperger Syndrome. The findings of this research reveal that Caitlin exhibits several characteristics consistent with Asperger Syndrome, a condition on the autism spectrum. These include impaired social skills, restricted and repetitive behaviors, and disturbances in critical areas of functioning. Caitlin's behavior and personality throughout the novel provide evidence of these traits. For instance, her interactions often reflect a lack of social skills, making her susceptible to bullying. Despite the significant challenges Caitlin faces, she demonstrates a remarkable sense of self and cognitive ability. Caitlin's character serves as a poignant reminder of the complex and multifaceted nature of individuals on the autism spectrum, emphasizing both their struggles and their strengths. In conclusion, the research underscores Caitlin's authenticity as a character with an autistic feature called "Asperger Syndrome", providing a nuanced understanding of her condition. This study contributes to a broader comprehension of autism in literature, offering insights into the lived experiences of those with autism and promoting greater empathy and awareness among readers.

1- INTRODUCTION

Human beings are inherently social and require interpersonal interaction for their survival and well-being. The foundation of social interaction lies in effective communication, as individuals naturally share their emotions, information, and experiences. However, the ability to communicate



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effectively is not universal. Certain individuals, such as those with autistic syndromes, face significant challenges in social communication and may struggle to integrate as fully functional members of society.

One such autistic syndrome is "Asperger Syndrome" (AS), which was first identified by Austrian pediatrician Hans Asperger and is commonly referred to as "little professor syndrome" (Attwood, 2007: 19). According to Attwood, individuals with Asperger Syndrome exhibit unique behaviors, thought patterns, and communication styles. Frith (2001) describes Asperger Syndrome as a milder form of autism that is often not diagnosed until later in childhood or adulthood. Gold, Faust, and Goldstein (2010) state that Asperger Syndrome is characterized by social impairments, difficulties in communication, and a tendency to have circumscribed interests or adhere rigidly to routines.

Baron (2008) identifies three core diagnostic features of Asperger Syndrome: challenges in social development, difficulties in communication, and an intense focus on narrow interests accompanied by repetitive behaviors. Individuals with Asperger Syndrome often exhibit social awkwardness, use pedantic speech, and have a preoccupation with specific interests or repetitive actions. Despite these challenges, many individuals with Asperger Syndrome are highly productive and successful. Notably, historical figures such as Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart and Albert Einstein are believed to have had Asperger Syndrome. A key diagnostic criterion is whether the individual had normal speech development and an average or above-average IQ (Baron, 2008). Ritvo (2006: 29) states that Asperger Syndrome "occurs in approximately 30 to 40 out of every 10,000 people" and is more prevalent in males than females (four to five times more common). Baron-Cohen (1991: 306) notes that individuals with Asperger Syndrome often have difficulty learning conversational rules naturally, which makes communication challenging. Previous studies suggest that people with Asperger Syndrome may rely on body language as a means of communication and may be perceived as socially immature, peculiar, or eccentric.

The central character of Kathryn Erskine's novel *Mockingbird*, Caitlin Smith, embodies these challenges. Caitlin, a ten-year-old girl with Asperger Syndrome, perceives the world in black-and-white terms and finds ambiguity confusing. She used to depend on her older brother Devon to help her navigate the world, but after his death, she struggles to cope. Caitlin's journey of understanding and finding closure is the core of the novel's narrative. Erskine effectively builds empathy by telling the story from Caitlin's perspective, enabling readers to experience her unique way of thinking and reacting to her surroundings.

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This paper aims to delve deeper into the character of Caitlin Smith in *Mockingbird*, examining her symptoms of Asperger Syndrome and the conflicts she faces as a result. Analyzing Caitlin's experiences provides valuable insights into the real-life challenges and behaviors of individuals with Asperger Syndrome. Through Caitlin's story, *Mockingbird* offers a profound understanding of Asperger Syndrome and its impact on those who live with it.

2- RESEARCH AND DATA METHODOLOGY

This section provides a comprehensive overview of the research and data methodology utilized in the study. The methodology encompasses the research type, the subject and object of the research, the data collection methods, and the data analysis procedures.

2-1 The Research method

This study utilizes a descriptive qualitative research approach, which is effective for investigating and comprehending the interpretations that individuals or groups assign to a social or human issue. This approach allows for a thorough examination of the themes and patterns surrounding mental health and autism as presented in the novel *Mockingbird*.

