



## **Perceptual Ability of Autistic Character in the Neurodivergent Narrative of Corinne Duyvis**

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### **Abstract:**

The research paper aims to study the application of enhanced perceptual functioning of an Autistic character in Corinne Duyvis's *On the Edge of Gone*. The role of enhanced perceptual functioning enabling the autistic character to do exceptional things is discerned. The unique abilities of Autism are rarely understood and recognised by society, as it is often labelled a neurodivergent disability. The enhanced perceptual theory provides insights into the unique cognitive strengths observed in individuals with Autism, refuting their label of disability. Research on autistic spectrum disorder has highlighted cognitive strengths, including enhanced memory, heightened sensory perception, detailed observation, and intellectual abilities over language and communicative skills. Their categorisation of neurodivergent disability is blurred and diminished by their capabilities and manoeuvring actions. Corinne Duyvis's *On the Edge of Gone* is a neurodivergent dystopian novel with an autistic protagonist navigating a catastrophe caused by a massive comet. The novel, being a neurodivergent narrative written by an autistic author, provides a factual account and first-hand experiences of Autism. The paper focuses on the enhanced perceptual functioning of the autistic protagonist and examines the potential of autistic minds in fostering unique cognitive strengths.

**Keywords: Autism, Enhanced Perceptual Functioning, Neurodivergent, Disability.**

## Introduction

Neurodiversity refers to the acceptance and recognition of individuals with different brain functioning and behavioural traits, not as a deficit but a human variation. It emerged as a social movement in the 1990s and embraced cognitive variations in individuals as differences rather than disability. The term is commonly used in the context of autism spectrum disorder.

The National Institute of Mental Health defines autism spectrum disorder as a developmental disorder that affects communication and behaviour. It is also described as neurodevelopmental, as the development of the brains of children with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) differs from that of children with more typical development (Williams 15). This variation in brain functioning leads to differences in learning and social functioning of autistic individuals.

The Neurodiversity movement emerged in literature as Neurodivergent literature and Neurodivergent narratives. They are works written by and about neurodivergent writers that challenge the negative perceptions and stigmatisation they face by accurately describing their lives and sufferings. It also serves as a medium for understanding the emotions and potential of their special abilities. One such narrative is the novel, "*On the Edge of Gone*" (2016) by Corinne Duyvis.

Corinne Duyvis is a renowned novelist and short story writer living in Amsterdam. She was diagnosed with autism spectrum disorder when she was fourteen years old. Driven by curiosity, she explored narratives to better understand life with Autism. Corinne believes that Autism opened worlds to her. She has acquired social skills like empathising and clear communication by accepting and working on her weaknesses (Duyvis 2014).

Her debut novel, *Other Bound* (2014), established her as an acclaimed writer, after which she wrote three more novels: *On the Edge of Gone* (2016), *Guardians of the Galaxy: Collect Them All* (2017), and *The Art of Saving the World* (2020). Her works are primarily young adult science fiction or fantasy.

The research article seeks to analyse how enhanced perceptual functioning helps autistic individuals perform challenging tasks, thereby refuting the label of disability through a close reading of Corinne Duyvis's *On the Edge of Gone*. The study also aims to reveal the protagonist's cognitive abilities, such as enhanced memory, heightened sensory perception, and detailed observation, and to understand the perceptual abilities of autistic individuals.

### **Methodology and Theoretical Framework**

The Enhanced Perceptual Functional Model of Autism (EPF) is a framework for understanding the perceptual abilities of individuals with Autism. EPF proposes that the unique symptomatology of ASD is a consequence of superior function and increased independence of auditory and visual perceptual processes (Beckerson et al. 65). It states that autistic individuals have superior perceptual abilities and cognitive strengths.

The study uses this framework to analyse the protagonist of the novel *On the Edge of Gone*. The research methodology opted to carry out the research is Qualitative Analysis. The methodological approach used here is the textual interpretation of the novels through the critical lens of Enhanced Perceptual Functioning.

### **Discussion**

Research on Autism Spectrum Disorders has highlighted the special advantages of Autism and deliberated on their unique abilities to contribute to various fields such as arts,

mathematics, science, and technology. One of the finest examples is Temple Grandin, an American academic and Animal Behaviourist. He was diagnosed with Autism at age four, but he recognised and used his unique ability to view everything visually through images. Acknowledging his skills and the ability of his autistic mind has made him a global expert on Animal Behaviourism.

In a presentation at Calgary, Temple Grandin expressed his view on the potential of Autistic individuals being unnoticed or unrecognised and suggested the benefits of employing them in various working streams.

In addition to being scrupulously honest, reliable, detail-oriented and having amazing memories, they have different and unique perspectives and great problem-solving abilities: attributes highly valued by businesses in a wide variety of fields, not just the computer industry. A friend told me that she looked for someone “on the spectrum” if she needed a person to do a job for her because she knew it would then be “done right”.  
(Bowen)

Ari Ne’eman, president of the Washington, D.C.-based Autistic Self Advocacy Network (ASAN), suggests that neurological diversity should be seen as workplace diversity (“Autism”). A workplace has employees of various backgrounds, though the only criterion is the ability to work. Employees may differ by gender, religion, nationality, and ethnicity, but they are accepted under the framework of workplace diversity. Similarly, neurodiversity is to be considered a normality like workplace diversity.

Disability Rights Movements and Neurodiversity, an activist social movement, has voiced the need to view Autism as a human diversity like gender, religion, and ethnicity. This perspective calls for the invalidation of the disability tag for Autism. It challenges the conventional perception of Autism as a disability and recognises the condition as a difference

rather than stigmatising. Academic research on neurodiversity has brought to light the exceptional abilities and talents of autistic people, thereby establishing their significance as possessing cognitive strengths.

Lydia Ripamonti, in her research article “Disability, Diversity, and Autism: Philosophical Perspectives on Health”, questions as follows:

why is disability a problem in the first place? Or more precisely, are people mostly affected by disability itself or by the social exclusion that results from being classified as abnormal? Is the key to integration for disabled people and those who are neurologically different purely based on making our society more welcoming and accepting? (Ripamonti 65-6)

The questions of Lydia Ripamonti instigated perceptions of viewing Autism as “a neurological form within a diversity of human minds” (Ripamonti 56).

Autistic people find it difficult to empathise with the feelings of others and have low social interaction and relationships, unlike neurotypicals. This does not categorise them as deficient or disabled, as social conduct cannot be the only criterion objecting to the normality. This ideology was proposed by the British psychologist Simon Baron-Cohen, and the following is his explanation of the same:

I do not spend much time, if any, thinking about mathematical problems, but I do spend quite a lot of time thinking about people. . . . yet I do not describe myself as having a disability in mathematics. I would instead say that I simply prefer to spend time thinking about people: they are more interesting to me. To call what a person does little of a disability could be seen as unreasonable. (Baron-Cohen 493)

Simon Baron-Cohen argues in the above-cited lines that autistic individuals are weak in social skills like his skills in mathematics, but that does not reason them to be called disabled.

The diverse symptoms of ASD have made it hard to develop an overarching theory covering the core entities of the disorder. This led to the emergence of various hypotheses and theoretical models of Autism, such as Mind Deficit Theory, EF Dysfunction Hypothesis, Weak Central Coherence theory, Enhanced Perceptual Functioning theory, Temporal binding deficit hypothesis, and social motivation hypothesis.

The enhanced perceptual functioning theory shows the unique abilities of autistic individuals, which can help them have intense experiences of the world around them. Their heightened memory and attention to detail enable them to easily process the changes around them pertaining to things and people. Recognition and acknowledgement of the enhanced perceptual abilities of autistic people can steer society towards inclusion and the normality of autistic individuals.

*On the Edge of Gone* is a neurodivergent dystopian novel set in 2034, where a massive comet is about to hit the Earth, wreaking havoc and death. After the announcement of the news, some people escaped through generation ships to a then-discovered twin planet where there was a possibility of life. Others stayed in underground shelters to escape the impact of the comet.

