

## Negotiating Autistic Difference and Femininity: Gendered Expectations in Madeleine Ryan's *A Room Called Earth*.

**R. Dhivya Prabha<sup>1</sup>**

Research Scholar  
Department of English

**Dr. E. Aarthi<sup>2</sup>**

Assistant Professor  
Department of English  
Karpagam Academy of Higher Education.  
(Deemed to be University)  
Coimbatore-641021.  
E-Mail ID- [prabha9361646985@gmail.com](mailto:prabha9361646985@gmail.com)

### Abstract

Madeleine Ryan's *A Room Called Earth* (2020) foregrounds the experiences of an autistic woman whose sensory perception, social interactions, and embodied reactions bring chaos to traditional notions of femininity. While there has been writing about the book relating to neurodiversity, neuroqueer aesthetics, and autistic narrative styles, the link between autistic difference and the social construction of femininity has not been examined in detail. This paper deals with the ways in which autism is depicted in the novel, dealing with both feminine characteristics and gender roles. The study uses both neurodiversity literature and feminist frameworks to analyze the sensory experience, interaction patterns, and self perception of the narrator. It suggests that there is no distinction between autism and femininity but that the two are in interplay, giving rise to a unique way of coping with feminine identity. Through highlighting the struggles between the lived experiences of autistic women and their societal expectations as females, Ryan's story reveals the inadequacies of traditional categories of womanhood, and seeing a definition of autistic femininity as something that is negotiated instead of being a deviation from normative femininity.

**Keywords:** Autistic femininity, autistic difference, neurodiversity gendered expectations, feminist disability studies, neurodivergent subjectivity.

## Introduction

The conceptualization of autistic women usually employs a model that treats the neurological condition and gender experience separately, which may disregard the interaction between autistic difference and feminine social preconception. Giving a voice to this perspective, literature contributes to the understanding of the multiplicity of the world, storytelling is capable of portraying modes of perception, embodiment, emotions, and relating to the world that run counter to the traditional woman behavior. The protagonist life offers a perspective that witnesses the regular environment, its relationships, bodily feelings, sexual experience, and social interactions in a different manner that is very intense and observant. Instead of portraying the nature of femininity as a stable fact, illustrating how the main character is constantly negotiating the expectations of femininity in terms of appearance, emotional expression, interpersonal relationships, sexuality, and social norms. Her reactions often challenge the idea that there is one way of being feminine. This research offers an analysis of how autism interacts and sometimes overturns the expectations to femininity. Through the lens of neurodiversity and disability theories, along with feminist theory, this paper addresses the unique nature of the stream of consciousness narrative as an example of this struggle. Rather than merely depicting the challenges of being an autistic woman conforming to traditional ideals of femininity, allows us to see how those who perceive the world differently utilize their perceptions to question, challenge, and reformulate feminine identity.

## Autistic Difference as a Disruption of Feminine Social Performance

The narrator's feelings at social occasions consistently cause her to experience a tension between her inner emotions and her external behavioral expectations. Even when she is surrounded by other people at a gathering, she can still feel lonely within. She does not simply try to find a way to be comfortable in social situations instead, she looks at the actions of those around her with intense observation. She perceives identities being formed through fashion, looks, conversations, dancing, and assertions of a relationship with the environment. She does not merely reject these activities because she is not comfortable with her feelings shift between intrigue, uneasiness, amusement, alienation and a longing for connection.

The emotional contradiction provides a way to ensure that her differences do not become equated with social ineptitude. The author longs for a feeling of belonging the author, however, wishes not to conform to certain societal expectations. The similarity in opinions on this matter clarifies the conflict experienced by the author regarding her paternal relations. She uses her father's views about "what she should do" as an anchoring system for her reactions and feelings in life. She continuously engages in questioning her feelings and reactions. It is, however, paradoxical in that the more she examines the expectations established by her father's belief system, the less valid they appear to her. Her discomfort with behavioristic approaches functions in reality as a way of self discovery. What started as discomfort regarding the author's inability to adhere to feminine social standards ultimately evolves into realization about her social identity that stems from restrictions placed upon her. Her interactions with other women and men who derive affirmation from feminine beauty continue revealing this process. The narrator's changing feelings and attitudes at different times judgmental, insecure, or solitary show that she does not occupy a role outside femininity but is instead trying to work through it. Therefore arguing that autism will be used as a way to gain critical distance from femininity at an operation level because it allows her to identify behaviors she had formerly viewed as mandatory.

### **The Sensory Body Beyond Feminine Surveillance**

The narrator understands her relationship to her body first through a sensory experience instead of through social interpretation. Sounds, movement, light, clothes, touch, the moon goddess, the environment, and the actual atmosphere all penetrate her consciousness in an intense way. Most interesting is her experience of dancing. At first, she is uncomfortable when another girl mimics her movements, showing her awareness that someone is watching her. However, she allows herself to dance freely after she closes her eyes. This change of emotion from self awareness to liberation shows the conflict between the body she feels from the inside and what she thinks others think of her body. This is important because there are bodies around the narrator that are always judged.

For instance, there is a woman who receives a lot of attention because of the way she looks a man who is insecure and wants to impress her and a very subtle way that attraction can be used as a kind of power. The narrator also is trying to figure out what she thinks about

attraction, desire, and being physically attractive. The narrator does not respond to physical attractiveness in the "normal way" because something intellectual, emotional, or even spiritual may be more important. Her sensory experience challenges the notion that we first see our body as something we desire. She can use her body without evaluating it when she dances. For her, the rainbow, music, and movement of her body, in addition to the sensations she has around her, make sense according to her perception. Arguing that Ryan's narrator presents a sensory embodiment model in which feminine bodily experiences are not based on being seen and desired as well as on people's approval of them.

### **Language, Silence, and the Authority to Define One's Own Experience**

Her recollection of the father, the narrator comes to understand the essence of who determines reality, upon which at the beginning she has certain realizations. She recalls her memories and thinks about how her father tries to make everything clear to unconfused. At the moment she realizes that each word or subject has its own peculiar value. As an illustration, she refers to herself as an "alchemist," which indicates that she understands the issue from her perspective, although she knows that, in her father's point of view, this issue is commonplace. In other words, her father and narrator are opposite to each other, while there exists also an important statement made by the narrator that all her experiences do exist without approval by other people. The fight goes on for her in her emotional life as well. The most important aspect of this process is that she can see that her habitual over smiling was a kind of submission. she is able to make sense of the behavior that had always seemed to be normal.

The smile was her way of being agreeable without showing her feelings and emotions of discomfort, doubt, or disagreement. Her feelings about people denying or ignoring her view points show the pain she encounters when her experience is regarded as invalid. Her emotional reactions are confusion, anger, uneasiness, and, eventually, self awareness. Instead of merely questioning whether the narrator has effectively communicated her ideas to others, question is being raised who gets to decide what her communication means. she continues on her journey, she becomes more willing to trust her own interpretation and meaning of her communication.

### **Stream of Consciousness as a Feminist Reordering of Experience**

The narrator's feelings and experience cannot be disregarded from the stream of consciousness in the narrative. All the thoughts and emotions of the narrator pass through the most immediate situation to the memory and then from the memory to fear, which leads the narrator to talking about relationships and then asking broader questions of gender, etc. For example, walking produces the association of fear and vulnerability, and a party can produce the thoughts about privilege, a man talking to a woman reminding the narrator of some other relation, while music can incite a discussion about intimacy, etc. However, these associations and emotions are primarily emotional and rational. Her consciousness reverts to certain unresolved experiences time and again. It's regarded that her memories about the father figure, her loneliness after her previous relationship, her fear of being observed by the outside world around her, her ambiguity in understanding the motives of those surrounding her, and her anger over social existence are running their course within her mind. It is possible to ascertain that through our narrative examination of her consciousness, not just reproduce her thinking we will also show how some experiences of her people remain in her mind at some stage on the emotional sphere. Observing the pertinence of the concept of stream of consciousness to the process of analysis. Instead of seeing the employment of this technique as nothing other than an instance of 'autistic mind', we can view the associative characteristic of this technique as a way of questioning the hierarchical concept of the individual realm and public knowledge regarding the person mentioned. By constantly sharing her provocative ideas, learning much about the relationship between power structure and gender for example, she fears her position. She views her experiences, in contrast to the ones of other women in the same culture, as living evidence of inequitable social relations and her exchanges with other people illustrate privilege and thus reinforce her subjectivity. She can utilize her subjectivity as a source of valid knowledge about the society. Her mind does not function as an escape from society, but as a space in which critical social thought takes place.