The research focuses on the novel *Mockingbird* (2010) written by Kathryn Erskine. Specifically, it explores the portrayal of mental health and autism, particularly the symptoms and experiences associated with Asperger Syndrome, through the character of Caitlin Smith in *Mockingbird*.

Data collection for this study is divided into primary and secondary sources. The primary data consists of textual evidence extracted from the novel *Mockingbird* by Kathryn Erskine. This includes direct quotations, descriptions, dialogues, and narrative passages that highlight Caitlin Smith's behaviours, thoughts, and interactions that indicate Asperger Syndrome and mental health challenges. The secondary data supports the primary data and includes scholarly articles, books, reviews, and electronic sources that are relevant to Asperger Syndrome, mental health, and their representation in literature. These sources provide the necessary theoretical frameworks and contextual background for analyzing the primary data.

2-2 Data Collection and Analysis Methods

The data analysis process in this study involves several steps:

Identification and categorization: The first step involves identifying and categorizing relevant textual evidence from the novel. This includes





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instances where Caitlin exhibits symptoms of Asperger Syndrome, faces mental health challenges, and interacts with other characters.

Thematic Analysis: The categorized data is then analyzed thematically. Themes such as social interaction, communication difficulties, emotional regulation, and coping mechanisms are identified and explored.

Application of Theoretical Framework: The identified themes are examined through the lens of established theories on Asperger Syndrome and mental health. This includes referencing works by experts in the field such as Frith (2001), Gold, Faust, and Goldstein (2010), and Baron (2008).

Contextual Analysis: The analysis extends to the broader context of how mental health and autism are portrayed in literature, considering the social and cultural implications of Erskine's portrayal of Caitlin.

Interpretation and Conclusion: Finally, the analyzed data is interpreted to draw conclusions about the representation of mental health and autism in *Mockingbird*. The study seeks to understand how Erskine's portrayal of Caitlin Smith contributes to the broader discourse on autism and mental health in literature.

This research methodology provides a comprehensive framework for investigating the depiction of mental health and autism in *Mockingbird*. By combining primary textual analysis with secondary theoretical insights, the study aims to contribute to the understanding of how literary works can reflect and influence perceptions of mental health and autism.

3- RESULTS AND ANALYSIS

The novel *Mockingbird* is narrated by Caitlin Smith, a ten-year-old girl with Asperger's syndrome. This analysis focuses on Caitlin as the main character, highlighting her distinctive symptoms that differentiate her from other characters in the story. Throughout the novel, Caitlin inadvertently causes problems due to her Asperger's syndrome. Readers may observe that certain words are randomly capitalized within the sentences. These capitalized concepts serve to illustrate Caitlin's unique way of relating each concept to herself, providing insight into her perspective and communication style.

The author describes various aspects of Caitlin's behavior and experiences that indicate symptoms of Asperger's syndrome. The analysis details these symptoms, and the challenges Caitlin faces as a result. Additionally, the explanations underscore how Kathryn Erskine emphasizes Caitlin's condition, ensuring that readers comprehend her experiences and challenges within the context of Asperger's syndrome.



3-1 The Symptoms of Asperger Syndrome

Caitlin Smith, the protagonist in Kathryn's novel "*Mockingbird*" resides in Virginia alongside her father, Harold Joseph Smith. Caitlin finds herself grappling with the recent loss of her beloved elder brother, Devon, who tragically perished in a shooting incident at their high school. Caitlin and Devon shared a profound bond as siblings, with him always supporting her in navigating life's intricacies. However, Caitlin defies these expectations by immersing herself in the world of art and drawing, while also endeavoring to help her community heal in the aftermath of the school shooting. One notable aspect that sets Caitlin apart from the other characters in Kathryn's "*Mockingbird*" is her Asperger syndrome:

3-1-1 Qualitative Impairment in Social Skill

Individuals diagnosed with Asperger Syndrome experience social impairments, and Caitlin's behaviors exhibit some of these impairments. Two symptoms within Caitlin's behaviors suggest that she may have Asperger's syndrome.

