

ISSN INTERNATIONAL
STANDARD
SERIAL
NUMBER

ISSN-2321-7065

IJELLH

**International Journal of English Language,
Literature in Humanities**

Indexed, Peer Reviewed (Refereed) Journal



Volume 7, Issue 7, July 2019

www.ijellh.com

Yemuna Kathiresan

Assistant Professor, Department of English

Sri Ramakrishna College of Arts and Science for Women

Coimbatore, Tamil Nadu, India

yemunakathiresan@gmail.com

Dr. M Mary Neena

Assistant Professor, Department of English

Nirmala College for Women

Coimbatore, Tamil Nadu, India

Dismantling Ableism Through Literature - A Prismatic Study On *Rules* By Cynthia Lord.

Abstract

The visible and invisible differences among people make them dynamic and unique. Based on appearance and behavior a few people are termed as disabled. The potential of those people does not rely on their appearance and behavior. It mainly depends on their contribution to their family and society. Being physically or mentally impaired doesn't make anyone disabled. Autistic Spectrum Disorder is a developmental disorder and children with this disorder function differently normal but most times their behavior is termed differently than normal. Living with an autistic family member is not a cakewalk but it is not a Herculean task. America is a pioneering country in keeping impaired people socially and politically comfortable through the Americans with Disabilities Act 1990. As a result, many American writers laid their focus on portraying the difficulties in the lives of people with special needs and their family members. First and foremost, they have to realize the

differences and accept them. Cynthia Lord's *Rules* is the best novel that captures the struggles of Catherine in accepting her Autistic sibling and a wheelchair-bound friend. She overcame a lot of internal storms to live with a differently normal family member. This paper explores the difficulties, pleasure, and happiness in living with an Autistic family member and it also aims to reveal the fact that disability is not a barrier for human relationships and happiness.

Keywords: Autism Spectrum Disorder(ASD), Disability Studies in American literature, Ableism, Constructing Normalcy.

Everyone has their difficulties and hardships in their lives. Especially, a family which consists of an autistic person has to face more struggles than other people. They have to deal with a lot of things like social pressure, medical expenses, psychological distress, physical inconveniences, economic restrictions, availability issues and so on. In Spite of all the external factors, their internal traumas torment them into pieces. The society adds more pressure to them in numerous ways unknowingly and knowingly. The American Psychiatric Association defines ASD as, "Autism spectrum disorder (ASD) is a complex developmental condition that involves persistent challenges in social interaction, speech and nonverbal communication, and restricted/repetitive behaviors. The effects of the disorder and the severity of symptoms are different in each person."

A Spectrum disorder is a mental disorder in which individuals have various sub-symptoms instead of having a single set of symptoms. Autistic Spectrum is one among the spectrum disorders and it mainly includes Autism and Asperger's Syndrome. Children with Autistic spectrum have a tougher life than children without the disorder. Being developmental disorder autism delays the social interaction, communication, and awareness of understanding the situations in the children. Due to the delay in these interactive life

aspects, autistic children and their family members have a hard time living in society. The very aspect that adds pressure to the existing pain is Ableism.

Many a time, people fail to identify the fact that someone's disabilities or disorders never affect their abilities. Disability Studies is an emerging multidisciplinary field that aims to voice out the unvoiced difficulties and discrimination that disabled people are facing daily. The concept of Ableism helps people to construct normalcy in society. Gregor Wolbring of the University of Calgary states ableism as, "It questions and highlights the prejudice and discrimination experienced by persons whose body structure and ability functioning were labeled as 'impaired' as sub-species-typical. Ableism of this flavor is a set of beliefs, processes, and practices, which favors species-typical normative body structure based abilities. It labels 'sub-normative' species-typical biological structures as 'deficient', as not able to perform as expected". In other words, ableism is the label given to people who label people with disability as ineffective and unproductive and discriminate them in many ways. People with Autistic Spectrum Disorder suffer a lot because of Ableism. The nature of their disorder makes them not behave in the way they are expected to behave in a social setup. The lack of awareness and understanding in common people complicate the lives of people with the disorder and their family members.

