

Reframing Autism in Erskine's Mockingbird: Neurodivergent Identity, Emotional Depth, and the Ethics of Representation

Ms. Rachel Glory. R¹ , Dr. M. Mary Neena² 

¹Ph.D Research Scholar, Department of English, Nirmala College for Women, Coimbatore, Tamil Nadu, India- 641018

²Associate Professor of English, Department of English, Nirmala College for Women, Coimbatore, Tamil Nadu, India - 641018

*Corresponding Author: rachelglory333@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

Kathryn Erskine's *Mockingbird* (2010) offers a nuanced portrayal of neurodivergence through the first-person perspective of Caitlin, an eleven-year-old girl diagnosed with Asperger's syndrome. Set after the death of her brother, the novel traces Caitlin's attempts to understand grief, social expectations, and emotional complexity while searching for "closure." This study examines how the novel challenges deficit-centered representations of autism by presenting neurodivergent cognition as a form of emotional and relational depth rather than limitation. Drawing on Disability Studies and neurodiversity theory, the paper employs close textual analysis to explore how Erskine constructs autism as cognitive difference and ethical subjectivity. The analysis demonstrates that the novel questions conventional assumptions about empathy, communication, and identity through Caitlin's internal reasoning and emotional awareness. Rather than romanticizing or pathologizing autism, *Mockingbird* represents neurodivergence as a socially negotiated mode of being, contributing to contemporary debates on autism, inclusion, and ethical literary representation.

KEYWORDS

Autism Representation, Children's Literature, Disability Studies, Emotional Depth, Neurodiversity

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1. Introduction

Disability Studies conceptualize disability not as an inherent biological deficiency but as a socio-cultural and political construct shaped by institutional norms, linguistic framing, and power relations (Murray et al., 2023). Rejecting the medical model, which interprets disability as individual pathology requiring correction, the social model finds disability within structural barriers and normative

expectations. Within this theoretical landscape, autism occupies a particularly contested position. Although neurodiversity scholarship challenges deficit-based interpretations of autism, medical and therapeutic discourses frequently continue to frame neurodivergence in terms of impairment, intervention, and normalization. This unresolved tension between pathology and plurality influences not only policy and education but also literary representation. Contemporary interdisciplinary research further highlights how neurodivergent identities intersect with broader cultural and psychological experiences, including spirituality and emotional expression (Arora, 2025). Similarly, studies of therapeutic encounters show how emotional diversity among autistic individuals is often negotiated through social expectations and institutional frameworks (Jaysane-Darr, 2020). Within this framework, autism remains a contested category, as medical discourses continue to frame neurodivergence in terms of impairment and normalization despite growing challenges from neurodiversity scholarship (Finke & Dunn, 2025).

Children's literature plays a significant role in mediating these conceptual tensions. Representations of autistic characters frequently oscillate between two problematic extremes: deficit-centered portrayals that emphasize social incapacity and romanticized depictions that risk aestheticizing differences while minimizing lived challenges. Consequently, an important question emerges: can literature represent neurodivergence ethically without collapsing into either pathologization or sentimental affirmation?

Kathryn Erskine's *Mockingbird* (2010) appears at this critical intersection. Through the first-person narration of Caitlin, an eleven-year-old girl with Asperger's syndrome coping with the death of her brother, the novel invites readers into a neurodivergent cognitive framework. Unlike outsider narratives that observe autistic characters from a neurotypical perspective, Erskine constructs an interior narrative voice that foregrounds thought processes, emotional reasoning, and linguistic precision.

Existing scholarship has explored *Mockingbird* from comparative and psychological perspectives. Kuldiurova (2024), for instance, situates the novel alongside *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time*, emphasizing the shift from externally narrated autism to an insider perspective. Shareef (2025) examines mental health and emotional regulation within the text, highlighting Caitlin's resilience. Recent studies also emphasize the transformative role of storytelling in shaping empathy, identity, and social understanding within literary narratives (Devi & Bansal, 2025). However, much of the existing research isolates individual themes, such as grief, empathy, or trauma, without fully integrating these elements into broader theoretical debates within Disability Studies and neurodiversity discourse.

This study addresses that gap. It argues that *Mockingbird* performs a complex narrative negotiation: it challenges the deficit model while resisting simplistic romanticization. The novel reframes autism as cognitive difference while simultaneously acknowledging social friction and

emotional difficulty. Through close textual analysis informed by neurodiversity theory, the double empathy framework, and cultural perspectives on autism, this study shows that Erskine redefines empathy as reciprocal understanding rather than normative conformity.

By situating *Mockingbird* within ongoing debates about representation, this paper contributes to three key areas. First, it advances literary disability studies by integrating neurodiversity theory with narrative analysis. Second, it complicates celebratory readings by addressing critical concerns about the romanticization of difference. Third, it positions children's literature as an important site of epistemological transformation in the understanding of neurodivergence. Thus, the study argues that *Mockingbird* does not merely portray autism differently; it reshapes the ethical conditions through which difference is interpreted.

2. Theoretical Framework: From Deficit to Neurodiversity

The representation of autism in literature is shaped by an ongoing tension between the medical deficit model and the Neurodiversity Paradigm. The deficit model interprets autism primarily as an impairment measured against neurotypical norms of communication, emotional reciprocity, and social adaptability. Within this framework, autistic traits are often viewed as limitations requiring correction or normalization, leading literary portrayals to depict autistic characters as socially deficient or emotionally restricted. Recent scholarship, however, has challenged this perspective by emphasizing autism as a form of human variation situated within social and relational contexts (Murray et al., 2023). Research on autistic belonging further suggests that communication differences frequently result in mutual misunderstanding rather than individual deficiency (Finke & Dunn, 2025). These perspectives collectively shift attention from pathology toward relational and contextual understandings of neurodivergence. However, the Neurodiversity Paradigm reframes autism as a natural variation within human neurological diversity rather than a pathological condition. Kapp et al. (2013) argue that neurodiversity recognizes difference alongside challenge while resisting reductive deficit-based interpretations. This perspective does not deny difficulty but situates it within social environments structured around neurotypical expectations. From a Disability Studies perspective, disadvantage is therefore located not within autistic individuals themselves but within normative structures that marginalize cognitive difference. Recent phenomenological research similarly conceptualizes neurodivergence as part of a broader spectrum of human cognitive experience rather than a disorder (Murray et al., 2023).

Bagatell (2010) extends this argument by conceptualizing autism as identity- "a way of being in the world shaped by culture, identity, and community" (p. 35). Autism thus becomes not merely a diagnostic category but a lived and socially negotiated experience. Davidson (2008) likewise challenges assumptions of communicative deficiency by demonstrating that autistic expression reflects

complex emotional and cultural worlds. Together, these perspectives foreground agency, belonging, and expressive richness beyond medical classification.

Milton's (2012) concept of the double empathy problem further destabilizes deficit assumptions. Rather than attributing communicative breakdown solely to autistic individuals, Milton argues that misunderstanding emerges from reciprocal differences in cognitive style and social expectations. This relational understanding of empathy shifts responsibility from the individual to the interactional context. Recent neurodiversity-affirming therapeutic research supports this interpretation by showing that affirming environments can enhance emotional awareness and relational understanding among autistic individuals (Robinson & Elliott, 2026).

Simultaneously, neurodiversity discourse must avoid romanticizing difference or overlooking the material realities of disability. Literary analysis, therefore, requires attention not only to thematic representation but also to narrative form. Research on literary aesthetics demonstrates that narrative immersion and perspective-taking significantly influence reader empathy (Abou Adel et al., 2025). First-person narration, in particular, can reorganize interpretive assumptions by positioning readers within marginalized cognitive perspectives.

Drawing on these complementary perspectives, this study approaches *Mockingbird* as a narrative site where deficit-oriented and neurodiversity discourses intersect and are renegotiated. By integrating neurodiversity theory (Kapp et al., 2013), cultural conceptions of autism (Bagatell, 2010; Davidson, 2008), relational empathy (Milton, 2012), and aesthetic engagement theory (Abou Adel et al., 2025), the analysis examines how the novel constructs autism as identity, communicative difference, and emotional variation rather than pathology.

3. Methodology and Analytical Approach

This study employs a qualitative textual analysis grounded in close reading, a methodological approach widely used in literary studies to examine narrative voice, characterization, and thematic construction. Close reading enables detailed attention to linguistic choices, narrative perspective, symbolic structures, and patterns of representation. Through this method, the study interprets how neurodivergent identity is constructed and articulated within Kathryn Erskine's *Mockingbird*. Because the novel is narrated in the first person, particular attention is given to Caitlin's language, emotional reasoning, and descriptive focus in order to understand how cognitive difference is expressed and framed within the narrative.

The analysis is guided by three interrelated analytical categories derived from the theoretical framework: representation of neurodivergence (difference versus deficit); emotional articulation and empathy, including forms of reciprocal understanding; and communication and identity formation within social contexts. These categories are treated as intersecting dimensions rather than isolated

themes. Key narrative moments, particularly those related to grief, the concept of “closure,” literal language, and experiences of social misunderstanding, are examined to find how the text aligns with, complicates, or challenges deficit-oriented interpretations of autism.

To ensure analytical rigor, interpretations are grounded in established scholarship from Disability Studies and neurodiversity research. Concepts such as the Neurodiversity Paradigm, cultural identity, and the double empathy problem function as interpretive lenses that guide the analysis. Textual claims are supported through direct reference to narrative evidence, and alternative interpretations, such as the possibility of romanticizing neurodivergent difference, are considered where relevant. By combining theoretical grounding with systematic textual analysis, this methodological approach maintains scholarly rigor while remaining consistent with humanities-based inquiry.

Through this framework, *Mockingbird* is examined not merely as a narrative text but as a discursive space in which cultural meanings of autism are constructed, negotiated, and reinterpreted. This methodological approach aligns with recent interdisciplinary research that emphasizes the importance of integrating literary analysis with contemporary neurodiversity frameworks to produce ethically grounded interpretations of neurodivergent representation (Abou Adel et al., 2025).

4. Analysis: Neurodivergence as Cognitive, Emotional, and Relational Difference

The narrative of *Mockingbird* reorients autism from a deficit-based interpretation toward an understanding of cognitive difference through Caitlin’s first-person perspective. Traits commonly framed as impairments, such as literal interpretation, preference for order, and difficulty interpreting implicit social cues, are presented as internally coherent ways of understanding the world. Caitlin’s structured thinking, particularly in relation to her brother Devon’s death, demonstrates how order functions as an emotional strategy rather than rigidity. She reflects, “I think of my brother every day. I think of how he liked things to be neat and in order and I try to do the same” (Erskine, 2010, p. 14). What may initially appear as inflexibility is instead revealed as continuity, remembrance, and care. Through this representation, the narrative challenges the medicalized assumption that cognitive structure necessarily signifies limitation. This representation aligns with recent psychological and cultural research suggesting that structured cognition in neurodivergent individuals’ functions as an adaptive mechanism for emotional processing rather than as a limitation (Pavlopoulou et al., 2025).

The first-person narration plays a central role in this reframing. By providing readers with direct access to Caitlin’s reasoning, Erskine shifts interpretive authority away from a neurotypical evaluative perspective. Caitlin’s attempt to interpret emotional complexity illustrates deliberate cognitive engagement: “I’m trying to put it all together, the pieces of what people feel and what I feel, to make sense of the world” (p. 72). Rather than indicating emotional absence, this reflection reveals a

form of analytical empathy in which understanding emerges through the careful synthesis of internal feelings and external social cues. Emotional depth in the novel therefore arises through structured reasoning rather than spontaneous expression.

Language also functions as a key site where deficit assumptions are reconsidered. Caitlin's preference for clarity reflects both cognitive precision and ethical sincerity. Her developing understanding of "closure" illustrates how cognition and emotion operate together in her interpretation of grief. She explains, "Closure is when you finally understand something completely and you can move on. I need to understand" (p. 102). Here, closure is defined not as emotional suppression but as coherent comprehension. This perspective expands conventional models of grief, which often privilege expressive immediacy over reflective processing.

Within the narrative, grief becomes the context through which neurodivergent resilience is articulated. Caitlin does not experience loss superficially; instead, she processes grief in ways consistent with her cognitive style. Her emotional development shows that resilience may manifest through structured reasoning rather than outward displays of emotion. At the same time, the novel avoids romanticizing neurodivergence by depicting moments of frustration, misunderstanding, and social conflict. Caitlin's growth occurs without requiring assimilation into neurotypical behavioral expectations.

Memory further functions as a structural element shaping Caitlin's identity. In literary narratives, memory frequently serves as an organizing mechanism through which subjectivity and ethical awareness are formed. As Sharma (2023) argues in his analysis of narrative interiority, memory enables individuals to transform recollection into continuity and meaning-making. Caitlin's persistent engagement with memories of her brother operates in this way, allowing structured remembrance to become a mechanism of resilience, emotional coherence, and identity formation rather than nostalgic fixation.

This process culminates in Caitlin's explicit rejection of deficit ideology when she states, "I am not broken. I just see the world differently and I have to figure out how to live in it" (Erskine, 2010, p. 118). This declaration encapsulates the novel's central epistemological shift. Autism is not portrayed as a condition to be overcome but as a distinct perceptual framework requiring relational negotiation rather than correction.

Through these narrative strategies, *Mockingbird* reconstructs the cultural meaning of autism. Cognitive precision becomes a form of ethical clarity; structured thinking becomes emotional depth; and literal language becomes communicative integrity. By situating these qualities within an immersive first-person voice, Erskine invites readers to reconsider assumptions about intelligence, empathy, and belonging. The novel ultimately advances a representational model in which neurodivergence is neither pathologized nor idealized but understood as a legitimate and complex dimension of human difference.

5. Discussion: Negotiating Neurodivergent Difference without Romanticization

The findings of this study position *Mockingbird* at the intersection of three major discourses shaping contemporary interpretations of autism: the medicalized deficit model, the Neurodiversity Paradigm, and emerging frameworks of cultural representation. The analysis demonstrates that the novel does not simply adopt one of these perspectives but instead negotiates among them through narrative structure and character development. By presenting Caitlin's experiences within linguistic, emotional, and relational contexts, Erskine challenges deficit-based assumptions while avoiding uncritical affirmation of neurodivergence.

First, the results confirm that *Mockingbird* actively contests deficit-centered constructions of autism. Traditional medical discourse characterizes autistic traits, such as literal interpretation, structured cognition, and emotional directness, as impairments that require normalization. In contrast, neurodiversity scholarship conceptualizes autism as "difference rather than deficit" (Kapp et al., 2013, p. 59). The narrative representation of Caitlin aligns with this reconceptualization. Her preference for order, analytical reasoning, and reflective engagement with grief are depicted as coherent cognitive strategies rather than dysfunctions. This portrayal resonates with Bagatell's (2010) interpretation of autism as a culturally situated identity or "way of being in the world" (p. 35). By foregrounding Caitlin's first-person perspective, the novel redistributes interpretive authority from external evaluators to the neurodivergent subject, thereby resisting the objectification of disabled identities that Disability Studies critiques within dominant discourse.

Second, the analysis indicates that the novel redefines empathy as a reciprocal process rather than unidirectional competence. