
**An-Najah National University**
**Faculty of Graduate Studies**

# TOWARDS NEUROCOSMOPOLITANISM: AN ECOSOMATIC READING OF CONTEMPORARY OWN-VOICES AUTISTIC WRITINGS

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# Dedication

To my father, whose relentless support helped me accomplish all I have achieved.

To my mother, the dazzling woman from whom I received the love and care to guide me through all facets of my life.

To my siblings, my pillars of strength.

To those whose unwavering faith in me surpassed my own doubts.

# Acknowledgment

﴿ ٱلۡحَمۡدُ لِلَّهِ رَبِّ ٱلۡعَٰلَمِينَ ﴾[الفاتحة: 2]

First and foremost, I would like to thank Allah S.W.T., for the patience, perseverance, and knowledge he bestowed upon me, of which without I would not have been able to complete this thesis nor would I have succeeded in achieving my dreams.

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Lastly, I wish to express my sincere solidarity with the people of Palestine for their resilience and strength in the face of injustice. May Allah S.W.T grant them peace and the freedom they so deeply deserve, and may their sacrifices be rewarded.

## Declaration

I, the undersigned, declare that I submitted the thesis entitled:

# TOWARDS NEUROCOSMOPOLITANISM: AN ECOSOMATIC READING OF CONTEMPORARY OWN-VOICES AUTISTIC WRITINGS

I declare that the work provided in this thesis, unless otherwise referenced, is the researcher's own work, and has not been submitted elsewhere for any other degree or qualification.

**Student's Name:** **Noor Nedal Said Alzaghal**

**Signature:** 

**Date:** **30/06/2025**

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# TOWARDS NEUROCOSMOPOLITANISM: AN ECOSOMATIC READING OF CONTEMPORARY OWN-VOICES AUTISTIC WRITINGS

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## Abstract

This thesis, drawing on literary neurodiversity studies, explores the oppressive hierarchal system of power, neuronormativity, through the lens of Autistic authors and from the perspective of Autistic characters in Elle McNicoll's *A Kind of Spark* (2021) and Anna Whateley's *Peta Lyre's Rating Normal* (2021). These novels highlight Autistic voices and their counter narratives towards a neurocosmopolitan society. This thesis follows the medical humanities approach, which studies the intersection between the humanities disciplines and questions regarding health and well-being of individuals. I have examined the displayed neuronormativity and its detrimental impact on Autistics' general wellbeing in both literary texts, and illustrated the literary texts' drive towards neurocosmopolitanism through analyzing the ecocritical aspects of the narrative and showcasing how both Addie and Peta find peace in nature, and fantasize about it as an escape from neuronormative society. I also highlight the role of nature in reclaiming Autistic identity. Through this deep dive into Autism in own-voices literature, we can sense the importance of exploring and analyzing literary texts that express the voices of the marginalized in order to lessen the neurotypical ignorance of other neurodivergent individuals around us and eradicate the persisting stigma surrounding Autism and other neurodivergent individuals.

**Keywords:** Autism, Own-voices literature, neuronomative society, stigma, ecosomatics, Autistic identity, and neurocosmopolitanism.

# Chapter One

## Situating Autism within the context of Ecosomatic Paradigm

## 1.1 Introduction

Representation of Autistic individuals has gone through many fluctuations. Moving from scarce representation to extensive misrepresentation, Autism has been framed through a stigmatizing and marginalizing lens (Turnock, Langley, & Jones, 2022). Such framing of Autism severely impacted the mental health and well-being of Autistic individuals globally. This thesis aims to shed light on neurodivergent Autistic narratives, thereby reducing neurotypical ignorance and helping to eradicate the persistent stigma surrounding Autism. This is achieved by viewing A Kind of Spark and Peta Lyre's Rating Normal as counter-narratives to the prevailing neurotypical discourse. This topic explores the intersection of literature, disability studies, and ecological embodiment within medical humanities. The central question guiding this study is: How do own-voices Autistic narratives reimagine Autistic embodiment and agency through ecosomatic and neurocosmopolitan frameworks?

The relevance of why Autistic Own-voices narratives matter lies in the concept that Autism is often pathologized and misrepresented in mainstream media (Holton, Farrell, & Fudge, 2014). This misrepresentation is attributed to the absence of own-voices narratives from the dominant discourse. Therefore, Neurodivergent authors offer insider perspectives that resist medicalized narratives surrounding Autism. Price (2022) comments on own voices narratives and their role in shifting from the pathology paradigm towards the ecosomatic paradigm saying that: “as we make major gains in public awareness and advocacy, we will begin to occupy a less disabled position in society. But we’ll still all be Autistic” (p.52). Furthermore, Price (2022) encourages own-voices texts by Autistic authors highlighting that “Autistic people have the right to define who we are, and that self-definition is a means of reclaiming our power from the medical establishment that has long sought to corral and control us” (p. 52). Price’s view of own-voices narrative illuminates the importance of own-voices authors in reframing Autism

within the ecosomatic paradigm, which is what this thesis aims to do by using McNicoll's *A Kind of Spark* and Whateley's *Peta Lyre's Rating Normal*.

### 1.2 Autism history

Exploring own-voices Autistic texts within the ecosomatic paradigm is essential for reframing Autistic individuals within a neurocosmopolitan society that accepts neurodivergence. The history of Autism contributes to the current ableist framing of Autism as a pathological deficit/disability. Autism is a term first coined by Swiss psychiatrist Eugene Bleuler in 1911 to describe a characteristic of schizophrenia, specifically denoting withdrawal from reality (Smith et al., 2016). Rodas (2018) states that "increasingly, advanced autism scholarship resists strict definition [of Autism] altogether" (p. 10). Some of the myths mostly associated with Autism include the medicalization of the phenomenon, linking it to the MMR vaccines, and asociality (Bennett, Webster, Goodall, & Rowland, 2019). The use of "autism" to describe one of schizophrenia's key symptoms – social isolation and withdrawal from reality – situated the term within the field of psychopathology, the scientific study of mental illness. Thus, when Kanner, an Austrian-American Psychiatrist and physician, first used the term "infantile autism" in 1948 to refer to children who displayed extreme isolation from social situations, he further cemented the connection between Autism and schizophrenia. Kanner initially believed that due to the similar manifestation of social isolation and withdrawal from reality present in both infantile autism and schizophrenia, early infantile autism "may be looked upon as the earliest possible manifestation of childhood schizophrenia" (Kanner, 1949, p. 419). However, 24 years later, Kanner concluded that his concept of early infantile autism "does not seem to fit in with Bleuler's criteria for autism" (Kanner, L (1973) The birth of early infantile autism, 1973, p. 95), which considered early infantile autism as an early onset schizophrenia, since both share "withdrawal from reality" (Crespi, 2010, p. 495). However, many contemporary autism researchers do not see any connection between infantile autism and schizophrenia. For example, Frith (1991) states that "autistic thinking in Bleuler's sense has nothing to do with autism as we know it" (p. 38), which is completely separate from schizophrenia.

Academic researchers in the 1970's began displaying a distinction between Autism and schizophrenia in accordance with Rutter's (1972) and Kolvin's (1971) proposal that Autism and schizophrenia were entirely different disorders (Chisholm, Lin, Abu-Akel, & Wood, 2015). The initial link between Autism and schizophrenia "contributed to the myth that autism is primarily a mental or behaviour disorder" (Bennett, Webster, Goodall, & Rowland, 2019, p. 154). This myth contributed to constructing a stigmatized perception of Autistic individuals Bennett, Webster, Goodall, & Rowland (2019), and "led some to justify the exclusion of autistic individuals from community settings and programs" (Bennett, Webster, Goodall, & Rowland, 2019, p. 158). Since the "exact etiology of autism is still unknown" (p. 45), this causes confusion, misperception, and misunderstanding within the academic community, the Autistic community, as well as the general public.

The misinterpretation of Autism/ Autistic individuals occurs as a result of "terminological confusion" surrounding the word Autism, which "may arise from an incomplete understanding of specific terms or from the changing meanings given to terms over time" (Bennett, Webster, Goodall, & Rowland, 2019, p. 6), and with the terminological confusion surrounding the word Autism comes fear. Mocarski (2014) points out that "many myths originate from fear as individuals seek out explanations to decrease their anxiety about things they do not understand or which cannot be explained" as cited in (Bennett, Webster, Goodall, & Rowland, 2019, p. 50). The relationship between fear and myths is bidirectional, since fear of the unknown creates myths and myths further intensify fear in the general public that internalizes them.

Varying terms have been used to identify Autism such as "syndrome" (Verhoeff, 2013, p. 443), "disorder" (Price, 2022, pp. 14-15), and "condition" (Bennett, Webster, Goodall, & Rowland, 2019, p. v). For instance, Price (2022), an Autistic American social psychologist uses the above-mentioned terms interchangeably when referring to Autism. In his book *Unmasking Autism*, he mentioned the word "disability" 148 times, and the word "disorder" 142 times, while he used the word "condition" 20 times. Therefore, terminological confusion generates myth and stigma surrounding Autism, while the opposite also stands true. For instance, Autism has been perceived as a malady

necessitating a cure. This misperception has been fueled by misguided theories and beliefs/myths such as the 'refrigerator mother' hypothesis, which unjustly attributed the cause of autism to emotionally distant and unresponsive mothers, and the unfounded assertions propagated by anti-vaccination advocates that link the MMR (Measles, Mumps, and Rubella) vaccine to the onset of autism (Kapp, 2020). Not only do these myths cause "direct physical or emotional harm" (Bennett, Webster, Goodall, & Rowland, 2019, p. 10) to Autistic individuals, but these fallacies have also significantly marred societal perceptions of autism and negatively impacted the treatment of autistic individuals (Kapp, 2020).

The pathologizing of Autism as in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (5th ed.; DSM-5; American Psychiatric Association, 2013), or the extensive literature concerning the etiology of Autism e.g. Rutter (2005), or characterization of Autism by an inherent social-deficit (Chevallier, Kohls, Troiani, Brodkin, & Schultz, 2012) participate in the framing of Autism within a deficit-based framework. Consequently, autism has been subject to extensive medicalization, resulting in an associated sense of shame, stigma, as well as a deficit-based perspective. As defined by Russell (2020), medicalization is "the process through which normal behaviors come to fall under medical jurisdiction". Botha, Dibb, & Frost (2022) in a qualitative study of 20 eighteen-year-old Autistic individuals (both professionally/ officially diagnosed and self-diagnosed), convey that "[Autistic] [p]articipants described a current social hierarchy in which autistic people were subjugated, judged, undervalued and erased" (p. 442) by neurotypicals, non- autistic individuals. This social hierarchy based on exclusion and stigmatization induces feelings of estrangement to Autistic individuals (Van Hees, Moyson, & Roeyers, 2015). Thus, the sense of loneliness experienced by Autistic individuals is attributed to the ostracization of Autistic individuals within an oppressive neuronormative society, which marginalizes neurodivergent/ Autistic individuals.

### 1.3 Neuronormativity, stigma, and social exclusion

The public and academic discourse surrounding Autism is itself deficit based. Brown, Stahmer, Dwyer, & Rivera (2021) state that "[u]ntil recently, the diagnosis of autism has been framed from a deficit-based perspective" (p. 1171). Such framing, based on the

"normal" (Price, 2022, p. 66) "non-autistic" (Walker, 2021, pp. 79-80), intensifies the exclusion of Autistic individuals, wherein Autistic individuals are regarded as the peripheral other. Anderson-Chavarria (2021) argues that the "focus on deficits that is inherent within the medical model of autism is accompanied by a significant impact on the identity building of the autistic individual" (Anderson-Chavarria, 2021, p. 9). Hence, the deficit-based perspective surrounding autism intercepts the process of identity construction for Autistic individuals by depriving them of constructing their Autistic identity and their participation in the social and political domains (Anderson-Chavarria, 2021).

The social exclusion Autistic individuals experience is attributed to "neuronormativity and neurotypical ignorance" (Catala, Faucher, & Poirier, 2021, p. 4). Catala, Faucher, & Poirier (2021) define neuronormativity as "the prevalent, neurotypical set of assumptions, norms, and practices that construes neurotypicality as the sole acceptable or superior mode of cognition" (p. 4), thus creating a hierarchy where Autism, a neurocognitive difference, is othered. This definition highlights that exclusion is not accidental but structured through a cultural logic that privileges one way of thinking and perceiving the world while devaluing others. Neuronormativity inflicts Autistic individuals with "indirect harm by way of exclu[sion]" (Bennett, Webster, Goodall, & Rowland, 2019, p. 11) "in a society comprised of a non-autistic majority" (Bennett, Webster, Goodall, & Rowland, 2019, p. 29). Such exclusionary practices manifest in various domains, including education, employment, healthcare, and social life, where Autistic individuals are either marginalized or pressured to conform to neurotypical norms at the expense of their authenticity. The harm is not only social but also psychological, as the insistence on neurotypicality as the "sole acceptable" mode delegitimizes Autistic ways of being, fostering internalized stigma and diminished self-worth. This demonstrates the effects of the exclusionary social hierarchy positioning Autistic individuals within the peripheral minority, where their identities are tolerated only when masked or reconfigured to approximate neurotypical standards. The broader consequence is the entrenchment of structural inequality: neuronormativity transforms difference into deviance, thereby reinforcing ableism and perpetuating the systemic silencing of Autistic voices. By framing neurotypicality as synonymous with normalcy, society not only invalidates the

lived experiences of Autistic individuals but also denies them full participation in civic, cultural, and intellectual life. Ultimately, exclusion under neuronormativity is not simply about interpersonal prejudice but about the organization of society itself around a narrow cognitive ideal, one that must be interrogated and resisted if neurocosmopolitan inclusion is to be achieved.