### **From Performing Femininity to Reconfiguring Womanhood**

The protagonist gradually understands the concept of femininity throughout her journey by examining her personal encounters with the world and with herself. The character's recollections involving her parental upbringing, her former boyfriend, female relatives at social gatherings, and sexuality issues all expose her to various conflicting definitions of femininity.

The character remembers the sense of emotional isolation that she experiences when being in the presence of a boyfriend who engages in flirtatious behavior with other women, which ultimately leads her to the conclusion that she is in an unhealthy state of mind because she is constantly engaging in self comparison with other women. The eventual direction she takes is not about embracing some ideal self it is about owning the experiences she has had. She becomes aware that she does not have to conform to the practices that have gained her social acceptance in the past, such as smiling excessively, being submissive emotionally, suppressing feelings of discomfort, seeking approval, and forcing herself into relationships that do not offer her true intimacy. She not want to conform to societal social norms, but even her desire for meaningful belongingness is now subject to the process of being defined. She can more fully appreciate the need for authentic connection.

As an autistic, she perceives things differently and that is of consequence for her. It enables one to inquiry why certain performance is needed. The Perspective shifts from narration about being different in terms of gender roles, to the awareness of womanhood which is free from unbalanced societal expectations, beauty, submission, emotional adjustment, and social confirmation. Therefore, our claim is not that Ryan's representation of "autistic femininity" is absolute, but rather the fact that her narration of various experiences presents new understandings of what it means to be a woman.

## **Conclusion**

*A Room Called Earth* does more than represent the autistic experience, it establishes a environment in which autism disturbs the interpretative frameworks through which femininity is socially constructed. This is achieved through the narrator's relationship with her body, emotions, sensory environment, intimacy, social life, and expression, which questions the normative expectations of womanhood. Her difference creates a critical perspective regarding femininity and its construction rather than merely conforming to an established feminine model of living. The importance resides in this negotiation itself. Femininity is not a solid and stable way but something that are constantly encountered , reject, adjust, and reformulate through our experiences. By indicating that different perceptions related to autism and femininity must be understood together in order to counter the idea that there is one right way to be feminine.

**Works Cited**

Bertilsdotter Rosqvist, Hanna, Anna Nygren, and Sarinah O'Donoghue. "Earthlove—Theorising Neurodivergent Reader Love of *A Room Called Earth*." *Journal of Literary & Cultural Disability Studies*, vol. 18, no. 1, 2024, pp. 25-37.

Butler, Judith. *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. Routledge, 1990.

Garland-Thomson, Rosemarie. *Extraordinary Bodies: Figuring Physical Disability in American Culture and Literature*. Columbia UP, 1997.

Hull, Laura, K. V. Petrides, and William Mandy. "The Female Autism Phenotype and Camouflaging: A Narrative Review." *Review Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders*, vol. 7, 2020, pp. 306-317.

Hull, Laura, et al. "'Putting on My Best Normal': Social Camouflaging in Adults with Autism Spectrum Conditions." *Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders*, vol. 47, no. 8, 2017, pp. 2519-2534.

Kafer, Alison. *Feminist, Queer, Crip*. Indiana UP, 2013.

Lai, Meng-Chuan, et al. "Quantifying and Exploring Camouflaging in Men and Women with Autism." *Autism*, vol. 21, no. 6, 2017, pp. 690-702.

Moore, Isobel, Gareth Morgan, Alice Welham, and Ginny Russell. "The Intersection of Autism and Gender in the Negotiation of Identity: A Systematic Review and Metasynthesis." *Feminism & Psychology*, vol. 32, no. 4, 2022, pp. 421-442.

Murray, Stuart. *Representing Autism: Culture, Narrative, Fascination*. Liverpool UP, 2008.

Ryan, Madeleine. *A Room Called Earth*. Penguin Books, 2020.

Walker, Nick. *Neuroqueer Heresies: Notes on the Neurodiversity Paradigm, Autistic Empowerment, and Postnormal Possibilities*. Autonomous Press, 2021.