The behavior of autistic children is extremely different from the numerous roles they play in their family and society. But the concept of ableism unconsciously oppresses them and prevents them from having a peaceful life. The emerging American writer Cynthia Lord explored the lives of the families which consist of a person with a disability. The novel beautifully portrays the struggles, barriers, transformation and the attitude of acceptance in the family members' perspective towards the disabled family member. This literary work is a new milestone in the contemporary literary world.

Rules by Cynthia Lord deals with the internal and external struggles of a twelve-year-old Catherine, the protagonist and the elder sister of an autistic brother, David. Catherine possesses extraordinary maturity in dealing with her brother but the peer and social pressure complicate her life and lifestyle. Her friendship with Jason, a wheelchair-bound boy is the turning point in the story. The title of each chapter represents the thought process and transformation of Catherine in accepting her brother and Jason as they are. Finally, Catherine understands that the attitude of treating David and Jason differently than normal is wrong and there is no abnormality, inefficiency, and shame in being different in the world.

Rules is the favorite word of David. He loves rules so Catherine has a rules book, and she adds rules whenever a new one is needed. The Cynthia Lord opens her book thus:

“ RULES FOR DAVID”

Chew with your mouth closed.

Say “ thank you” when someone gives you a present (even if you don’t like it”)

If someone says “hi”, you say “hi” back.

When you want to get out of answering something, distract the questioner with another question.

Not everything worth keeping has to be useful.

If the bathroom is closed, knock (especially if Catherine has a friend over)!

Sometimes people laugh when they like you.

But sometimes they laugh to hurt you.

No toys in the fish tank. (*Rules*)

The list of rules for David makes his life and Catherine’s life easy. David shouts the rule out whenever he breaks it. Even Though Catherine has a tough time taking care of David, she loves her brother and family. She is supportive to her parents and brother in all possible means. Both the parents of Catherine are working so most of the time Catherine

takes care of David. Sometimes, she wishes how her life would be if David understands the World without her help. At the same time, she realizes it will happen only when pigs have wings. The greatest thing Catherine does to her autistic brother out of all odds is teaching him social skills through rules. Catherine says,

“ . . . I click the seat belt across me and open my sketchbook to the back pages. That’s where I keep all the rules I’m teaching David so if my someday-he’ll-wake-up-a-regular-brother wish doesn’t ever come true, at least he’ll know how the world works, and I won’t have to keep explaining things. . .

Most kids don’t even consider these rules. Sometime when they were little, their mom and dad must’ve explained it all, but I don’t remember mine doing it. It seems I’ve always known these things...

Not David, though. He needs to be taught everything. Everything from the fact that peach is not a funny-looking apple to how having long hair doesn’t make someone a girl.” Lord (9-11).

Catherine is a wonderful artist when she accompanies David and her mother to the Occupational therapy she takes her sketchbook along with her. There she sketches while her mother reads her Harry Potter. One fine day at the Occupational therapy she meets a wheelchair bound boy who communicates with the help of a communication book. Catherine starts sketching him with a guitar, and she feels embarrassed when that boy informed his mother about Catherine sketching him. She is highly amazed by his talent, and she befriends Jason, the wheel-chair bound boy in the next therapy session. She also collects some cards from Jason’s mother to create some colorful words on the cards of Jason’s communication book. Meanwhile, Catherine learns that a girl of her age, Kristi is going to move into a house next to her home. She is super excited to be friends with the girl because she already misses her

best friend Melissa during this year's vacation. The two new friends of Catherine bring a lot of changes into her life which led her to a great transformation.