Neurotypicals subject Autistic individuals to stigmatization. Price (2022) states that "neurotypicality is more of an oppressive cultural standard than it actually is a privileged identity a person has" (p. 36), which highlights the disabling role this hierarchal oppressive system has in stigmatization of Autistic/neurodivergent individuals. Turnock, Langley, & Jones (2022) define stigma as a "socially constructed concept" (p. 78) that denotes any "unfavourable" (p.78) traits. Leon discusses how "stigmatization socially constructs disability" (2019, p. 161), which I will exemplify through my analysis of McNicoll's *A Kind of Spark* and Whateley's *Peta Lyre's Rating Normal*. The exclusionary neurotypical public perception of Autism socially identifies Autistic individuals as "less valuable than the rest of society" (Turnock, Langley, & Jones, 2022, p. 78). For instance, neurotypicals perceive Autistic individuals as "violating" 'accepted societal norms'" (Huws & Jones 2010, as cited in (Turnock, Langley, & Jones, 2022, p. 78). Although many Autistic individuals internalize the prejudice hurled against them many others have achieved their Autistic identity through the neurodiversity movement (Turnock, Langley, & Jones, 2022).

### 1.4 The Autistic identity

The shift from the medical model of disability to the social model has led many autistic individuals to view it as an integral part of their unique identity. Botha, Dibb, & Frost state that "participants [in a study investigating how autistic individuals make sense of autism and stigma] made clear arguments for autism as a biological, value-neutral, internal reality in which autism was inseparable from who they are" (Botha, Dibb, & Frost, 2022, p. 435). To Autistic individuals, Autism represented an intrinsic physiological and psychological way of being that is essential to their identity. Sanchez (2006) points out that identity "implies an agential act of affirmation or negation and action, a coming to terms with the fact of identification processes at work" (p. 41). Since

autistic individuals are often perceived as different from the neurotypical majority, they can either embrace their autistic identity, identifying with the autistic community and rejecting the constraints of a neuronormative society, or choosing to mask this part of their identity. Masking is an attempt on the part of Autistic individuals to assimilate with neuronormative society for acceptance. Sanchez (2006) points out that "[i]n either case, the response will be identity or nonidentity, but the issue cannot be skirted, although it may be displaced" (p. 41). Applying Sanchez's concepts of identity and nonidentity, the Autistic identity, which is realized through self-definition and unmasking within the predicament model represents 'identity'. The predicament model is a system which not only identifies the possible deficits of neurodivergence, but also acknowledges the deficits of the neurotypical society which is not designed to accommodate neurological difference. Furthermore, it "embraces the individualized and highly variable experience of autism to understand that autism may be at once a disability and positive difference" (Anderson-Chavarria, 2021, p. 3). In contrast, the process of masking, driven by the oppressive neuronormative system, exemplifies 'nonidentity. Nevertheless, it is important to consider the Autistic identity in light of the concept of identity politics. Siebers (2006) states that "identity politics makes it possible to conceive of democratic society as comprising significant communities of interest, representing minor affiliations and different points of view that need to be heard and included if democratic society is to continue" (p. 10). In the context of this study, the term "democratic society" refers to a neurocosmopolitan society in which autism is viewed as an intrinsic part of one's identity rather than being used in an "othering" manner (Anderson-Chavarria, 2021).

There is a disagreement among scholars regarding whether Autistic individuals have identity. Siebers (2006) conveys that "[t]heorists of disability have… expressed hesitation about conceiving of people with disabilities as an identity or minority group" (p. 13), thus rejecting disability as an identity. While "[c]ritics of identity fear that the old identities used to repress people will come to define them in the future, or that claiming one, strong identity will excuse injustices against people not in that identity group" (Siebers, 2006, p. 13), it is important to apply a neurocosmopolitan approach to this study, which "involves both an openness to neurological difference and a willingness to be educated about that difference by people with autism." (p. 193). The mere "view of diversity [present in

neurodiversity] will not sufficiently aid people with disabilities, particularly neurological ones, where stigma remains a substantial problem" (Savarese, 2013, p. 192). The neurodiversity movement itself is framed by the pathology paradigm's core opposition ie. normal/abnormal neurotypical/neurodivergent. Therefore, neurocosmopolitanism improves on the neurodiversity movement's scope through the construction of a bidirectional relationship between neurodivergent individuals and neurotypicals rather than having neurotypicality at center of a hierarchal structure. Derived from the concept of cosmopolitanism, neurocosmopolitanism presents a more well-fitted approach than the social model of disability, an approach which highlights Autism/neurodivergence as a deficit-based difference, that further augments the social ostracization of Autistic individuals. Sanchez (2006) comments on the concept of identity stating that "[g]iven the varied socio-spatial-structural location of individuals, and their links to a variety of groupings (family, community, gender grouping, etc.), identities are necessarily also multiple" (p. 41). Thus, it is fluid. "In the process of becoming aware of social contradictions and difference (nonidentity or alterity), the individual may opt for a particular designation or identity linking him [or her] to a group" (Sanchez, 2006, p. 41). Accordingly, harboring a sense of belonging to a group/community makes it easier for Autistic individuals to fully accept their fluid identity.

### 1.4.1 Autistic identity between masking and unmasking

The fluid Autistic identity is endangered by masking which is a social phenomenon consisting of an "exhausting performance that contributes to physical exhaustion, psychological burnout, depression, anxiety, and even suicide ideation" (Price, 2022, p. 18). Also referred to as "social camouflaging" (Chapman, Rose, Hull, & Mandy, 2022, p. 2), masking is disguising the autistic self in an attempt to fit in with neurotypicals and be accepted by the neurotypical society (non-identity). Price (2022) elaborates on how "masking is a state of exclusion forced onto us [autistic individuals] from the outside" (p. 15). This practice engenders a counterfeit sense of subjectivity for the autistic individuals, creating a facade of selfhood and concealing their Autistic selves. Essentially, Autistic individuals are coerced into impersonating someone they are not, compelled to mimic the societal archetype deemed acceptable, i.e., neurotypicality. While a significant number of

Autistics engage in this act of 'masking' throughout their lives, it bears an undeniable detrimental impact on Autistics (Cage & Troxell-Whitman, Understanding the reasons, contexts and costs of camouflaging for autistic adults, 2019). One should be mindful to the fact that Autistic individuals resort to masking due to their pervasive fear of stigmatization and rejection by the neurotypical society (Van Hees, Moyson, & Roeyers, 2015). Chapman, Rose, Hull, & Mandy (2022), in their study exploring the relationship between masking and mental health for autistic teenagers in the UK, argue that masking is an “anxiety-driven response to others’ behaviour and attitudes towards them, or to uncomfortable and inhospitable environments” (p. 13). Therefore, the act of masking, a coping defensive mechanism, invariably deprives autistic individuals of their unique identity and sense of agency.

Having been deprived of their identity and agency by “stigma-related stressors” Botha, Dibb, & Frost (2020, p. 438) and their coping mechanism of masking, Autistic individuals reclaim their identity through embracing their different Autistic identities in order to liberate themselves from the periphery. The neurodiversity movement points that “autism is a part of normal human variation and should not be considered as a disorder or in medicalized terms” (Russell, 2020, p. 298). The neurodiversity movement “values the full spectra of differences and rights such as inclusion and autonomy" (Kapp, 2020, p. 2). The term "neurodiversity" has evolved to encompass "variation in neurocognitive functioning" (Hughes, 2016, p. 3), thereby extending its reach to individuals with various neurocognitive differences, including but not limited to ADHD, schizophrenia, psychopathy, dementia, and others. Nevertheless, the central focus of this thesis will be on Autistic individuals. This focus is particularly appropriate given the historical origins of the neurodiversity movement, which was spearheaded predominantly by advocates within the autistic community. This thesis will shed light on the experiences of Autistic individuals within the broader discourse of not only neurodiversity, but also of the predicament model proposed by (Anderson-Chavarria, 2021). In the light of the predicament model, this process of unmasking supports Autistic individuals in the assertion of their identities, actively contesting the prevailing narratives set forth by neurotypical society. Anderson-Chavarria (2021) states that the predicament model “facilitates the reclaiming of autistic identity and… prioritizes a nuanced,

multidimensional understanding of the lived autistic experience and all of the gifts and challenges that may go along with it" (p. 3). Unmasking thereby serves as a mechanism for self-reclamation among individuals with autism, simultaneously prompting the reevaluation of entrenched societal norms. Moreover, unmasking is also "a radical act of self-love" (Price, 2022, p. 18) that brings autistic individuals a step closer to their subjectivity and agency. Through unmasking, individuals with autism can reclaim their agency and redefine their experiences outside the confines of neurotypical expectations. Unmasking autism is "detaching from expectations about how one "should" live" (Price, 2022, p. 181). By detaching from neurotypical expectations, autistic individuals embark on a journey of self-discovery, striving for self-realization and autonomy.

This process of self-acceptance and the reclamation of their autistic subjectivity and agency subverts the prevailing neurotypical norms of society. According to Price (2022), "proudly owning one's disability can have a big impact on how people feel and it can change the attitudes of the neurotypical people around us" (p. 153). However, unmasking is rather difficult to exercise, as it requires not "trying to be an appealing "brand" (Price, 2022, p. 176). Although "the journey toward self-acceptance involves learning to unmask" (Price, 2022, p. 19), self-acceptance is often dependent on perceived acceptance that is external. Cage et al. state that "feeling accepted by others could act as a protective factor against mental health problems" (Cage, Di Monaco, & Newell, 2018, p. 4). Therefore, a sense of belonging to other marginalized groups is essential for the constitution of an intersubjective autistic identity.

### 1.4.2 The Autistic identity between self and other

The fluid Autistic identity is based on both the Self (the Autistic identity) and the Other (neurotypical identity). Peta shares with readers the internal conflict she faces when trying to decide where to sit in class:

> If I sit in the front row no one will sit with me and everyone will see the back of my head. They'll think things about me, but I'll be able to ask questions more quietly. If I sit in the middle to the right I'll be able to see out the window in case I get bored. Goofy might sit with me, which is good, but then I'll have to be friendly the whole time and keep up with his clever remarks without getting in

> trouble for talking. If I sit on the left in the middle then I'm trapped against the wall, closer to the door, and the same thing with Goofy. I could sit in the middle of the middle, but then I'd be in the teacher's main eye-line and if the room isn't symmetrical it will feel off. Sitting at the back is out of the question: I'm not naughty and can't stand people swinging on their chairs against the wall, which they always do... (p. 13)

This excerpt illustrates Peta's ultra-awareness of the gaze of the Other, neurotypical individuals, and highlights Peta's efforts to conform to neurotypical societal norms. This conscious effort stems from Peta's desire to avoid criticism and judgment from neurotypical society, and showcases the advertent exclusion neurodivergents experience due to the Other being the center of the societal structure. Moreover, Dolezal (2017) illustrates that "embodied vulnerability is revealed through shame and, furthermore, is at the heart of subjective constitution" (p. 422). Consequently, the act of unmasking enables autistic individuals to expose their embodied vulnerability, thereby directly confronting the shame induced by neurotypical observers. By openly expressing behaviors often associated with autism, such as stimming, avoiding eye contact, echolalia, etc., Autistic individuals establish a sense of self that is truly their own. In this manner, they attain subjectivity, a critical component in the assertion of one's identity and the rejection of stigma at the cost of facing shame by the neurotypical society.

Collective identities are essential to the fluid individual identities. The concept of collective identity has "no consensual definition" (Snow & Corrigal-Brown, 2015, p. 175) and lacks a fixed definition. However, in this thesis, I choose Taylor & Whittier (1992) definition of collective identity as "the shared definition of a group that derives from members' common interests, experiences and solidarity" (p. 105/ p. 170). According to Taylor & Whittier (1992), collective identity is naturally oppositional to dominant cultural practices. In the context of this study, the collective Autistic identity represented in the literary texts chosen here implies a confrontation to neuronormativity which deems neurotypicality as the dominant paradigm. Fomoyani comments on Taylor and Whittier's statement saying that it "implies that movement practices and organizational forms, such as decision making based on consensus, communal living or 'horizontal' democratic

organizational structures are conscious and explicit alternatives to dominant paradigms" (year, p. 396). In the light of this, social movements based on collective identities (i.e. neurodiversity) are acts of active resistance. Moreover, Sanchez, (2006) commenting on identity, depicts that "[i]dentity implies reflexivity, a willing connection to a collectivity, and a recognition of being bound to a group" (p. 41).