The first symptom is her lack of sociopathy. Caitlin's inability to demonstrate empathy or sympathy towards others implies that she may be affected by Asperger's syndrome. Additionally, she struggles to interpret social cues, which becomes evident in her interactions with her father and those around her. In chapter eight, following the death of her brother, Caitlin engages in a group project. As depicted in the following excerpt, she draws a heart with a gunshot and shows it to her father:

(1) When I finished my last drawing, I go to the sofa where Dad is sitting and show it to him. He reads it and his head droops almost to his knees. The bump on his throat goes in and out every time he swallows. He sniffs several times which means at least three times and actually he sniffs five times before I say, What's wrong with it?

Nothing, he says. It's—it's very well done. I ...need to go to take shower. You can pick out a video and watch it.

Yay! And I don't even have all the stickers I need for a video! I run over to the shelf with videos and stop. Why are you taking a shower at night? You always take a shower in the morning.

He is already out of the living room. I'm little sore ... and I don't hear what he says after that except he must be really sore because I hear him crying even before the shower turns on.

I don't want to hear the crying so I focus on my favorite videos. (Erskine, 2010: 47)

Caitlin demonstrated a limited awareness of her surroundings, showing little emotional response and generally maintaining a flat demeanor. She





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exhibited a self-centered focus, paying minimal attention to others. Another noteworthy trait of Caitlin is her strong inclination towards logical thinking. This characteristic is closely linked to her difficulty in understanding jokes and metaphors. Individuals who think in concrete terms and struggle with grasping indirect symbolic meanings often fail to comprehend the intended humor or sarcasm. Similarly, metaphors pose a challenge for them. Therefore, Caitlin's aversion to jokes and metaphors can be attributed to the difficulty she experiences in comprehending them.

(2) *Mrs. Brook says you can talk with her anytime because her door is always open, I tell Mrs. Johnson. Actually, it's almost always closed. But if you knock then she remembers to open it.* (Erskine, 2010:17)

Caitlin demonstrates a logical mindset. Upon hearing the statement, "her door is always open," she initially took it literally, perceiving it as a reference to a physically open door. However, this expression actually conveys her constant availability to offer guidance, support, aid, or assistance whenever required.

3-1-2 Restricted, Repetitive, and Stereotyped Patterns of Behaviours and Interest

The second category of Asperger's Syndrome encompasses restricted, repetitive, and stereotyped patterns of behavior and interests. These symptoms serve as clear indicators of Asperger's syndrome for observers. Erskine effectively depicts Caitlin with distinct behaviors that set her apart from others. One symptom in this category is Caitlin's heightened and concentrated interests. Erskine emphasizes this through Caitlin's fervor for drawing and her fascination with words and their meanings. Caitlin's exceptional interest in drawing stands out prominently. She is conscious of her talent and exhibits confidence in her drawing abilities, as exemplified in the following quotation:

(3) I draw them and also a dogwood—the state tree AND flower—with a cardinal in it—the state bird. Everyone thinks cardinals are red but actually that's just the male. I don't do colors so my cardinal is a female. When I'm done I show my group.

Brianna shakes her head. *You traced that.*

No I didn't.

No one can draw like that.

I can. I told you. I'm probably the best artist in the state.



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Yeah right.

I've seen what Caitlin can draw. Emma says. It's awesome. And anyway it doesn't matter. It can be traced or drawn for this project.

I drew it, I tell her. (Erskine, 2010: 193)

The second symptom in the category of restricted, repetitive, stereotyped patterns of behaviors and interests is the presence of inflexibility towards specific and nonfunctional routines or rituals. This symptom is displayed through Caitlin's particularity and inflexibility when it comes to maintaining order. Caitlin exercises her autonomy in selecting her clothing by consistently opting for sweatpants and a long-sleeved T-shirt on a daily basis. She possesses a multifaceted personality with numerous inclinations, which are further elaborated upon below.

(4) The T-shirt can be any color. I don't care as long as it's not yellow or gold or mossy green or pukey green or poopy green—That makes Michael start giggling—or any kind of pink because those colors make me feel sick. And it can only be one color because I don't like colors running into each other. And there can't be writing on the T-shirt or people will read it and I don't want them looking at me. And the long-sleeve T-shirt can't have scratchy cuffs. And none of the T-shirts have tags in the back or collars. Or stripes. Or pockets. Or zigzag stitching. Or double stitching. (Erskine, 2010: 93)

Another symptom within the category of restricted, repetitive, and stereotyped patterns of behavior and interests is demonstrated in *Mockingbird* through Caitlin's repetitive motor behaviors. These behaviors include groaning, screaming, shaking, sucking her sleeve, and experiencing temper outbursts. These behaviors are depicted multiple times throughout the novel. Caitlin finds it challenging to refrain from engaging in these actions, which usually occur when she tries to alleviate negative thoughts. She relies on these actions to self-soothe and establish a sense of security within her personal space. In the role of the narrator, Erskine provides detailed descriptions of Caitlin's atypical behaviors, as shown in the following passage:

(5) DEV-ON! DEV-ON! DEV-ON! And I hear Dad's voice screaming like at the hospital and I don't want to hear it because I don't want any part of The Day Our Life Fell Apart to happen again so I focus and become the Heart Louder and louder and harder and harder but then I fall out of the chest because there's no way to close it and I feel Dad grabbing me but all I can do is scream the words from the green hospital people, I TRIED BUT THERE WAS NOTHING I COULD DO!



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Caitlin! Caitlin! I hear Dad yelling but I can't stop crying. (Erskine, 2010: 65)

3-1-3 Disturbance in Important Area of Functioning

Asperger syndrome often significantly impacts important areas of functioning in individuals, as is evident in the character of Caitlin Smith. Erskine skillfully depicts various aspects of Caitlin's life that are affected by her condition. One crucial area that is impacted is her family life. Caitlin struggles to comprehend how to appropriately behave around her remaining family members, particularly her father. Unfortunately, her father, in response, suppresses his emotions and fails to effectively communicate with her, resulting in frequent misunderstandings. As a result of Caitlin's actions and words, her father is sometimes unintentionally overwhelmed with sadness.

The disruption in family functioning is readily apparent in Caitlin's interactions with her father. Her difficulty in interpreting social cues causes her to be insensitive to his feelings. Throughout the novel "Mockingbird," it becomes clear that Caitlin's behavior frequently causes emotional distress to her father, yet she remains oblivious to the errors she makes in their interactions. Erskine expertly portrays these challenges, illuminating the impact of Caitlin's Asperger syndrome on the dynamics within her family.

(6) I sit on the sofa and start talking about Devon a lot except I don't call him Devon anymore. I call him Devon-who-is-dead. I say it until Dad asks me to stop.

But that's his name.

No. His name is Devon.

No. His name WAS Devon. Now it's Devon-who-is-dead. That's different from the other Devon. That Devon was alive and you thought I was confused but I'm not because I know that Devon is dead and that's why I'm calling him Devon-who-is-dead and you'll get used to it.

No I won't. I'll feel like crying every time you say it.

Even if I say it fifty times?

Yes.

Even a hundred times?

Yes.

Even a thousand times?

Caitlin. I get upset even thinking about it so I'll definitely feel like crying every time you say it.



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I'm only saying it because you're upset that I think Devon is still alive so I'm showing you I Get It that Devon is dead.

Dad shakes his head and leaves the living room. (Erskine, 2010: 109-110).

3-2 The struggles of the main character due to the Asperger Syndrome

One of the central conflicts in *Mockingbird* revolves around Caitlin's pursuit of "closure" following her brother's tragic death in a school shooting. The concept of closure is introduced to Caitlin, and the narrative follows her evolving comprehension of this notion. The resolution of this conflict arises when Caitlin finally "gets it," comprehending the meaning of closure. Caitlin encounters various challenges associated with living with Asperger Syndrome. Nevertheless, she takes it upon herself to complete her brother's Eagle Scout project because she interprets one aspect of closure as "bringing a project to completion" and immediately thinks of his chest. The fact that this endeavor brings some healing to the community can be seen as a secondary outcome.

Individuals with Asperger Syndrome often grapple with difficulties in social interactions, necessitating training to enhance their social skills. Successful social interaction entails a personal orientation towards others and the ability to respond appropriately to their behavior. Despite possessing normal IQs, individuals with Asperger Syndrome often display a level of functionality and naivety that may be perceived as unconventional or peculiar. This perception renders them susceptible to teasing, bullying, and even societal discrimination.

In *Mockingbird*, these social challenges are evident through Caitlin's interactions and her journey towards understanding and attaining closure. Through her experiences, the novel sheds light on the struggles faced by individuals with Asperger Syndrome in navigating social life and underscores the significance of support and understanding from those around them.

3-2-1 Lack of Social Skills

In solitude, the child does not exhibit a qualitative impairment in social interaction. Social interaction requires the presence of at least two individuals. The most dysfunctional aspect of Asperger syndrome is the lack of social skills. According to Taylor et al, "the essential feature of Asperger syndrome is a qualitative impairment in social interaction, as recognized in all diagnostic criteria" (2000: 132). The diagnostic criteria also highlight the absence of social relationships and the failure to develop peer connections. In comparison to their peers, children with





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Asperger syndrome typically have fewer friends, engage in less frequent play with other children, and for shorter periods of time. This can be observed in Caitlin's daily life at school, where she lacks friends in her class due to the other children consistently asking her to leave them alone. Therefore, Caitlin complies with their requests.

(7) *I already have friends.*

Tell me about your friends.

My dictionary, TV. Computer.

Mrs. Brook shakes her head. *I'm talking about people and learning how to get along with others.*

I know how. I leave them alone. (Erskine, 2010: 41-42)

3-2-2 Bullying

Individuals with Asperger's syndrome often face bullying, as their unique qualities make them stand out from their peers (Berger, 2006). Unfortunately, due to a lack of understanding about the behaviors associated with Asperger's syndrome, these individuals may be unfairly labeled as odd, unusual, or even strange. One of the most hurtful experiences is when they are subjected to derogatory terms. Being called a "freak" is particularly hurtful and can cause significant emotional distress. In the book *Mockingbird* by Erskine, the protagonist Caitlin is subjected to such name-calling by one of her classmates.

(8) *Ew!* he yells. *You're like a dog! Slobbering all over your sleeve!*

I stop sucking my sleeve even though I don't know why he says *Ew*. I like dogs. Dogs sit next to you and put their chin on your lap. Dogs are sweet and and kind. I'm happy if people think I'm dog.

What do you want? Freak! Josh says, and I remember why I'm there.

You shouldn't get in someone's Personal Space.

What's it to you?

I don't know what that means so I say again, *You shouldn't get in someone's Personal Space.*

He outs his hands on his hips and his nose wrinkles up. *What of it?*

He must mean, What IS it? *Personal Space is this.* I step right in front of him –I even step on his toes –to show him where Personal Space is.

Get off me you freak! He yells. (Erskine, 2010: 29-30)

Caitlin frequently displays eccentric behaviors and mannerisms that have an impact on how she is perceived by society. Individuals with Asperger's syndrome are often mislabeled as having a mental disorder due to their atypical mannerisms (Frith, 2001). This misconception can result in bullying and discrimination against them. Bullying of individuals with Asperger's syndrome usually stems from their unconventional behavior,



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which society may not comprehend. However, individuals who possess knowledge about the symptoms of Asperger's syndrome are less likely to engage in discriminatory behavior such as mockery and bullying. Thus, it is imperative to promote accurate information and explanations of Asperger's syndrome in order to foster a better understanding and reduce instances of discrimination.

4- Conclusions

- The analysis reveals that Caitlin, the main character in Erskine's *Mockingbird*, exhibits symptoms of Asperger syndrome across three primary categories: qualitative impairments in social skills, restricted and repetitive patterns of behavior and interests, and disturbances in significant areas of functioning. These symptoms illustrate Caitlin's experiences and the challenges she faces throughout the novel.
- Caitlin is portrayed as an unempathetic and logical person, showing significant social impairment. She lacks empathy and sympathy, as emphasized by Erskine through Caitlin's interactions with others and her unawareness of social cues.
- Caitlin exhibits restricted and repetitive interests, inflexibility towards specific routines or rituals, and distinctive motor mannerisms. These behaviors include screaming, shaking, sucking her sleeve, and having tantrums, particularly when she feels overwhelmed by sensory stimuli like loud sounds or bright lights.
- Caitlin's social interactions with her family and friends at school are significantly affected by her symptoms. These areas of functioning are challenging for her to navigate, as her Asperger syndrome symptoms frequently interfere with her ability to connect and communicate effectively.
- As a person with Asperger syndrome, Caitlin faces numerous difficulties in social interactions. She often experiences a lack of social skills and is subjected to bullying. Despite these challenges, Caitlin demonstrates a strong sense of self and cognitive ability, highlighting her humanity and resilience.

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