The protagonist, Denise, is a 16-year-old biracial and autistic teen moving to escape the impact by staying at a temporary shelter assigned by the government along with her mother, a drug addict. Her sister, Iris, has gone to celebrate the last festival before the catastrophe at Luik. She has not returned home on time to shift to the temporary shelter assigned to their family. However, Denise believes Iris would have taken refuge in Belgium or moved to their designated shelter. Their encounter with Denise's Geography teacher on their way to the shelter

changes their lives as they learn about a last-generation ship on Earth called Nassau, where they can stay safe from the impact of the comet. Nassau can accommodate only selectively helpful people, and Denise's Autism and her mother's drug addiction pose a threat to proving their usefulness and securing a permanent spot at Nassau. The novel explores Denise's struggle to secure a permanent place, leveraging her autistic abilities of heightened perception and keen observation of her surroundings.

Corinne, being an autistic individual, has expressed a detailed account of Autism with thorough accuracy and certainty. At the novel's beginning, Denise and her mother are supposed to move to the temporary shelter for impact, while her mother delays their departure, waiting for Iris. Denise's fear of not reaching a safe place during the impact and uncertainty of her future actions to protect herself makes her mind chaotic. However, her learned skills for the demanded situation enable her to handle the situation accordingly. "I've been standing next to the massive pack by my feet and wearing the winter coat that swallows me whole, hoping that remaining standing might make Mom hurry up. If I sit, she'll think I'm not waiting for her, and she'll take her time like she always does. I learned that trick from Iris" (Duyvis 5). Throughout the novel, Denise encounters people with different emotional tones; however, she overcomes her difficulty with social interaction by appropriately responding to their conversations. She has learned this skill from her sister, Iris.

While the novel explicitly describes autistic people's difficulties with social interaction, Denise stands out by handling these challenges well. Her ability to respond aptly illustrates that the barriers posed by Autism can be overcome. With effective interventions, children with Autism can learn essential social skills that help mitigate deficits and strengthen social competence (Silveira-Zaldivar et al. 341). Denise talks about the training that her dad and sister gave her to interact with a close member of a deceased person. "I've rehearsed what to tell him. Last year, a friend of my aunt's died, and Iris and Dad coached me on what to say. I copy it

almost word for word. ‘Max, I didn’t know your sister well. But she was nice to me. I’m very sorry for your loss.’ I hold his gaze for a second” (149).

Denise's heightened perception and detailed observation make her resourceful throughout the novel, especially when she realises that staying in Nassau depends on being productive. Her main goal is to be useful and helpful enough to secure a permanent spot for herself and her family. Denise works tirelessly, assisting others, compensating for her mother's recklessness and lack of concern for their safety, to ensure their well-being and future security.

People in Nassau search for food and other resources outside the ship and store them for future purposes. During one such search, Denise learned that a tsunami was approaching and quickly warned her friends. In response, Nassau was placed under lockdown to prevent water from getting inside, leaving Denise and her friends stranded outside. While everyone was unsure how to proceed, Denise remembered an escape shuttle mentioned in a conversation with Els, an essential member of Nassau. Using this memory, Denise found the shuttle, providing the group with a way back into the ship. The following lines narrate Denise's discovery of the escape shuttle:

My eyes lock on to a line running around the bottom of the ship. . . . It’s like the lowermost part isn’t even attached to the rest of the ship. I drop my fist and let out a cry. Because the other thing Els said was this: The only way out is through the emergency shuttles. I yank at Fatima’s sleeve and point. “Is that an escape shuttle?” “Yeah, I—Yes!” “It’s not part of the lockdown!” Fatima swirls to face the engineers. “We can get in through the shuttle. Call the others. Get them down there!”. (135)

Denise’s intense memory and detailed observation saved many people from dying. Her autistic abilities help her to survive even in critical situations. She is allowed to stay permanently in Nassau as she has saved lives from the tsunami. Another important incident is

where her careful observation plays a significant role in saving her sister, Iris. During her search for Iris, a water scooter hits Denise, and during her fall, she notices a blue barrel. The barrels are stored with food and seeds in Nassau, and the tsunami has damaged the storage bay and swept away the barrels. Nassau gives importance to the people who provide supplies for sustenance, and Denise wants Nassau's help to fuel up her scooter to find Iris. Her memory of the barrel while falling helped her reach the exact spot where she noticed it, and on her way back, to her luck, Iris was found. Though she has trouble with interaction, her focus on every detail people say helps her navigate a solution for all her problems. The following are the lines from the novel in which Denise gets the idea to save Iris: "If I find a barrel, I might appease the captain and be allowed to borrow enough energy to power the scooter all the way to Gorinchem. If I do my job right, my family will have a better shot on the waiting list. It's a straight line to Iris" (214).

Her careful deliberation of details and use of every opportunity to save herself and her family have been constant throughout the novel. Iris finds a barrel after Denise's insistence, which earns her a stay at Nassau. However, Iris secretly visits her friends and helps them by assisting and providing food at an old stadium called Olympisch Stadion. Later in the novel, barrels are stolen, and Iris's secret visit to her friend's place is found by Denise. She suspects Iris of stealing the barrels from Nassau.

The Olympisch stadium has a storage room where many barrels are stored. Iris informs Denise that the barrels were not stolen from Nassau and that they are numbered to prove that. Unfortunately, Nassau tracks the place and arrests Denise and Iris, believing they are the thieves who stole the barrels.

Els examines the barrel and informs the captain that the barrels belonged to Nassau and that they are the missing barrels. Following this, the captain of Nassau decides to send Iris and

Denise off the ship, depriving them of their stay in Nassau for their theft. In this situation, Denise remembers that the barrels are numbered, and Els has lied about the missing barrels and is confronted. ““You had access. And motive. You wanted a safety cushion. Extra supplies as backup. You—you can identify the barrels. The ones they found at the Olympisch Stadion. We indexed the numbers. You could’ve proved they weren’t stolen. You could’ve freed Iris and me right away. You didn’t. . . . ”” (425). Denise proves her innocence through her detailed observation and intellectual abilities in the above-stated incident.

Denise is bright and intelligent, and her added privilege of enhanced Perceptual skills helps her establish her stance in society and for her very survival. Though everybody around her is aware of her Autism, she becomes far too valuable to be considered useless in Nassau. Her confidence in herself and correct usage of her enhanced perceptual skills secures her that undeniable and valuable position. The doctor in Nassau, playing an essential role in treating and saving lives, is also an autistic individual, evidently refuting the label of disability.

## **Conclusion**

Autistic individuals, upon focusing on their latent abilities, can recognise their strengths and overcome their barriers. By developing their latent potential, their capabilities in handling their personal and social life are improvised which can further assist them in their professional life. Parents and caretakers are to be made aware of the importance of their support and understanding to the autistic individuals. They have the responsibility of providing a nurturing and supportive environment to enable the growth of their perceptual abilities. Society has to provide acceptance and inclusion of diverse abilities and disregard the misconceptions of Autism.

The paper has analysed the perceptual abilities of Denise in *On the Edge of Gone*, that has helped in the survival of her and the people around her. It throws light on the ignorant

capabilities of autistic individuals and prompts the disregard for the label of disability for autistic individuals. The enhanced perceptual skills of Denise are identified through the incidents in the novel.

The study has contributed to the field of literary neurodiversity studies, which is an emerging field of literary criticism that focuses on the literary representations of neurodivergent disorders. It examines the differences in the literature produced and received by neurodivergent individuals and neurotypical individuals. By applying the enhanced perceptual functioning theory, which is grounded in cognitive psychology, to a literary character, the study has bridged literature and cognitive psychology. The arguments on Autism and disability have made discourses on disability studies. The scope for further research is possible in stylistics, where narrative techniques and stylistic tools that depict enhanced perceptual skills of autistic individuals can be studied. A comparative literary study can be made on the representation of Autism across texts.

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