### 1.4.3 Autistic identity and gender

Autism and gender contribute to the creation of one's identity (Moore, Morgan, Welham, & Russell, 2022). The word "autism is associated with cis, het, white males" (p. 437). Moore, Morgan, Welham, & Russell (2022) also convey that "autism has been coded "male" (p. 423). Autism was subjected to gendered evaluations. Baron-Cohen's Extreme Male Brain theory of autism, which entails that "The higher incidence of autism in male individuals might provide important clues to the etiology of the condition, which has been described as an "extreme of the male brain"" (Baron-Cohen, 2002, p. 995), sets an example of how Autism has been coded male. However, with the rise of the feminist movement in gender diversity in the 21st century, emerged a new concept of "female Autism" (Hull, Petrides, & Mandy, 2020). While many Autistic individuals mask their Autistic selves, individuals belonging to other minority groups such as women, African Americans, and LGBTQIA+ tend to be under more pressure to mask their Autism due to the increased marginalization and exclusion they are subject to (Price, 2022). This increased likability of women masking their Autism has caused the popular misconception referred to as 'Female Autism'; "a female-specific manifestation of autistic strengths and difficulties, which fits imperfectly with current, male-based conceptualizations of ASC [Autism Spectrum Condition]" (Bargiela, Steward, & Mandy, 2016, p. 2382). This characterization demonstrates that "a key feature of the female autism phenotype is a capacity to 'camouflage' social difficulties in social situations (e.g., Kenyon 2014)" (Bargiela, Steward, & Mandy, 2016, p. 2382). Marking "camouflaging" as a key feature of the female Autism phenotype "presents the root of masking as being a person's assigned sex at birth" (Price, 2022, p. 68), thus framing the masking phenomenon as a biological (linked to biological sex/gender) response rather than a social reaction to exclusion. Therefore, in this thesis, I explore two own-voices Autism

narratives with different gender representation - straight female, and bisexual female – in order to debunk the "female autism" myth using Autistic individuals' own voices. Literary works, novels in this case, written by Autistic authors allow for the crystallization of a more accurate representation of Autism and Autistic individuals, and viewing them through an ecosomatic lens allows for a neurocosmopolitan reading that illuminates the Autistic identity.

### 1.5 An ecosomatic reading of Autism

The predicament model's focus on the various contexts that play a role in the construction of a fluid Autistic identity serves as a suitable field for the application of an eco-critical reading of Autistic own voices' narratives. Cella (2013) conveys that "this shared concern in disability studies and ecocriticism for spatial (or, more broadly, environmental) contexts provides somewhat tenuous ground for a coalition between the two fields" (p. 578). The intersectionality between ecocriticism and disability studies lies within their shared interest in nature as a topic of analysis. Cella (2013) uses the term "ecosomatic paradigm" (p. 575) to refer to the interdisciplinary nature of disability studies and ecocriticism; "the ecosomatic approach relies heavily on the cross-fertilization of ecocriticism and disability studies" (Cella, 2013, p. 575). With the predicament model's holistic approach and focus on spatial and environmental elements, and ecocriticism's focus on relationships between mind/body and culture/nature, the ecosomatic paradigm highlights and examines the overlapping of disability studies and ecocriticism. These binary opposites of mind/body and culture/nature are present in the narratives of McNicoll's *A Kind of Spark*'s Autistic main character, Addie, and her Autistic sister, Keedie, as well as in Whateley's *Peta Lyre's Rating Normal*'s Autistic main character, Peta. All three characters struggle through ostracism as a result of the oppressive neuronormative/neurotypical society which insistently imposes hegemonic neurotypical ways of being. While Leone (2019) observes how "[d]isability studies has shown that literary and cultural works often have propagated the othering of people with disabilities via preconceived, unnuanced portrayals that affirm for the audience its normalcy" (p. 166), this thesis aims to further explore own voices literary works with accurate Autism representation as a counternarrative to the neurotypicals' misrepresentations of Autism. The discourse surrounding autism can be significantly reshaped (Levy, 2019). Through the portrayal of accurate and subjective character representations in fiction as

will be illustrated through the analysis of the chosen own voices literary texts: McNicoll's *A Kind of Spark* (2020), and Whateley's Peta Lyre's *Rating Normal* (2020). Own-voices literary texts, unlike autobiography and memoirs, are more appropriate, since these two chosen children novels are geared towards children and adolescents in hopes of a reframing of the Autistic identity.

# Chapter Two

# Neurotypicality as a Hierarchal System of Power

## 2.1 Introduction

This chapter considers the various societal constructions of Autism, especially neurotypicality as an oppressive hierarchical system of power, present in McNicoll's and Whateley's novels, which relies on medicalization, infantilisation, subjugation, animalization, and exclusion of Autistic individuals. It also studies how such flawed constructions of Autism lead to the disablement and further alienation of Autistic individuals within the neurotypical ableist society, as well as the observed Autistic characters. This sense of alienation is reflected in Elle McNicoll's *A Kind of Spark* and Anna Whateley's *Peta Lyre's Rating Normal*, wherein the main characters Addie and Peta respectively illustrate ableist neurotypical societal constructions of Autism in action from an Autistic individual's perspective. Their points of view crystalize the flaws, insufficiencies, and effects of the ableist neurotypical constructions of Autism. Stigma being a major byproduct of the flawed neurotypical constructions of Autism is highlighted prominently in both novels. In this chapter, I will analyze the stigmatization of Autism as a flawed societal construction, particularly in relation to Walker's pathology paradigm (2021).

McNicoll's and Whateley's own voices novels display the struggles of Autistic individuals within an ableist society ruled by the pathology paradigm through Addie and Peta's narratives. With both novels dedicated to "all children with happy, flappy hands" (p. 7) and "all the wildthings" (p. 7) respectively, McNicoll and Whateley dedicate these literary works to Autisitc children experiencing the oppressive neurotypical society. Addie and Peta, both Autistic characters, are perceptive and conscious of their othering and ostracism. Their narratives showcase the neurotypicals' influence on their sense of self. This displayed awareness of neurotypicality guides Autistic readers to better understand the oppressive hierarchal system of power they reside in. Addie and Peta's acute self-awareness signifies the extent to which they internalized the neurotypicals'

perceptions. The two novels depict the neuronormative standards of normalcy and abnormality.

Anna Whately, an 'own voices' author who is proudly Autistic with ADHD and sensory processing disorder (SPD), relates Peta Lyre's narrative as she traverses the neurotypical ableist society, as well as romance through a neurodivergent lens. Peta's friend, Jeb, jokes about her having so many letters she "could start her own alphabet!" (p. 10) referring to her being diagnosed with ASD (autism spectrum disorder), ADHD (attention deficit hyperactivity disorder), and SPD (Sensory Processing Disorder); With the addition of the letter G for Gifted (aka. having a high IQ). Peta is conscious of the prevailing discriminatory oppressive system of neurotypicality as she asks her friend Jeb not to tell anyone about her diagnosis (p. 10). She further shares with readers that she only informs people about her ADHD diagnosis as it "makes them laugh" (p. 10). Putten et al. (2024) highlight how individuals with "ADHD show more camouflaging than a comparison group [non-Autistic and non-ADHD], but less than autistic adults" (p. 821). This is indicative of the differing stigma related stressors experienced by Autistics and people with ADHD, wherein people with ADHD are often not taken seriously "due to skepticism about ADHD diagnoses" (Putten et al., 2024, p. 813). Hence, it is a simple laughing matter according to Peta, while Peta's "Autism honesty beast" (p. 10) must remain hidden, for it conjures up various stigmatizing stereotypes. Furthermore, Peta's consciousness of the oppressive system of neuronormativity includes her awareness of the ostracism and subjugation she has to deal with within the neurotypical society. Such awareness causes Peta to mask her neurodivergent self in order to fit in with "normal" neurotypical people as a defense mechanism. Despite being Gifted with high IQ, Peta "fail[s] and ace[s] school in equal measure" (p.10). This reveals that she willingly fails school to hide her high IQ in an attempt to fit the neurotypical "normal" stereotype. This act of masking highlights how Peta is socially ostracized for deficits as well as advantages. Neurotypicality centers the average neurotypical individual as the "normal", thus casting both above average and below average to the margins. Peta is not only ostracized for her "deficits" but also for her above average IQ. Although a high IQ is often viewed as a positive attribute of Autistic individuals, which can be seen in stereotypical representation of Autistic individuals in film and media, such stereotypical representations are also

oppressive since they assume it is okay to have Autism if it means you will have a high IQ that would be helpful to neurotypical society. Shows like (The Good Doctor) and (The Big Bang Theory) star Autistic characters with high IQs in heroic roles. Morgan (2023) conveys that "Hollywood continues to be lambasted for its singular representation of autism as a "sort of disability 'superpower'" (p. 680). This highlights that neurotypicals reduce Autistic individuals' value to how beneficial they are to neurotypicals.

Elle McNicoll's *A Kind of Spark* illustrates the current domineering neuronormative system of power through an in-depth description of many struggles Autistic children face on a day to day basis. Moreover, Addie's narrative highlights the discrimination and subjugation Autistic individuals experience in their childhood due to ableist ideology. Addie's narrative starts with the following excerpt:

"THIS HANDWRITING IS UTTERLY DISGRACEFUL."

I hear the words, but they seem far away. As if they are being shouted through a wall. I continue to stare at the piece of paper in front of me. *I* can read it. I can make out every word, even through the blurriness of tears. I feel everyone in the classroom watching me. My best friend. Her new friend. The new girl. Some of the boys are laughing.

I just keep staring at my writing. Then, suddenly, it's gone.

Ms. Murphy has snatched it from my desk and is now ripping it up. The sound of the paper being torn is overly loud. Right in my ears. The characters in the story I was writing beg her to stop, but she doesn't. She crumples it all together and throws it toward the classroom bin. She misses. My story lies in a heap on the scratchy carpet.

"Do not *ever* write so lazily again!" she shouts.

Maybe she isn't even shouting, but it feels that way. "Do you hear me, Adeline?" I prefer being called Addie. "Not ever. A girl your age knows better than to write like that; your handwriting is like a baby's." (p. 8) (Capitalization and italics from the original text)

Through this excerpt, one can comprehend the neuronormative ableist society that this novel depicts. Starting her own narrative with the scream of Ms. Murphy, Addie is shown

to have no voice or free space for self-expression. Feeling watched through this humiliating incident intensifies Addie's feelings of perceived shame. Ms. Murphy acts very stereotypically neuronormative and ableist by ripping up Addie's writing merely because her handwriting is "utterly disgraceful" (p. 8) according to neurotypical standards of normalcy. Describing Addie's handwriting as that of a "baby's" (p. 8) infantilizes Addie and ignores her different "motor skills" (p. 16) that cause her handwriting to be different. Keedie, Addie's Autistic sister, however, explains how her "handwriting is the same way" (p. 16), which comforts Addie slightly.

### 2.2 "Normal people": the center of neuronormativity

The construction of "normal people" as the default standard underpins hierarchical systems of oppression that privilege the neurotypical majority and marginalize neurodivergent individuals. Walker (2021) comments on the concept of normal saying that "to treat one particular group [ethnic, cultural, sexual, neurological, or any other sort] as the "normal" or default group inevitably serves to privilege that group and to marginalize those who don't belong to that group" (p. 20). The pathology paradigm centers around the assumption that there is "such a thing as a "normal person" (Walker, 2021, p. 20), i.e. the neurotypical majority. Such assumption leads to the marginalization of neurodivergent individuals in general and Autistic individuals in specific. On the one hand, equating normalcy to neurotypicals pushes neurodivergent individuals to perceive themselves as abnormal. On the other hand, neuronormativity pushes neurodivergent individuals further into the margins of the established periphery. Autistics, classified within the realms of neurodevelopmental disabilities or disorders, are left feeling excluded and marginalized even within the subjugated disability paradigm. For instance, Jeb tells Peta: "You're not the normal kind of abnormal" (p. 10), so within abnormality lies a hierarchal order of normalcy dictated by the neurotypical system of power. Peta is aware of the differing levels of stigma associated with different disabilities and conditions. For instance, when Peta broke her leg she "didn't have to talk to anyone about it" (p. 32), and when she got a skin infection "they put cream on it" (p. 32). However, When she was diagnosed with letters "ADHDASDSPD" (p. 32) everyone said she will "need a lot of help" (p. 32). Another reason Peta hides her diagnosis from people lies in

the idea that "apparently, letters mean *you* should change" (p. 32) highlighting how neurodevelopmental divergence is not granted the same accommodative attitude other disabilities obtain. Peta's love interest, Sam, finds out about Peta's diagnosis and her need to follow neurotypical rules leaving her feeling exposed. Peta says "I'm disappearing and all she'll see is the letters… we sip our hot chocolates and I wonder if she will ever see me again" (p. 94). Jenkins highlights how "for Peta, being normal means fitting in and not attracting attention to herself" (Jenkins, 2021, p. 46). This is established in the novel through Peta's anxious narrative. Peta's "chest clenches at the thought of being exposed" (p.11), which highlights her fear of her Autistic self being exposed. Therefore, in her attempt to fit in and hide her Autistic self, Peta "put[s] [her] shields into place" (p. 12) carefully filtering through her actions making sure they conform to the neurotypical standards of normalcy. Through Peta's narrative we get to explore "what it means to be normal, who and what is normal and ultimately, whether being normal is all that it is made out to be" (Jenkins, 2021, p. 46). The Pathology paradigm of Autism, the building block of neurotypicality, cements the assumption that neurotypicality is what is normal, thus discarding neurodivergence as abnormal and pushing it into the periphery. This hierarchal oppressive system of power stigmatizes Autistic [neurodivergent] individuals by creating binary opposites (like: normal/abnormal, neurotypical/neurodivergent, Abled/disabled etc…).

In Whateley's *Peta Lyre's Rating Normal*, the recurring normalcy rating, presented at the end of almost every chapter, highlights the internalized stigma imposed by a neurotypical society. Measured on a scale of 1 to 10, this fluctuating score reflects Peta's ongoing struggle to conform to normative social protocols, emphasizing how societal expectations can lead individuals to devalue their neurodivergent identities. Peta says "I can't trust many people, least of all myself" (p. 10) referring to her "psych stuff" (p. 10) i.e. her diagnosis. Having trust issues with people around herself as well as her own self/diagnosis signifies unhappiness with the self and low self-acceptance as a result of felt stigma, which is "the internalized prejudice experienced by a stigmatized person, including shame and fear of enacted stigma" (Turnock, Langley, & Jones, 2022, p. 78). Peta experiences felt stigma as a result of the stigmatized perception of Autism.