Kristi is just like other teenagers of the era thinks about hanging out and having fun with friends. Catherine has a lot more responsibilities than Kristi has. Catherine has to take the toys out of her fish tank whenever David throws them in it, she has to fix the Frog and Toad cassette before David yells when he pulls the tape off, she has to take care of her two guinea pigs; Cinnamon and Nutmeg, and she has to prepare colorful words for Jason's communication book. After Kristi's arrival, Catherine has one more job to accomplish that is hiding the reality about David and Jason from Kristi. During Kristi's visit to Catherine's house, she wants her mother to take care of David but unfortunately, her mother is busy at work so David comes to Catherine for each and everything. Kristi says that life with regular little brothers is pain and Catherine feels, “ “Regular” snarls in my stomach” (84). When Kristi asks Catherine whether Jason is her boyfriend, Catherine refuses it without revealing the nature of Jason to Kristi, and she says that he is just a boy she knows.

Catherine wants to be a good friend to Kristi, and she spends her time with Kristi whenever she gets a chance. Kristi befriends Ryan, the worst bully of Catherine and David. Ryan always makes fun of David and his actions. This led Catherine to make a rule for David “Sometimes people laugh when they like you. But sometimes they laugh to hurt you” (*Rules*). Catherine hates people making fun of her brother. She becomes furious and burns whoever does it. Be it Ryan or Kristi. Once Ryan came to visit Kristi in the presence of Catherine and David. David never misses finding gum. Ryan was chewing gum, and he when David asked him for his turn he threw one to Kristi and Catherine. Catherine got irritated because she never asked for it. Kristi started discussing with Catherine and David asked for his turn again. To Catherine's surprise, Ryan threw a gum to David but when David opened it there was no

gum, so he started crying and hugging Catherine tight. Catherine became furious and chucked Ryan out of the place. Kristi apologized to Catherine on behalf of Ryan.

While swimming in a nearby pond, Catherine and Kristi meet Ryan. He reminded Kristi to invite Catherine for the Community Dance party on Saturday. Initially, Catherine thinks that they would invite her to help with the decoration, but they invite her to dance. Catherine refuses it, and she promises to help them with decoration. On their way home, Kristi asks Catherine to take Jason with them for the dance party. Catherine refuses to reply and she goes back home.

Catherine's friendship with Kristi adds a lot of pain and discomfort to her. Meanwhile, Jason starts loving Catherine's company. He goes out with Catherine and inside the hospital fence, Jason requests Catherine to make him run so she holds the rim of his wheelchair and runs fast. Jason becomes very happy and excited. He touches the words that show his affection for Catherine. But Catherine is not soulfully happy because she does not feel comfortable taking Jason out.

In the next session, Jason comes to Occupational therapy in an automatic wheelchair because he wants to be independent. He requests Catherine to go for a walk. Catherine accepts it half-heartedly and accompanies Jason. They walked a long distance and reached the beach. In the beach, Jason invites Catherine to his birthday party. Catherine assures Jason that she will come for his birthday party. At that time, Catherine sees a girl who is far away and realizes a familiarity. When the girl passes by she hides because that is Kristi and Catherine does not want Kristi to see her with Jason in a wheelchair. Catherine is afraid how Kristi will react, so she hides behind Jason's wheelchair. She feels relaxed only when Kristi left the place.

Kristi comes to Catherine's home to make posters for the dance party. At that time, Kristi asks Catherine whether Jason will join them or not. Catherine informs her that Jason

has invited her to his birthday party on the same day. Kristi asks them to join the dance party after the birthday party but Catherine refuses to come. On the way to Occupational Therapy, Catherine buys a guitar for Jason and hides it from Jason's view. Jason asks Catherine to bring Kristi also to his birthday party. Catherine tells Jason about the Dance party then he asks Catherine to dance but she denies the idea. Catherine always makes beautiful cards for Jason's communication book with stunning drawings. She gives Jason the cards she made for him that day. Jason finds the word together and asks Catherine:

“ Where? Wheelchair. Jason pulls his brows together.

“I imagined you without it. Like in your dream where you can run.”

Want. Wheelchair. In. Picture.

“ I just thought ---”

Take. It. Out. Jason looks away, frowning. (165-166)

After this incident Catherine feels bad and she wants to convince Jason. Catherine hates going to parties because people at the party mock at David. Her mother convinces her that she will take care of David and Jason's family will understand when something goes wrong. Catherine buys a guitar for Jason from her savings. Jason's family hosts Catherine's family very well. Jason's brother takes Catherine to Jason's room. She wishes him a happy birthday but Jason is not happy. Catherine takes a card from her pocket and gives Jason. Immediately, Jason becomes happy. He finds a girl and a boy in a wheelchair with the word together in the card. Catherine reveals her next surprise for Jason. She hands over the guitar to him. Jason is overwhelmed by the surprise. He starts asking Catherine about her new neighbour. Catherine tells Jason about the Dance party and she also informs him that Kristi is going with Ryan and she has helped them with the decoration. Jason asks Catherine:

I mean. Do you want to come? Dance. Me.

I look up from Jason's book. He's watching my face, his eyes serious.

“I can’t.”

Why?

I stare at the word card with its big question mark.

Are ? You. Embarrassed. About Me.

“ Of Course not!” . . . “ I am just a horrible dancer. Terrible. In fact, I’m so bad I even have a rule against it. No dancing unless I’m alone in my room or it’s pitch- black dark.”

Jason makes a loud, rumbling sound. RULE. Stupid. Excuse. (176).

In between their conversation, David eats a piece of cake in a clumsy manner which upsets Catherine. Moreover, David runs and opens the cupboards in Jason’s home. The people in Jason’s house do not react badly for David’s behavior but Catherine feels bad and leaves the house with her mother and brother. While returning home Catherine thinks:

I look at him, wishing he’d take his hands off his ears and say, “ It’s going to be alright, Catherine, Don’t worry,” or I’ll try harder next time,” or even “I’m sorry”.

But he only sits, rocking gently, a faraway smile on his face. (179)

Catherine is upset and she thinks about her best friend Melissa with whom she feels very comfortable. Catherine feels that her life was fearless and happy when Melissa was with her. She struggles to accept the reality about David and Jason because she undergoes a lot of peer pressure and the concept of ableism also troubles her indirectly. The dilemma in Catherine due to peer pressure and ableism can be seen obviously in the following incident:

“ You don’t get it. I can’t fix it!” I throw the cassette. It clangs, hitting the bottom of my trash can.

“Fix it!” David screams.

“ When someone is upset, it’s not a good time to bring up your own problems! I scream back. “ Why don’t you understand ? No toys in the fish tank! Chew with your mouth closed! Don’t open or close doors at other people’s houses!”

David drops to the floor and wraps his arms over his knees. “Trash goes in the garbage can,” he says, between snobs. “That’s the rule.”

He’s crying so hard, his whole body shakes. I get David’s cassette from the trash, but it’s too broken. “I can’t fix it.”

Tears fill my eyes. I walk over and kneel beside him. Circling his knees and shoulders with my arms, I lay my chin on David’s hair.

“I’m sorry,” I whisper. “I’m sorry, Toad.”(182-183)

Catherine calls Mrs. Morehouse, Jason’s mother and requests her to bring Jason to the dance party. She accepts it and assures Catherine that they will come if Jason is ready to come. Catherine’s father accompanies her and David to the dance party. Catherine waits for Jason but he has not reached the party until it is about to begin so she feels bad but she convinces her that late does not mean not coming. Finally, Jason arrives. Catherine goes to Jason and tells him how she grows mad when people look at David. Then the conversation goes this way:

Hidden. “I didn’t tell Kristi everything about you. I didn’t tell her about your wheelchair or your communication book. I didn’t know how she’d react. I should’ve because you’re my friends, but it got harder and harder.” I drop my gaze to the tiled floor. “ No. that’s an excuse, too. The real truth is I was scared what she might think of me, not you.” (194-195).

After listening to her Jason calls her “Week” (195). Meanwhile, Kristi and Ryan enter, Catherine introduces Jason to them and finds Kristi’s smile disappearing. Kristi wishes a happy birthday to Jason and he taps thank you in his book. Further, Catherine explains:

“Jason can’t talk so he uses these cards, and I’ve been making words for him.” I smile at Jason. “He’s my very good ___” I tap. Friend.

She looks where I’m pointing to the card at a girl’s hand writing.

Jason taps. Catherine. Talk. About. You. All the time.

“Really?” Kristi makes a *hmm* sound. “She could’ve told me more about you.” (196)

Kristi and Ryan leave the place and Jason also moves from there. Catherine follows him and asks him where he is going. Jason taps, “Dance. Do you want to come?” “But I don’t ___” Break. Dance. RULE. (196-197). Catherine follows Jason and dances. She realizes that a true friend supports her, keep her comfortable and understands her. A best friend makes their friend break the odd rules for goodness and leads them to the right path by supporting them. Jason’s friendship brings a great transformation in Catherine’s life and she starts adoring David and accept him as he is. The transformation in Catherine is evident in these lines, “Kneeling beside David, our arms touching, our faces reflect side by side, in the glass. I let them enough.” (200).

Each and every person in society is associated with one another in many ways. Like the polychromes of a prism they have multiple colors and play various roles in each other’s role. Mankind evolved from many heterogeneous changes and transformation in social settings and human behavior. Nothing is perfect in this world. Likewise, the society has unconsciously imposed the concept of ableism among people. That attitude of discriminating people with disability has brought a lot of complications in the lives of the so called disabled people and their family members.

The character of Catherine in *Rules* is the best example of the struggles and sufferings of a young girl who has an autistic brother and a wheelchair-bound friend. Catherine’s life is not different from others but the society makes it difficult for her to live her life happily. Catherine is more mature than other kids of her age but when she befriends her neighbor

Kristi, she undergoes a lot of pressure being herself. Once she stated to Jason that he is a very good friend of her but she is afraid of Kristi's reaction and also she is afraid of what Kristi would think about her friendship with Jason. The very thought makes Catherine to hide David's autism and Jason's wheelchair from Kristi. Whereas, David and Jason enjoys spending time with Catherine and she does her best in supporting them. In the end, Catherine realizes what she thinks as abled is not and what she thinks as normal is not only normal. She realizes the differences in the role of David, Jason and Kristi in her life. The concept of ableism unconsciously pushed Catherine away from understanding the normalcy in the attitude and behaviour of David and Jason.

The characters David and Jason show the power of self-awareness and self-acceptance. Jason never worries about his disability and he possesses much more maturity than Catherine in accepting life as it is. Once he called Catherine weak because she refused to say and do what she liked. But Jason and David do whatever they feel like doing confidently and carelessly, for example, David danced care freely when Kristi asked him to dance and Jason asked Catherine to break her rule for dancing and made her dance. These incidents show that by just being physically and mentally fit never makes a person humane.

The only characters who brought happiness and peace to Catherine are Jason and David. Unfortunately, they do not fall under the category of socially normal or abled. The concept of ableism prevented Catherine and other characters to construct normalcy in society. Catherine openly states that the way people treat David drives her mad and she is more bothered about the reaction of Kristi than her friendship with Jason. Catherine is happy and content with her life, brother, and her friend Jason but the peer pressure and ableism caused a dilemma in her. The clarity in thinking and self-awareness of Jason brings a massive transformation in Catherine's life. She tasted the sweetness of acceptance and enjoys her life with her friend and brother.

By breaking a single rule with the help of a wheelchair- bound friend Jason, Catherine leads a happy life. If all the odd rules against disability and disabled people in society get broke one day, society will be a better place to live for all people undoubtedly.

Works Cited

Primary Source

Lord , Cynthia. *Rules*. Scholastic Inc. , 2018.

Secondary Source

J, Nathan Copeland. “What Is Autism Spectrum Disorder?” What Is Autism Spectrum Disorder?, Aug. 2018, www.psychiatry.org/patients-families/autism/what-is-autism-spectrum-disorder.

Wolbring, Gregor. “ABOUT ISSUES EVENTS BLOG BLOG Ableism, Disability Studies and the Academy.” Federation for the Humanities and Social Sciences, 17 June 2011, www.ideas-idees.ca/blog/ableism-disability-studies-and-academy.