In sections where Peta struggles to pass as normal or mask well, her normal rating is usually pretty low. For instance, being late to take her meds—which help her better mask her neurodivergence—Peta thinks, "she'll [Sam] think I'm a freak" (p. 21). Her internalized shame and fear of being exposed frame her autistic/neurodivergent self as a freak. In another section, where Peta struggles with masking and "the coffee and the tablets aren't enough to make [Peta] normal" (p. 25), her rating of normalcy is "5/10" (p. 25). On the other hand, in sections where she successfully conforms to neurotypical social protocols through masking her neurodivergent identity, "pride fills [her] chest" (p. 28) and she gives herself the following rating: "Normal rating: 10/10" (p. 28). These ratings change to varying degrees according to many variables such as medication, coffee, and her ability to mask or pass as normal. These ratings are often accompanied with the phrases "Inhale. Exhale. Survive." (p. 16…) signaling that masking is an attempt at survival. However, near the end of the novel, after unmasking, Peta stops relating these phrases, which represents the end of her internal struggle for survival that accompanied masking her Autistic identity.

Neurotypicality follows a structuralist approach that centers neurotypicals/non-autistics as a domineering entity which dictates what is "normal," thus casting any deviance from their normalcy into the periphery. On a school trip, when forced to share a room with multiple other girls, Peta states: "The girls are all so normal and I'm a monster who hasn't learnt the rules for sharing a room with people in the snow" (p. 78). Although there is no mention of direct bullying in this scene, Peta is keenly aware of the social exclusion imposed by a neuronormativity that deems neurodivergence as monstrous. This stigmatized perception of neurodivergence/autism as abnormal, once internalized by Peta, makes her feel like a "monster" (p. 78). Neuronormative society applies intense social pressure on neurodivergent individuals like Peta Lyre to conform to neurotypical standards of normalcy. Walker (2021) reflects on how neurotypicality—as a characteristic of the pathology paradigm of autism— "disempowers them [Autistic individuals] and keeps them feeling bad about themselves" due to "internalized oppression" (p. 23). Peta, for instance, views herself as a "monster" (p. 78) and often relates herself to Frankenstein's monster: "sewn together from dead people… doesn't have a name… learn[t] how to be human by listening to a family read stories and teach

each other" (p. 52). The analogy underscores her feeling of being a monster created by neurotypical society, burdened with labels such as "disabled", "freak" (p. 11), and "monster" (p. 78). When mastering neurotypical social protocols and "*passing as normal*" (p. 28), Peta expresses happiness saying "pride fills my chest and I know all the books and sessions have been worth it" (p. 28). Feeling a sense of achievement for conforming to neurotypical societal expectations and following it with a "normal rating: 10/10" (p. 28) illustrates the internalized stigma and shame Peta endures due to neuronormativity.

As discussed earlier in the introduction, the word Autism was coined by neurotypical scientists in an attempt to address neurodivergence to the established neurotypical norm. The term Autism was given by neurotypicals to refer to a very diverse group of individuals with different physical, mental, and social attributes, and—as part of an oppressive, hierarchical neuronormative system—it carries negative, stigmatized connotations that further alienate neurodivergent individuals from "normal" neurotypical society. Furthermore, like Frankenstein's monster, Peta had to learn how to behave and talk like "normal" people. Through her stream of consciousness narrative, she tells readers, "*We shall be monsters*, together. Frankenstein's monster is made up of all different people, and he needs to learn how to be a person by watching. Just like me" (p. 38). This identification suggests that Peta spent her childhood watching people around her and learning how to be "normal." She recounts that she also "had a therapist" (p. 38) whom she saw for years during her childhood, and who provided her with "books on what might happen, and what to do so people are happy" (p. 38). Conditioned by neurotypical society to act in a neuronormative manner in order to fit in and be accepted, Peta's early awareness of a problem with herself leads her to falsely think she wants to mask and hide her diagnosis altogether, due to neurotypical societal pressure to be "normal". Finally, unlike her neurotypical classmates, Peta understands that Frankenstein's monster asks for a bride because he "just wants someone *like him*… because he can't be like them" (p. 52). The use of italics – *like him* – highlights Peta's social isolation due to her neurodivergence and the uselessness of trying to mask her Autistic self.

Subjugation of Addie due to mere difference from the accepted neurotypical "norm" plays a role in her social exclusion. McNicoll's *A Kind of Spark* relates the story of Addie's

school life as an Autistic child in a neuronormative society, while she learns about the historic witch trials that used to be held in her village, Juniper, long ago. Addie points out all the parallels between Autistic individuals and the women accused of being witches for their "deviance" from what is "normal" at the time. In *A Kind of Spark*, Autistics and women are both victim of the hierarchal oppressive neurotypical society. Ms. Murphy, Addie's school teacher, inform her students that "In old Edinburgh, and in many other parts of Scotland and the world, you could be tried and executed for being a witch" (p. 21). She continues to explain: "It is said that witches were dunked in the Nor' Loch. Their thumbs and toes were tied together, and they were tossed into the water! If they floated, they were guilty of witchcraft. If they drowned, they were innocent. Guilty witches were removed from the loch and taken to Castlehill to be burned or hanged" (p. 22). Addie feels "angry" at "the unfairness" (p. 22) of the trials that the women were forced to experience and at the painful torture they had to endure just for "being different" (p. 23). Upon hearing these facts, Emily, Addie's classmate, says to the classroom "Addie would have been burned, then" (p. 23) for which the whole classroom erupts in laughter including Ms. Murphy. Such a statement draws a comparison between Addie and the innocent women accused of witchcraft, thus, highlighting a parallel between the two and implying that Addie is abnormal and deserves violent unjust execution. Moreover, McNicoll's intriguing connection between Addie and the victimized Scottish women from the 16th century accused of witchcraft, skillfully redirects the narrative focus from a collective subjectivity to individual subjectivity, and then reintegrates it into a broader, autistic collective subjectivity.

### 2.3 Myths surrounding Autism Vs. neurotypical society as disabling

The domineering exclusionary social hierarchy imposed by neuronormativity is supported by yet another myth regarding Autistic individuals as asocial, which is in the words of Catala, Faucher, & Poirier "one of the most prevalent stereotypes about autism" (Catala, Faucher, & Poirier, 2021, p. 2). However, this thesis which examines McNicoll's *A kind of spark* and Whateley's *Peta Lyre's Rating Normal* highlights that the autistic authors and their characters articulate their desire for social interaction. These authors and their characters' struggle with social communication is attributed to the "exclusionary

social environment structured by and for neurotypical people that does not accommodate their different neurocognitive profiles" (Catala, Faucher, & Poirier, 2021, p. 4), by setting up social protocols regarding communication and relationships. Such social protocols, present in the novels, are forced upon neurodivergent characters: Peta, Addie, and Keedie.

Autistic individuals' misperceived asociality is a direct result of the neuronormative society and not their Autism. Treweek, Wood, Martin, & Freeth (2019) argue that "Autistic individuals have reported a sense of feeling trapped by the stereotypes non-autistic people hold of them" as cited in (Botha, Dibb, & Frost, 2022, p. 442). One can infer that Autistic individuals are not "disabled" as a result of their Autism, but instead by "the expectations and inflexibility of their environments" (Bennett, Webster, Goodall, & Rowland, 2019, p. 30; Grinker, 2008). In this sense, a large part of the challenges and obstacles that Autistic individuals struggle with are ones imposed upon them by the neuronormative exclusionary society (Kenny, et al., 2015). As a result of the stigmatization and subsequent exclusion that Autistic individuals suffer from, Autistic participants "described processes of coping with stigma, such as trying to fit in or assimilate, concealing their autism" (Botha, Dibb, & Frost, 2022, p. 438), a process referred to as masking.

Autistic individuals are often falsely accused of being asocial. However, Addie and Peta prove their willingness for making human connections. For instance, Addie clearly expresses wanting to get along with her non-autistic sister, Nina, despite their differences. Nina, Addie's non-autistic older sister and a social media vlogger, decides to make a video of herself putting makeup on Addie— "giving her a crash course" (p. 30) on beauty. Addie's stream-of-consciousness narrative allows us to understand the scope of her relationship with her neurotypical sister, Nina. Although aware of her lack of interest in makeup and hairstyles, Addie states, "she [Nina] looks so open for once, I don't want to say no" (p. 30). Thus, she agrees to be in one of Nina's videos because she wants to bond with her sister. Addie explains how she feels about the makeup being applied, saying, "It's awful. It feels so uncomfortable, like paint. But she's so close to me and she's being so calm and nice. I don't want to ruin it, so I sit still and let her do it. I'm happy she wants to be near me. So I let it all go" (p. 31). This depicts Addie's desire to bond with her

neurotypical sister despite various obstacles, ranging from neurotypicals' ignorance to the struggles faced by autistic and neurodivergent individuals, such as sensory processing disorder (SPD), which is implied throughout *A Kind of Spark*; Addie tells one of her school friends, Audrey, "I…feel things a bit more. Sounds, sights. I can hear people down the street without straining" (p. 38), explaining her hypersensitivity to sounds and other sensory stimuli.

Neurotypical ignorance fosters an environment wherein social exclusion of Autistic characters, such as Addie and Peta, is encouraged. When Nina uploads the video featuring Addie to the internet, it attracts many insensitive comments from the neurotypical audience. This, in turn, angers Keedie and sparks an argument between the sisters. Nina uses the word "functioning" (p. 39) in reference to Addie, asserting that it is a "perfectly appropriate medical term" (p. 39) to describe how Addie "has it [Autism] mild" (p. 39). However, Keedie explodes, saying, "It's mild to you!... It's mild to you and every other heartless soul in this village, Nina; it's not mild to me. It's not mild to Addie!" (p. 39). Terms like functioning/non-functioning or "high-functioning and low-functioning autism" are "divisive and potentially harmful labels" (Morgan, 2023, p. 681) because they encourage division and create a superiority/inferiority system that oppresses those labeled as "low-functioning." Furthermore, although the term is widely used within the pathology paradigm and the medical model of disability, it is inherently biased. This bias is rooted in autistic individuals' ability to mask their autistic identity and pass as "normal"—the better an individual is at masking the "mild[er]" (p. 39) version of their condition, the more accepted they are in neurotypical society. Keedie illustrates this by saying, "It's mild to you because we make it so, at great personal cost!" (p. 39), referring to the ongoing efforts to mask their true selves.

Therefore, although the neurotypical society insist on framing Autistic individuals as inferior disabled individuals, it is the social exclusion resulting from stigma that disables Addie and Peta and not their Autistic selves. Peta also comments on her desire to form a relationship with the new girl, Sam, saying: "seeing Sam now, I realise what it means to be attracted to someone with your whole body and mind" (p. 66), expressing her physical and emotional attraction towards Sam.

McNicoll brings light to another common misconception about Autism that Autistic people lack empathy. For example, Emily tells Addie "You don't even know what empathy is. Your damaged brain can't feel it" (p. 76), to which Addie chooses not to respond. The neuronormative misconception that Autistic brains are damaged feeds into the hierarchal oppressive system of neuronormativity. In another instance, however, Mr. Patterson says that "most children with autism don't have a lot of empathy" (p. 51), to which Addie replies with "that's a common misunderstanding" (p. 51) and that Autistic people are indeed very "empathetic" (p. 51). This demonstrates how neuronormative misconceptions of neurodivergence intensify Autistic's alienation and encourage discrimination.

Pathologizing Autism, represented in *A Kind of Spark* through Keedie's friend Bonnie, is another example of domineering myths surrounding Autism. Bonnie was "taken away" (p. 58) to a "place for kids with mental-health issues" (p. 58) because of being Autistic. Addie explains to her friend Audrey that although "Autism isn't a mental illness… they [neurotypicals] didn't care" (p. 58). This emphasizes on how the neurotypical society pathologizes Autism out of ignorance. Moreover, Addie relates how once Bonnie turned eighteen "They moved her to a new facility. Meaner people. And no hatch on the door. No windows. Just four walls" (p. 59). This encapsulates the mistreatment of Autistics by the neurotypical majority, wherein if an autistic like bonnie, for instance, gets "sectioned" (p. 59), "the state sort of owns you. They decide what to do with you. Not your family. And not you" (p. 59). Thus, Autistics live in constant fear of being "sectioned" (p. 59), and stripped of their agency. Replying to a comment implying that "the government can lock people like Addie up if they want to" (p. 62), Nina says "no one is going to lock Addie away" (p. 62). However, Addie responds "Yeah, as long as I'm good" (p. 62), showcasing Addie's awareness of the neurotypical oppressive system of power that imposes masking upon neurodivergent individuals such as, Addie, Keedie, and Bonnie. Addie is fully aware that Bonnie was taken away and locked up "because she couldn't mask anymore" (p. 64). Therefore, Addie is "scared" (p. 64) to end up like Bonnie.

Neuronormative society's discriminatory practices significantly contribute to the disablement and infantilisation of neurodivergent individuals. The social model of

disability views disablement as a form of marginalization (Walker, 2021, p. 56); neurotypical society reinforces this marginalization by stigmatizing Autistic individuals within a disability framework. For example, after learning of Peta's autism diagnosis, her teachers and principal ceased pushing her to achieve her "potential" and began treating her in a manner that reinforced notions of inferiority and perpetual childhood (Loftis, 2021, p. 105). This infantilisation strips Peta of her agency by casting her as passive characters within neurotypical society.

Both Addie and Peta experience infantilisation as a result of the stigmatized perception of autism as disability based on deficits. Referring to one of her classmates, Emily, who participates in the bullying and exclusion of Addie, Addie says "I'm not sure why she always speaks so slowly to me. I actually prefer fast talking" (p. 19). Emily speaks slowly to Addie based on the misconception that Autistics' brains are slow and underdeveloped, aka. Suffering from "eternal childhood". Infantilisation plays a role in the dehumanization of Autistic individuals by reducing them to less than human status. Addie recounts witnessing her autistic older sister, Keedie, having a meltdown in front of their previous babysitter, and she relates how Ms. Craig, the babysitter, hissed at Keedie saying: "you little animal" (p. 33). Calling Keedie a "little animal" (p. 33) paints the picture that Autistics are less than human, thus animalizing Autistics. Furthermore, Addie relates facing ableism from the village people, wherein Mr. Macintosh, head of Juniper's committee, disregards Addie's agency when she asks him for a memorial to be built in memory of the women falsely persecuted for witchcraft in Juniper saying "I'm not sure who has put you up to this" (p. 36), indicating that Addie's mental capabilities are not developed enough for her to come up with ideas on her own. He then "bends down so that we're level and then speaks very slowly, in the same voice Emily uses. "Who put the idea in your head?"" (p. 36). McNicoll, here, highlights the misconception that Autistic individuals are thought of as unable to think on their own accords, which agrees with infantilisation, dehumanization and animalization of Autistics. Addie struggles with the neurotypicals' treatment of her, the "disabled child" (p. 39). McNicoll, in her novel, refers to various terms of address used by neurotypicals to refer to Addie: "troubled" (p. 39), "disabled" (p. 39), "functioning" (p. 39), "cursed" (p. 40), "modern tragedy" (p. 40), "imbecile" (p. 49), and "animal" (pp. 33, 106).

Ableism and anthropocentricism are both correlates of Stigma. Ableism is "a system of oppression leading to the process of disablement and attendant discrimination of disabled or chronically ill people through physical barriers in the built environment and social and attitudinal barriers, throughout contemporary and historical society (Butler & Bowlby, 1997; Gleeson, 1999; Imrie, 1996, 2001, as cited in Arathoon, 2021). As a direct result of neurotypicality, ableism disables Autistic individuals and sends them into the periphery. Savarese (2013) comments on the notion of neurodiversity highlighting how "this view of diversity will not sufficiently aid people with disabilities, particularly neurological ones, where stigma remains a substantial problem" (p. 192). Stigmatization of Autism and its construction of negative deficit-based narratives of disability establish groundwork for ableism. In both novels, "public stigma", "self-stigma", and "affiliate stigma" (Turnock, Langley, & Jones, 2022, p. 78) are presented along with their intersection, and their effects. Furthermore, conventionally, disabled people have been discriminated against, marginalized, and "sometimes 'animalized', treated as inferior or less-than-human" (Arathoon, 2024, p. 201) due to their differences. Similarly, animals suffer from anthropocentrism. Kopnina, Washington, Taylor, & Piccolo (2021) define anthropocentrism as a "planetary-scale subordination of nonhuman organisms that denies they have value in their own right" (p. 9), meaning that animals' merit depends on their usefulness to humans. Within this framework disabled individuals and animals share the same anthropocentric oppressive system, which regards able-bodied and neurotypical individuals as "normal" and reduces the value of Autistics and animals to their direct usefulness to neurotypical society. Arathoon (2024) states that "the inherent entanglement of ableism and speciesism works in tandem to oppress disabled people, positioning disabled people as different, immoral, or deviant" (p. 207). Oppression resulting from a perceived fear of difference led to the stereotyping, stigmatization, and subsequent animalization of Autistic individuals (Hahn, 1989). Furthermore, "modern society—a society which by and large is designed exclusively around neurotypical needs and expectations, and is unrelentingly hostile to deviation from neurotypical norms—systematically disables a great many neurodivergent people, autistic people included" (Walker, 2021, p. 60).

Perceived stigma correlates with social camouflaging i.e. masking. According to Perry et al. (2021), "perceived stigma motivates camouflaging" (p. 801). Walker (2021) argues that the framing of Autism within the pathology paradigm leads to the assumption that the less autistic one is, the better their well-being either by masking or by abusive behavioral therapy practices. "[S]tigmatization socially constructs disability and deviance" (Leone, 2019, p. 161). With the neurotypical societal pressure to be "normal", Peta struggles with feeling "normal" instead of a deviant in the periphery. Through Peta's stream of consciousness narrative, readers explore the inner workings of the "Alphabet girl['s]" brain. Peta reflects on having gone to a therapist at a young age, she says: "They [therapists] just want you to know how to look neurotypical" (p. 55). The premise the Autistic individuals need to be fixed and taught how to act "normal" contributes to forming the stigma surrounding Autism, which is internalized by Autistic individuals causing low self- esteem and low self – acceptance.

Masking, for Peta, becomes a tool for self-suppression and conformity. Her room represents a sanctuary, as she explains, "My room is the safest place my body has. My mind doesn't really have a safe place" (p. 16), underscoring her struggle to find a space where she can be herself without the oppressive expectations of neurotypical society.

### 2.4 Masking and its side effects

One use of italics in *Peta Lyre's Rating Normal* is to express internalized neurotypical rules of normalcy. Social protocols that Peta was taught through therapy are expressed in italics; for example: Peta narrates a recollection from six years ago when her mum decided to leave her at her aunt Antonia's place for two weeks because "parents need a break" (p. 49); what Peta acknowledges as "respite" (p. 49) meaning that Peta sensed that she was both difficult to handle and unpleasant to raise. As a result, Peta genuinely asks her mother if she could permanently stay with her aunt, however her mum declines her request saying "Because I'm your mother, not her" (p. 49) to which Peta instantly replies "She's nicer than you" (p. 49). Peta's reply is instantly followed by these words in italics "*Just because something is true, doesn't mean it should be said*" (p. 49). Bringing attention to social rules she was previously taught to conform to neurotypical norms

consisting of hiding the truth, which goes against her Autistic self which she refers to as "Autism honesty beast" (p. 10).

Peta's actions were influenced by her internalized neurotypical voice that she thought made her "normal". Eating lunch with the new girl, Sam, Peta, because of her sensory processing disorder (SPD), becomes aware of the unique scents coming from Sam's lunch. When offered to taste it, Peta refuses with a simple "no" (p. 53) because trying out "new food takes preparation and thought" (p. 53). However, internalized neurotypical rules of normalcy followed: "*Refusing food can be seen as insulting*" (p. 53). Thus, Peta resorts to saying "Thank you, though, I'll try it another time. It smells wonderful. Dill" (p. 53). This type of italics relating neuronormative social protocols is scattered across Peta's narrative signifying it is an inseparable part of her thought process. This is a result of masking, wherein the words in italics are a guide that Peta follows in order to modify her actions to conform with neurotypicality. There are many examples wherein words in italics function as a neurotypical guide for Peta:

> "*Try to respond in reasonable time. If you can't decide on something, use a delaying tactic*" (p. 71). "*Don't talk too much in the car. Don't jiggle. Don't ask too many questions. Don't...*" (p. 57) "*Look people in the eye if you can, at least when you greet them*" (p. 69) "*I know it's harder when you're tired, Peta, but your tone matters to the people you are talking to. They might misunderstand what you are saying or feeling*" (p. 71) "*Don't let them see how fussy you are*" (p. 71-72). "*try not to say everything that comes into your head*" (p. 73) "*Try practicing in front of a mirror* [her facial expressions]" (p. 73)

It is clear from these examples that Peta manages her life by adhering to neurotypical social protocols in an attempt to accommodate neuronormative society and fit in. Being taught such neuronormative social protocols by therapists creates "the assumption that autism is intrinsically pathological, intrinsically a problem or form of wrongness" (Walker, 2021, p. 61). Peta, internalizing this pathological perception of Autism, "leads inevitably to the assumption that the well-being of any given autistic person hinges on that autistic person somehow becoming less autistic" (Walker, 2021, p. 61). One can sense the immense effort Peta devotes to conforming to neuronormativity.

Furthermore, masking is not only exhausting, as it is a constant effort to conceal one's identity, it is also detrimental to Autistics' psychological wellbeing. Camouflaging behaviors among Autistics are linked to significant psychological stress, with extensive masking correlating with higher stress and anxiety levels. Walker (2021) states that "social anxiety in the autistic population was a symptom of the extensive social trauma neurotypical society inflicts upon autistics from childhood—in other words, that what we sought to treat was a symptom not of autism but of traumatic oppression" (p. 75). Cage & Troxell-Whitman (2019, p. 1907) argue that "high camouflagers showed significantly higher ratings of stress symptoms in comparison to low camouflagers," suggesting that Autistics who engage in high levels of masking experience elevated stress and anxiety. Although social anxiety and withdrawal are commonly misperceived as inherent traits of Autism, Walker (2021) emphasizes that "social anxiety in the autistic population was a symptom of the extensive social trauma neurotypical society inflicts upon autistics from childhood" and thus a symptom of "traumatic oppression" (p. 75). For instance, after experiencing a "burnout" (p. 117), Keedie tells Addie: "All I've done this term at university is mask. I've masked so well, I've fooled myself… And the more I've pretended, the more I've felt myself slipping away" (p. 120). To experience Autistic burnout, "a syndrome conceptualized as resulting from chronic life stress… characterized by pervasive, long-term (typically 3+ months) exhaustion, loss of function, and reduced tolerance to stimulus" (Raymaker, et al., 2020, p. 140), Keedie endured high levels of social anxiety on a daily basis as a result to masking, which consequently led to Autistic burnout.

Moreover, during one of Peta's therapy sessions with Fiona, a psychologist, Peta explains, "We look at pictures of people and talk. We practise things, like having conversations. It's exhausting, and she doesn't let me stop and play when I ask to" (p. 75). This description captures the rigid disciplinary structure of behavioral intervention, where the goal is not to understand or validate Peta's own communicative style but to train her to replicate neurotypical modes of interaction. What emerges here is the expectation that she must master the codes of neurotypicality in order to be recognized as intelligible, an exercise that demonstrates how therapy often functions as a technology of normalization. In this sense, Peta is not learning to communicate more effectively according to her own

needs, but rather to "pass as normal" (p. 145), adopting behaviors that conceal her Autistic identity in favor of external approval. The cost of such performative compliance is captured in her admission that the sessions are "exhausting," highlighting the emotional and physical toll of sustained masking.

This theme of conscious performance recurs throughout the narrative. In one scene, while her aunt recounts a humorous work story that Peta finds disgusting rather than funny, Peta remarks, "I make my eyes go wide and eat as fast as I can" (p. 15). The phrasing here is particularly revealing: she does not say "my eyes widened" but rather "I make my eyes go wide," a subtle but powerful distinction that underscores the deliberate, effortful construction of her responses. The act is not spontaneous but calculated, performed to fit the expected script of amusement in social interaction. This illustrates the essence of masking—strategically deploying facial expressions, gestures, and conversational cues that simulate neurotypical reactions while suppressing authentic Autistic responses. In this way, Peta's narrative demonstrates how neurodivergent individuals are compelled to edit their embodied expressions in order to avoid stigmatization or exclusion, thereby situating masking not as a choice but as a survival strategy within a society governed by neuronormativity.

McNicoll's *A Kind of Spark* discusses the issue of masking and its consequences for neurodivergent individuals' quality of life, mental wellbeing, and social life. Addie defines masking saying: "Masking is when I have to pass as a neurotypical person, as someone who is not like me. I have to ignore the need to stim, to self-soothe, and I have to make firm eye contact" (p. 18). However, when surrounded by neurodivergent individuals, such as her sister Keedie, Addie tells readers: "so we run. My hands flap joyfully; I'm able to stim without anyone telling me not to" (p. 18). Feeling free to stim around neurodivergent individuals only signify that neurotypical society deems stimming as abnormal and unacceptable based on the comparison with the neurotypical majority. At the "semimonthly committee meeting" of Juniper, Addie along with her family attended in order to voice a request for the building of "a new village memorial" (p. 28) that "commemorates the people who were unjustly sentenced to death [referring to women who were unjustly executed for accused witchcraft]" (p. 29). With her request

denied, Addie is "resigned" (p. 30). Keedie tells Addie "Addie, I thought you were amazing. Staying so calm and *masking* so well when that stupid light was flickering like mad" (p. 30) [italics not in original text], thus, signaling that masking is a positive trait that brings about pride. This sense of pride in masking is rooted in the internalized stigma created by the neurotypical oppressive society which deems neurotypicals as the desired norm, and casts neurodivergence to the periphery. This brings us back to what is "normal". For instance, Addie tells her sister Keedie "You're not normal, either" (p. 40) signaling that she does not view herself nor her sister as normal. This showcases Addie's self-awareness and consciousness of the hierarchal oppressive system that places neurotypicals at the center to dictate rules of normalcy. Addie comments on the neurotypicals' role in disabling and excluding of Autistic individuals saying "a doctor said I would never speak. Then that I'd never be able to go to school with normal children" (p. 91). The medical community, representing the pathology paradigm, consistently tries to dictate what Autistics are unable to do; focusing on the deficits the pathology paradigm frames Autistics as abnormal and in less than status. By saying Addie would "never be able to go to school with normal children" (p. 91), the doctor makes a distinction between Addie and "normal children" aka. neurotypical children. Addie is aware that "that's what masking is for. To appear nice" (p. 91); as if to say being Autistic isn't "nice" or "normal". Addie relates to readers that she feels "trapped in a box" (p. 40); between the urge to mask to fit in and the need to unmask her Autistic self. Addie relates to readers how she is masking by saying "I am invisible. The real Addie is behind a mask of social rules, regulations, and strange neurotypical customs" (p. 88). Addie is, therefore, conscious of the stigma surrounding Autism and has to some extent internalized it, which can be seen through her constant masking attempts.

Masking for long periods of time could be very dangerous as it could lead to various issues with one's mental health. Price (2022) highlights the detrimental side effects of masking starting from Physical and mental exhaustion resulting in burnout, depressive episodes, anxiety, as well as suicidal thoughts in some cases (p. 18). Addie, for instance, narrates some of said side effects "feel[ing] everyone in the classroom watching [her]" (p. 8) signaling social anxiety, as well as, physical and mental exhaustion in the form of Autistic burnout. Addie witnesses her older sister, Keedie, "curled up in the corner,

looking utterly gone" (p. 117). Nina explains to her that "She's experiencing a burnout… It's when her system is overloaded and she's so overwhelmed, she breaks down" (pp. 117 – 118). Addie perceived the image of Keedie curled up on the bathroom floor as stemming from the physical exhaustion resulting from excessive/prolonged masking.

*A Kind of Spark* illustrates how Autistics often experience what is referred to as a "meltdown" in the novel due to bullying (dehumanization, social exclusion). For example, Addie has a meltdown at school as a result to bullying. Addie enjoys learning new vocab and, thus, was gifted a small thesaurus by Keedie. Addie comes into the classroom one day to find that her bully, Emily, have "taken scissors to it" (p. 102) and destroyed it. Addie falls to her "knees" (p. 102) in shock. As she opens the first page she finds that "someone has taken a dark and ugly black pen and written a word [Retard] over the drawing Keedie did for [her]. The sight of it causes something in [her] to snap" (p. 102). Addie starts crying and "can hardly breathe" (p. 102). Dehumanizing words such as "retard" rooted in neurotypicality is a result to the stigma and fear surrounding Autism, and the circulation of such words further establishes the oppressive hierarchal system of neurotypicality which pushes Autistics into the margins. This following excerpt illustrates the relationship between fear, stigma, myth and oppression:

- I look up at Emily. "Why?"
- She glares down at me, nostrils flaring and eyes aflame. "Because I'm sick of that stupid little book. Sick of all your books."
- "WHY?" I scream. She looks startled for a millisecond. "Because! You're no better than me, retard." She spits out the word with poison…
- I get to my feet unevenly. My body feels as if it is floating a few inches above the floor…
- I stare down at the book. At the word… All I know is I'm flying. I'm flying through the air and I land squarely on top of Emily. (pp. 102 – 103)

Emily "struggling with reading" (p. 97), contrary to Addie, views Addie as a threat. Emily's reasoning for ruining Addie's thesaurus stems from Emily's fear of Addie's Autism that provides her with "superpower[s]" (p. 131). Addie is attacked for her

difference. She is bullied for "her stupid disease" (p. 103) as Emily puts it. Being labeled as a "retard" (p. 103) for her difference signifies the extent to which Neurotypicality oppresses any deviance from the established "normal". Neurotypicality doesn't differentiate between negative and positive deviance; all deviance from the "normal" is viewed negatively in deficit-based framework. Peta also reiterates this point when conveying to readers that she not only hides her autism spectrum disorder diagnosis, but also hides her "Gifted" (p. 10) diagnosis signaling her high IQ. Addie's meltdown is due to her subjugation and exclusion as well as "humiliat[ion]" (p. 111) she endured by both her teacher Ms. Murphy and her classmate Emily who uphold the neuronormativity beliefs, wherein Autistics are "retard[s]" (p. 103), "Violent" (p. 109), and "[are]n't right for a regular school" (p. 109). Such remarks given by Ms. Murphy signal the level of ignorance the neurotypical society upholds against neurodivergent individuals who differ from the expected "norm".

Keedie also experiences meltdowns due to masking and neurotypical ignorance. Unlike Addie, Keedie was alone with no neurodivergent individuals to guide her through what it is to be Autistic in a neuronormative society. Addie recalls an instant from Keedie's childhood, wherein Keedie struggled with their babysitter's aggressive "snarl[y]" (p. 33) remarks and aggressive attitude. Addie relates:

- One evening, Keedie was having trouble with the dinner Mrs. Craig had made. I remember disliking it too. Even Nina was grappling with it, and Nina never likes to displease grownups.
- When Keedie reached a stage of no longer being able to stomach it, Mrs. Craig lost it. She threw a plate and dived at Keedie. And then something broke inside my sister.
- She howled. I still remember the sound. Screaming, crying, and beating her own head. It was like she was trying to knock all the horrible names she had been called out of her mind. Mrs. Craig sprang into action, cursing Keedie all the while, and using her considerable weight to restrain my sister. She pinned Keedie's wrists to the floor and got right in her face.
- "Stop!" Nina cried, looking more afraid than I had ever seen her. Memories from so long ago can be difficult sometimes, but this one is as clear as a film scene in my

head. I remember the feelings as vividly as the look of contorted pain and terror on Keedie's face.

This showcases how neurotypical ablesit ideology pushes Autistics to experience meltdown due to the immense psychological and physical pressure they endure.

Masking could also lead to self-loathing as a result of the suppression of the Autistic identity. Addie lives her life "desperately trying to make other people feel at ease. To show them [she's] normal. That [she] can be just like everyone else" (p. 107). This confession underscores how the practice of masking is not simply a matter of choice, but rather an act of survival within a society that continually demands conformity to neurotypical standards. The phrasing "desperately trying" conveys the intensity of the effort required to maintain a facade of normalcy, an effort that is both exhausting and alienating. Indeed, Addie admits that such performance is "hard" (p. 98), pointing to the toll masking takes on her energy, emotions, and sense of authenticity. The difficulty here is not only in maintaining the performance but also in constantly negotiating the fear of being unmasked, of being exposed as different in a society that equates difference with deficiency.

Addie further elaborates on the internal conflict inherent in masking when she admits, "I try really hard to hide. But sometimes I don't want to. I don't want to, Keedie" (p. 64). Her words expose the paradox of masking: while it offers temporary protection from stigma and exclusion, it simultaneously erases the possibility of living authentically. The reference to Keedie, her Autistic sister, suggests that the desire to "not want to" hide emerges in spaces where she feels understood and safe, highlighting the importance of solidarity and recognition within the Autistic community. Yet, this desire for authenticity is constantly curtailed by the threat of punishment or confinement, as illustrated by Bonnie, who "slip[ped] through the cracks [ending up locked up in mental institutions and stripped of your rights over her own self, which is mentioned as a side story in McNicoll's *A Kind of Spark*]" (p. 112). Bonnie's story reveals the structural violence of a neurotypical society that pathologizes unmasked Autistic behavior and responds with incarceration rather than accommodation.

The psychological consequences of this oppressive system are most apparent in Addie's admission: "on days like today [where she experiences a meltdown], when I fail [at masking], I hate myself. More than anyone else can hate me" (p. 107). Here, self-loathing emerges as the byproduct of an impossible demand—the unattainability of sustaining a perfect mask indefinitely. Failure to conform does not simply invite external judgment but is internalized as self-hatred, demonstrating how deeply neuronormative ideals infiltrate Autistic subjectivity. Masking, therefore, becomes both a shield and a prison: it protects against immediate exclusion but simultaneously generates profound feelings of exhaustion, alienation, and self-directed hostility. In this sense, the act of masking is emblematic of the neurotypical oppressive system of power, which forces Autistic individuals into a cycle of self-suppression and self-loathing, denying them the possibility of embracing their identities without fear of stigma or violence.

# Chapter Three

# Neurocosmopolitanism and Autistic Agency

## 3.1 Introduction

Elle McNicoll's *A Kind of Spark* (2020) and Anna Whateley's *Peta Lyre's Rating Normal* (2020), situate stories of Autistic individuals within the neurodiversity paradigm, aids in the shift from the pathology paradigm of Autism (or the medical model of disability) to the neurodiversity paradigm (or the social model of disability). Nick Walker (2021) highlights the importance of this paradigm shift for the achievement of a neurocosmopolitan society and reclaiming Autistic agency. Moreover, an ecosomatic reading of Autism own voices literature provides a counter narrative to the hegemonic neuronormativity. Both narrators, McNicoll and Whateley, opt for fantasy and nature when their characters are in distress. Relating to nature or fantasizing about nature can be looked at as a means of alienating the self from the oppressive reality and at the same time it plays a role in making the characters reflect on their lived reality, which would in turn lead to them opting out of this oppressive system. This chapter aims to showcase how Elle McNicoll and Whateley's narratives propose an ecosomatic critique of the pathology paradigm and anthropocentrism respectively through the exploration of and advocacy for a neurocosmopolitan society/reality, wherein Autistic individuals regain their full intersubjectivity and agency through solidarity with nature/animals.

## 3.2 Emergence of ecosomatics

The emergence of the intersectional field of study referred to as ecosomatic paradigm came as a result of multiple authors who "claim that their disability has enabled for them unique understanding of non-human animals and how they experience the world" (2013, p. 120), which opens room for the discussion of nature and animal studies in relation to disability studies and neurodivergence. Morton (2010) states that "everything is interconnected. This is the ecological thought" (p. 1). For instance, Arathoon's work demonstrates that animal and disability geographies share fundamental theoretical foundations that challenge established systems of power. Referring to both fields, Arathoon (2024) highlights their "shared ontological, epistemological, and methodological connections" (p. 201). In particular, these fields are united by their

common aims: to challenge and deconstruct systems of power and oppression, to understand lived experience, and to create shared pathways to social justice (Collard & Gillespie, 2015; Parr & Butler, 1999; Philo & Wilbert, 2000b, as cited in Arathoon, 2021). Thus, combining the two fields through an ecosomatic reading of the novels, deconstructs neurotypicality and anthropocentrism in pursuit of social justice as expressed through neurocosmopolitanism.

An ecosomatic perspective in McNicoll's *A Kind of Spark* and Whateley's *Peta Lyre's Rating Normal* initiates the deconstruction of the neuronormativity/ neurodivergence dualism that associates Autism with disability thus casting Autistic individuals as inferior as nature is to humans or as women are to men. Arathoon (2024) states that "intersectionality is adopted as an approach to critique systems of oppression" (p. 205). Queer autistic scholar and author Nick Walker illustrates how neurodiversity conceives "the idea that there is one 'normal' or 'healthy' type of brain or mind, or one 'right' style of neurocognitive function, [and how it] is a culturally constructed fiction, no more valid […] than the idea that there is one 'normal' or 'right' ethnicity, gender, or culture" (Walker, 2021, p. 32). Stigmatized Autism, therefore, is a social construct, which is why in order to stop the stigmatization of autism we must employ Derrida's deconstruction to decenter neurotypicality and shift the contested space of autism into an uncontested space, wherein Autistic individuals reclaim ownership of their own narrative.

### 3.3 Own-voices narratives vs. the alienation of Autistics by neuronormativity

The neuronormative narrative depicts Autistic people in a "dehumanizing" manner "because they don't fit into a social construct [of normality] that alienates instead of valuing heterogeneity" (Morgan, 2023, p. 680). Own voices narratives such as, McNicoll's *A Kind of Spark* and Whateley's *Peta Lyre's Rating Normal*, reflect a glimpse of the fluid Autistic identities of their characters devoid of the dehumanizing subjugator's lens. Rodas (2018) concludes that "if autists are writing their own lives, it is presumably for the sake of being seen and heard, of asserting agency and identity in a culture where autistic experience is often marginalized" (p. 21). Own voices narratives bring Autism to the forefront sparking a shift in the dominant oppressive neuronormative system of power. Moreover, Morgan (2023) elaborates that one imperative change towards

understanding autism lies in "see[ing] autism through a value-neutral lens to reduce shame and stigma, accept and celebrate difference in a way that makes barriers disappear, to allow autistic people to thrive in the world" (p. 680). This shift from neuronormativity paves the way for neurocosmopolitanism.

Autistic individuals should be in charge of their own narrative. Rodas (2018) states that "autistic people must have the dominant role in exploring and defining autistic voice and autistic identity" (p. 23), making *A Kind of Spark* and *Peta Lyre's Rating Normal* suitable texts to explore own-voices novels, wherein Autistic authors write Autistic characters based on their neurodivergent experience. Such narratives resist the long history of misrepresentation produced when neurotypical authors, clinicians, or cultural institutions attempted to define Autism from the outside, often pathologizing difference rather than valuing it. By foregrounding the insider perspective, own-voices novels destabilize the hierarchy of authority that privileges neurotypical interpretations and instead recenter Autistic knowledge as authentic and epistemically valid. Melanie Yergeau (2018) writes in their book *Authoring Autism*, "to author autistically is to author queerly and contrarily" (p. 6) to neurotypical "normal" rhetoric. This assertion underscores that Autistic authorship challenges not only the content of dominant narratives but also their form, structure, and logic, producing stories that resist linearity, conformity, and normative expectations. In this sense, the very act of writing becomes a form of resistance, a disruption of the discursive boundaries imposed by neuronormativity. Furthermore, "conceiving of autism as a rhetoric, as a way of being in the world through language, allows us to reconstrue what we have historically seen as language deficits" (Heilker & Yergeau, 2021, p. 496). This reframing is crucial because it reinterprets the differences in communication styles often stigmatized as impairments, and instead recognizes them as rhetorical strategies that express alternative modes of being and knowing. By acknowledging Autism as a rhetoric, literary and cultural criticism can move away from deficit-based models and toward an understanding that values the creativity, complexity, and legitimacy of Autistic expression. Thus, works like McNicoll's and Whateley's novels do more than represent Autistic characters; they embody a broader political and epistemological shift that affirms Autistic authors as the rightful narrators of their own lives and identities.

### 3.4 Autism rhetoric vs. neurotypicality

Both *A kind of Spark* and *Peta Lyre's Rating Normal* are written in the first person, a fictional memoir of sorts where both Autistic authors write about what being autistic is like based on their own experience in the neuronormative society. Both texts display autism poetics, "the particular ways in which autism is expressed in language" (Rodas, 2018, p. xi). Rodas (2018) conveys that "autistic language is its own thing" (p. 34). It has unique characteristics that distinguish it from neurotypical language, such as silence, ricochet, apostrophe, ejaculation, discreation, and invention (Rodas, 2018, p. 34). For instance, Apostrophe, a language overflow characterized by "lengthy monologues", is evident in both Addie's and Peta's narratives, especially when connected to their special interest or hyperfixation. Addie tends to go on about sharks even when not asked about them:

> "Sharks don't have bones," I tell him, caressing the photograph of what I know is a blue shark. "And they have six senses. Not five. They can sort of sense electricity in the atmosphere. The electricity of life! They can also smell blood from miles away." Their senses are sometimes overpowering. Too loud, too strong, too much of everything. I turn the page to a large photograph of a solitary Greenland shark, swimming alone in the ice-cold water. "People don't understand them." I touch the shark's fin. "They hate them, actually. A lot of people. They're afraid of them and don't understand them. So they try to hurt them" (pp. 10 - 11).

Addie extends her identification with sharks to their shared experience of feeling overpowered when exposed to too many senses all at once. She also highlights Sharks' sixth sense which allows them to sense electricity. This is similar to how Autism allows Addie to perceive things that may not be seen easily by neurotypicals. Addie comments on how her Autism is difficult at times, however Addie says: "on the days when I'm finding electricity in things, seeing the details that others might not, I like it a lot" (p. 132). The title of the novel – *A Kind of Spark* – refers to Addie's Autism, which although misperceived by the neurotypical society, remains a sixth sense that Addie learns to accept and thrive with.

Peta's use of medication illustrates how she adapts her naturally expressive communication style to meet social expectations. Peta conveys that she manages her habit of talking too much, Apostrophe, by taking medication; “It’s harder going out at night, when my meds have worn off. It’s exciting, I’m relaxed, and I risk just being myself, talking too much, being strange” (pp. 11 – 12). This highlights the inner conflict Peta experiences with Autistic attributes. While Peta feels both excitement and relaxation when not taking her medication, she still prefers to take them in order to hide her true “strange” (p. 12) self that talks “too much” (p. 12). Peta illustrates a sense of stigma associated with her Autistic apostrophe, which stems from the oppressive neurotypical society. For instance, Peta relates meeting up with a therapist as a kid before starting on medication:

- ‘Have you had fun with the magnet sticks?’ she [the therapist] asks.
- ‘I have. I like magnets. Did you know the forces of the earth all have to do with magnets? Magnets have two poles, and they won’t touch because they repel. That means they strongly go opposite ways ...’ I want to tell her more about magnets, how many ways they are used and how important they are, but she holds up a hand and stops me talking.
- ‘Just give me short answers, please’ (p. 32)

Instances like these elaborate on the mechanism in which neurotypicality imposed stigma onto harmless Autistic attributes such as apostrophe. Being told by a therapist to only give “short answers” (p. 32) depicts the therapist’s efforts in suppressing Peta’s unique characteristics such as her tendency of producing long monologues and talk lengthily about her topics of interest. Such a rule by the therapist is classified as a masking rule that aims to teach Peta how to “look neurotypical” (p. 55) and “pass as normal” (p. 145) by suppressing her true Autistics identity and adopting a neurotypical “normal” identity. Peta conveys how therapists and neurotypicals in general only want to teach Autistics how to fit in to neurotypical norms “not to know how to vote or make your world different so you don’t look so wrong in the first place” (p. 55). Yergeau in a foreword to Rodas’ book titled *Autistic disturbances*, says that “where a clinician finds TMI [Too Much

Information], Rodas finds apostrophe or ejaculation" (Rodas, 2018, p. x), which translates/represents to neurocosmopolitanist perspective of Autism.

### 3.5 Symbolic bonds with nonhuman animals

McNicoll's *A Kind of Spark* embraces a sense of direct and indirect eco-awareness, which makes it easy to apply the ecosomatic paradigm. With Addie relating to sharks and animals in general. There is also, Keedie comparing Addie to a tree saying "You're a tree" (p. 35); "Some people are like trees. The wind can blow and blow, they'll never move. They'll always be there" (p. 35). Leone (2019) conveys that the "narration of the disabled character's interactions with and affinity for nature, including birds, insects, and plants, supports the desirability of diverse human and non-human bodies" (p. 174). Autistic individuals often form deep, symbolic bonds with nonhuman animals, reflecting both their unique inner worlds and their resistance to societal misjudgment. Monroe (2019) states that "closeness with nonhuman animals is an often-discussed aspect of autistic people's experiences" (p. 89). On the one hand, Addie shares her hyperfixation on sharks; she says they are the "most interesting thing to [her], even more than the ancient Egyptians and the dinosaurs" (p. 10). Pete Wharmby (2023) discusses the concept of hyperfixation to Autistic individuals stating that a "hyperfixation is an interest in a topic, idea, thing, or things… the interest is intrusive… inexhaustible" (Wharmby, 2023, p. 10), meaning it is an interest that occupies their thoughts and is unlikely to cause boredom. Addie shrieks "Sharks!" (p. 10) in excitement over being presented a "sort of encyclopedia… all about sharks" (p. 10). Addie often relates to how sharks are misjudged and misunderstood, and she draws a connection between herself and sharks. For example, when asked by Audery about what she loves so much about sharks, she says:

- I light up at the question. "I love everything about them. Their ancestors were here millions of years before the dinosaurs. That's so old, I can't even get my mind around it."
- "That is old. But don't they eat people?"
- "No." I shake my head adamantly. "They might take a bite out of someone, thinking that they're a seal, but they don't hunt or eat humans."

- “I don’t know…” She giggles. “I think they’re horrible.” The light in me dims. I retreat to my book, embarrassed and saddened… I feel defensive. “They’re amazing fish. Really smart.” … “Everyone likes dolphins,” I say sadly. “I don’t see why they’re any better than sharks.”
- “They just seem friendlier,” she points out. “Less scary.”
- I nod absently and go back to my book. I feel a little empty. Flat. I feel that maybe we weren’t talking about sharks and dolphins at all” (pp. 77 -78)

In this conversation with her friend Audery, Addie clearly demonstrates a sense of connection with sharks. This connection stems from her awareness of the subjugation and stereotyping directed at sharks that is similar to what the Autistic self is experiencing by neurotypicals. Her attitude shifts the moment sharks are criticized and labeled as “horrible” and “scary.” She feels “empty” and “flat” for being indirectly shunned. Her final remark— “maybe we weren’t talking about sharks and dolphins at all”—highlights her consciousness of an anthropocentric, neurotypical oppressive system, wherein friendly dolphins represent neurotypicals and “scary” sharks symbolize the misunderstood minority of neurodivergent individuals.

The motive behind the human desire to connect with nature stims from our desire to reclaim our identity as a whole. Vidon (2019) observes that the motivation behind nature tourists [ those seeking to explore nature] lies in the concept that “through this kind of engagement with the wilderness, they are seeking (re)union with their “whole” selves and are, in Lacanian terms, thus attempting to overcome or transcend their split subjectivity and alienation” (p. 19). One can infer from the provided data that by connecting with nature and being in its presence, individuals tend to reconnect with their true “unalienated” (Vidon, 2019, p. 13) selves. This applies to both Addie and Peta, wherein surrounding themselves with nature aids them in reclaiming their suppressed Autistic identity that they were forced to alienate themselves from by the neurotypical society. From a Lacanian point of view, nature provides Addie and Peta with a “feeling of wholeness or heightened self-awareness” (p. 13). This could be seen in both McNicoll’s and Whately’s narratives that incorporate nature throughout the text and in their main characters’ fantasy. Vidon conveys that nature tourists seek nature because it gives them

"the opportunity to (re)connect with their authentic, unalienated selves, free from the gaze, and judgment of others around them" (p. 13). Similarly, with Addie and Peta, whether they escape physically to nature in order to self-reflect and be with their true selves, or they fantasize about nature to achieve self-awareness. Vidon states additionally that "fantasy is crucial in structuring our reality and providing us ability to function" (p. 18). For instance, when asked to go to the Blue Light Dance with her friend Jeb, Peta struggles with deciding whether to go and risk "d[ying] of humiliation" (p. 16) because of her meds wearing off in the evening exposing her Autisitic self, or not going and sparing herself the certain "humiliation" (p. 16). Peta follows this internal conflict with the following fantasy: "*I climb onto the window ledge and take off into the night air. The bats welcome me, and we fly to their caves. I live out the rest of my days in the dark and the smell of rancid shit. Happy and safe, furled in my wings*" (p. 17). Fantasizing about nature here can be seen as an escape from reality into nature, where Peta is welcomed and feels a sense of belonging. Peta narrates how her "room is the safest place" (p. 16) for her "body" (p. 16), while her "mind doesn't really have a safe place" (p. 16). Her mind is suppressed and alienated and thus, only finds shelter through fantasizing about nature.

On the other hand, Peta Lyre also illustrates a "closeness with nonhuman animals" (Monroe, 2019, p. 89) by relating her preference for stuffed animals over dolls. She says, "Animals are safer, less complicated, and feel nice and furry" (p. 29). Peta also recalls spending considerable time as a child watching her stuffed animals: "for hours I waited, watching my animals" (p. 29). Additionally, part of Peta's weekly routine involves bird watching with her friend Jeb. She states, "It's Thursday. We go down to the Point and chuck chips at seagulls on Thursdays" (p. 24). Both Peta and her friend Jeb find watching and feeding seagulls relaxing. For instance, after their college ski trip—which was tiring for Peta—Jeb "buys chips" (p. 137) and they "sit on the bonnet" (p. 137) feeding the seagulls, doing what "comforts" (p. 137) them. Furthermore, Peta's middle name "Lyre" references the lyre bird, which is known for mimicking sounds. Peta comments on the origin of her name saying "I *study people. I'm the mimic, the lyrebird.* They created me" [Italics in original text] (p. 124). Choosing Italics here to describe her mimicking actions conveys that Peta was taught to "*study people*" and "*mimic*" (p. 124) by the neurotypical society, for italics are used in Whateley's narrative to reference the set of rules and social

protocols set by neuronormativity, which have become a part of Peta. However, Peta, with the help of nature and animals, becomes aware of the impact neuronormativity has on her Autistic self. Peta highlights the epiphany she experiences in these lines:

> I've always been disordered, faulty, lacking. But there's something new mixed in. *Anger*. I'm *angry* with them all. Fiona [ one of her therapists], the books, my parents, the doctors. They said I could pass as normal, that I was clever and no one would ever know. They lied. Not about passing. The lie was hidden beneath, in the desire for me to be the same as them. I am extraordinary. They should have helped me soar, be more of me, not less… I lost my voice. So scared of the words that were always wrong, I silenced myself and could only hear them and their rules (p. 145).

Peta, after what can be perceived as a suicide attempt of walking into the ocean, realizes that due to the exclusionary neurotypical society she lives in, she has been made to believe that she wants to fit in and "pass as normal" (p. 145) to be accepted. However, the "ocean" (p. 145), "night creatures" (p. 144), and "curlews" (p. 145) aid Peta to acknowledge her wish to "[call] to someone, wanting them to find you, see you" (p. 145) as you are behind the mask:

- I keep walking down to the Point. Time clears my mind. The power of my legs reminds me of the slopes. I trudge on and on to the sea. Where blissful silence can be found again.
- The road takes a short steep decline to the car park. People huddle on the right, near the jetty. Some are having a late dinner at the chip shop, happy families. I turn left. The mangroves and the shallow water are dark and hidden.
- I take off my boots and feel the sand and mud under my feet. In the distance, lights twinkle on the northern shore, and the moon plays on the small waves. This is the perfect place to let go of everything. I walk out into the water; it's warmer than the air. Release waits below. I keep walking, pushing the water aside as I go where *I* choose.
- My ears are full of sweet words, my body aches for the gentle touch of skin. The loneliness is worse now I know how it feels to be with someone, to want someone.

The world would be a simpler, better place without me. I just want the emptiness to stop. Salt water isn't as good as snow and ice but it will do.

- The water reaches my chin, my breathing heavy in the pressure. The tide pulls me further from the beach. The surface seems peaceful. Small wave by small wave, the melted snow in my veins turns to brine. My toes lose the muddy bottom as I'm pulled away. Water rises over my face. Silence in my ears.
- I scream unheard into the black water.
- I scream and scream as the current offers to help.
- Exhale (pp. 142 – 143).

This dramatizes Peta's embodied confrontation with despair, where the physical journey to the ocean mirrors her psychological descent. The act of *"walking down to the Point"* and feeling *"the power of my legs"* signifies both a reclaiming of bodily agency and an approach toward dissolution. The juxtaposition of *"happy families"* at the chip shop with her solitary movement toward the mangroves underscores her exclusion from neurotypical belonging, highlighting the social isolation that frames her suicidal ideation. The tactile sensations—*"sand and mud under my feet"* and the sight of *"lights twinkling on the northern shore"*—anchor her in sensory reality, yet also signal her awareness of distance from community and connection. Her recognition that *"release waits below"* suggests that the water is both a site of death and a possibility of liberation, reflecting a duality between annihilation and rebirth. The imagery of *"salt water"* replacing *"snow and ice"* recalls earlier moments of solace in nature, suggesting continuity in her search for peace, even in self destruction. The rising tide, *"water reaches my chin… my toes lose the muddy bottom"*, emphasizes her surrender to forces beyond her control, while the *"silence in my ears"* marks both the terror of obliteration and the erasure of her voice in a world that refuses to hear her. Yet, her *"screams unheard into the black water"* and the current's offer *"to help"* reveal that even in the depths of despair, resistance persists: the scream becomes an assertion of presence, while the ocean becomes not merely a place of erasure but also of transformation, a liminal threshold where Peta confronts the imposed mask of normalcy and gestures toward unmasking through release.

Burdened by the "extra weight" of the "Frankenstein's wretched *normal* skin" (p. 144) "they [neurotypicals] sewed" (p. 144) onto her, Peta "trudge[s] on and on to the sea" (p.

142), “the perfect place to let go of everything” (p. 143), to complete what I believe is her rebirth. As the “water rises over [her] face” (p. 143), Peta screams “unheard into the black water”, “screams and screams as the current offers to help” (P. 143) “slough” “the monster’s skin… into the ocean” (p. 145) revealing Peta’s Autistic identity. Similarly to how the snow aided Peta to feel at peace with her Autistic identity, the ocean helps her get rid of the oppressive hierarchal neurotypical social protocols that have been restricting her Autistic Identity from emerging fully. She ends this section with the phrase “Exhale” (p. 143) as if to say she is finally letting go of the neurotypical pathology paradigm that have held her captive throughout her life. Nature plays a huge role in Peta’s unmasking process. “[B]linking away the veil [she’s] lived under for so long” (p. 145) Peta states that “Lyrebirds don’t just mimic. They make their own songs too, and dance to their own beats” (p. 146), signaling the symbolic reference of Peta’s middle name “lyre”, A bird known for its ability to mimic sounds. Peta states: “I *study people. I’m the mimic, the lyrebird.* They created me” (p. 124). Here masking can be viewed as mimicking and imitating the other like the l*yre*bird that imitates human speech. Peta emphasizes that “they”, the neurotypicals, created her. However, by stating later that lyrebirds do more than just mimic, Peta is illustrating that Autistic identity is a separate standing identity that is not dependent on the neurotypical system for survival. Here Peta is reclaiming both her Autistic identity and her subjective agency by increasing emphasis on her anger towards the neurotypical oppressive system, which led her to falsely believe she wants to pass as “normal” or neurotypical.

### 3.6 Neurodiversity movement and Autistic identity

With the rise of the neurodiversity movement, neurodivergent individuals have begun reclaiming the term by clarifying its meaning and asserting agency over their Autistic identity. For instance, Price (2022) states, “I capitalize ‘Autistic’ for the same reason members of the Deaf community capitalize ‘Deaf’—to indicate it is a part of my identity I am proud of, and to signal Autistics have our own culture, history, and community… By capitalizing Autism, I signal that it’s actually an important, meaningful aspect of who we are, one we don’t need to shy away from” (p. 53). By capitalizing Autism, one breaks down the stigma associated with it, allowing neurodivergent individuals to take pride in

their identity. In Whateley's *Peta Lyre's Rating Normal*, Peta uses her alphabet (aka. diagnosis) to reclaim her agency. She conveys:

> I reach into the depths of my alphabet and pull out the obsessive Peta. The Peta who taught herself to read using junk mail, just because she liked how black squiggles on paper could make a real sound. The Peta who could spend weeks learning to shuffle cards while her parents argued. The Peta who rolled dice hundreds of times to check they were random. The Peta who learnt the rules so well she graduated therapy. *Now I'll be the Peta who can ski* (p. 115).

By resorting to her true Autistic identity for help, Peta reclaims her subjectivity by disregarding the neuronormative societal expectations and deciding to just be who she is and do what she wants.

Another highlight in *A Kind of Spark* is that it brings attention to another debate regarding person first vs identity first language. Neurotypicals tend to use person first language such as "children with autism" (p. 51) instead of saying "Autistic people" (p. 51). Although Person first language began as an 'equalizer' for all kinds of disability, "over time person-first language has been implemented unequally as children with more stigmatized disability (such as autistic children) are more likely to be referred to in person-first language in comparison to children with less stigmatized disability (such as blind children) (Anderson-Chavarria, 2021, p. 3; Gernsbacher, 2107). Vivanti (2020) conveys that "Far from being mere semantics, this distinction has practical implications, as the words that we use to describe individuals with an autism diagnosis influence societal perceptions, public policy, clinical practice, and research directions' (p. 601). In my thesis, I follow the identity first terminology often endorsed by self-advocates, but do understand and respect other individuals' preference for person first language, since Vivanti (2020) suggests that "a complete shift away from person-first language appears premature" (p. 602).

McNicoll's *A Kind of Spark* advocates for the abandonment of masking. This unmasking serves as a potent form of resistance against ableist and neurotypical oppression and discrimination. It also acts as a catalyst for the reclamation of individual autonomy, subjective authenticity, and agency, thereby offering an empowering narrative for those

on the autism spectrum. Through a narrative lens characterized by first-person narration, it is posited that McNicoll deftly imparts autonomy and agency to her protagonist, Addie. Through Addie's stream of consciousness narrative, readers are able to explore life through her Autistic lens, as well as, observe the interconnectedness between Autism and nature. Talking about blue sharks, Addie says "People don't understand them... They hate them, actually. A lot of people. They're afraid of them and don't understand them. So they try to hurt them" (p. 11). Addie explain how neurotypicals fear sharks because they are misunderstood. Drawing a parallel between the stigma around sharks being aggressive and the stigma around Autistic individuals being violent and "weird" showcases how this fear and exclusion stems from misperception and misunderstandings.

Moreover, Addie explains how having her Autistic sister, Keedie around, made being neurodivergent easier saying: "I have Keedie to explain everything to me. To tell me why my handwriting is bad, why loud noises and bright colors make my mind catch fire. She had no one to tell her" (p. 17). This highlights the importance of Autistic individuals sharing their experiences with each other as well as with neurotypicals. By sharing her Autistic experience, Keedie was able to make Addie's life easier by being a comfort zone where Addie is fully noticed and accepted.

# Chapter Four

# Conclusion

By analyzing both novels in terms of their suggested ecosomatic inclination, this thesis has shown how Autistic own voices novels, such as *A Kind of Spark* and *Peta Lyre's Rating Normal*, contribute to the establishment of a neurocosmopolitan society through providing a counter-narrative to the existing ableist discourse surrounding Autism. Through the application of an ecosomatic reading to the novels, this thesis managed to critique the pathology paradigm, which lies at the heart of neuronormativity, and initiate the shift from the oppressive discriminatory pathology paradigm/ medical model of disability to the neurodiversity paradigm towards neurocosmopolitanism. By providing a counter-narrative to the neuronormative narrative, these texts create a bidirectional path between neurotypicals and neurodivergents. Joining the general discourse, Autistic narratives contribute in educating neurotypicals of the innateness of Autism, and assists the reclamation of the fluid Autistic identity in a positive framework. McNicoll's *A Kind of Spark* and Whateley's *Peta Lyre's Rating Normal* depict an overcoming of the neuronormative society achieved through the process of unmasking.

This thesis examines the neuronormative standards of normalcy against the neurocosmopolitan approach that articulates receptiveness of neurological difference. Addie and Peta's narratives encourage acceptance of neurological difference through a call for unmasking. Both Addie and Peta relate their experiences with the oppressive neuronormative society that imposed masking on Autistic individuals leading to suppression of Autistic identity. Through decentering the notion of neurotypicality as the only accepted norm and re-centering the autistic identity along the neurotypical identity, this thesis illustrates how own-voices narratives contribute to breaking the shackles of the pathology paradigm governing neuronormative society towards a neurocosmopolitan society that deems Autistic individuals and other neurodivergent individuals as normal.

This thesis closely studies different myths surrounding Autism and the role neurotypical society plays in disabling and infantilising Autistics. It highlights the roles of stigma, fear and ignorance in myth creation and subsequent oppression of Autistic individuals. The

stigmatized perception of Autism linked to the pathology paradigm and the terminological confusion caused by circulating myths imposes masking onto Autistic individuals. Due to neurotypical societal pressure to be "normal", Autistics are made to believe their Autistic identity is abnormal and should be masked in order to fit and be accepted by neurotypical society. This demonstrates the characters' awareness of the subjugation of Autistics and their internalization of the stigmatized perception of Autism. Masking, however, leads to physical and mental side effects such as, Autistic burnout and meltdowns.

Symbolic bonds with nonhuman animals mark an important element of the ecosomatic reading of *A Kind of Spark* and *Peta Lyre's Rating Normal*. Such ecosomatic approach provides new insight into the underlying desire for Autistic individuals to reconnect with nature and consequently with their identity. In the texts, nature has a prominent role throughout the narrative. Both Addie and Peta unmask and reclaim their fluid Autistic identity when surrounded by nature. Aiming to illustrate the effects of the oppressive neurotypical society in McNicoll's *A Kind of Spark* and Whateley's *Peta Lyre's Rating Normal*, this thesis has found that both literary texts share environmental elements and special connection to animals. Their shared incorporation of nature and animals to the Autistics identity highlights the importance of an ecosomatic reading of the texts, which reframes these own-voices texts as counter-narratives to neurotypical ignorance of the Autistic identity.

Moreover, the significance of an ecosomatic and neurocosmopolitan reading extends beyond the immediate textual analysis of *A Kind of Spark* and *Peta Lyre's Rating Normal*. What this thesis ultimately demonstrates is the transformative potential of literature to reframe cultural understandings of disability, identity, and human relationality in ways that resonate across disciplines. By situating Autism within a framework that is at once ecological, embodied, and cosmopolitan, these texts invite us to rethink the boundaries between human and nonhuman, self and other, normalcy and difference. Such a reframing is not merely corrective to the damaging stereotypes perpetuated by neuronormative discourses; it is also generative of new epistemologies and modes of coexistence. The inclusion of Autistic voices within literary studies challenges dominant critical paradigms

that have historically marginalized disabled subjectivities, pushing scholars to reconsider how literary canons are formed, whose voices are amplified, and what counts as legitimate knowledge. It also reveals how disability and neurodivergence are not peripheral to cultural life but central to reimagining more just and sustainable futures. In this sense, neurocosmopolitanism does not simply describe a hoped-for condition of acceptance; it functions as a critical lens through which to interrogate existing hierarchies of power and to envision relational models grounded in reciprocity, mutual recognition, and respect for difference. Thus, while the novels analyzed in this study foreground the struggles of individual Autistic protagonists, their broader implication lies in reorienting readers toward a more expansive and inclusive understanding of what it means to live together in diversity. By bridging literary criticism, disability studies, and ecological thought, this thesis affirms the role of literature as both a site of resistance and a catalyst for social transformation, where the reclamation of Autistic identity signals a wider call for equity, dignity, and recognition across all marginalized communities.

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كليَّة الدّراسات العليا

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إعداد
نور نضال سعيد الزغل

إشراف
د. بلال حمامره

قدمت هذه الرسالة استكمالا لمتطلبات الحصول على درجة الماجستير في الأدب المقارن بكلية الدراسات العليا في جامعة النجاح الوطنية في نابلس، فلسطين.

2025

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## الملخص

تتناول هذه الأطروحة، المستندة إلى دراسات التنوع العصبي الأدبي (neurodiversity)، النظام الهرمي القمعي للسلطة والمعروف باسم المعيارية العصبية (neuronormativity)، من خلال روايات المؤلفين المصابين بالتوحد وكذلك من منظور الشخصيات المصابة بالتوحد في روايتي A Kind of Spark لإيل ماكنيكول (2021) ورواية Peta Lyre's Rating Normal لآنا واتيلي (2021). تسلط هاتان الروايتان الضوء على الأصوات التوحدية وسردياتها المضادة تجاه مجتمع يتبنى مفهوم الكونية العصبية (neurotypicality). وتتبع هذه الأطروحة نهج العلوم الإنسانية الطبية، الذي يدرس التقاطع بين التخصصات الإنسانية والأسئلة المتعلقة بصحة ورفاهية الأفراد. لقد درست المعيارية العصبية والتأثير السلبي لها على الرفاهية العامة للمصابين بالتوحد في كلا النصين الأدبيين، كما ابرزت دافع النصوص الأدبية نحو العالمية العصبية (neurocosmopolitanism) من خلال تحليل الجوانب البيئية النقدية وكيف تجد كل من آدي وبيتا السلام في الطبيعة، وتخيل ذلك على أنه هروب من المجتمع العصبي العالمي. كما اسلط الضوء على دور الطبيعة في استعادة الهوية التوحدية. من خلال التعمق في الادب التوحدي والذي يُمكننا من إدراك أهمية استكشاف وتحليل النصوص الأدبية التي تُعبِّر عن أصوات المهمَّشين، والرامية الى تخفيف الجهل النمطي للمجتمع تجاه الافراد ذوي التنوع العصبي ، والقضاء على وصمة العار السائدة والمرتبطة بالتوحد وغيره من اصناف التنوع العصبي.

**الكلمات المفتاحية:** التوحد، المجتمع العصبي، الوصمة، البيئة الجسدية، الهوية التوحدية، والنظرية العصبية الكونية.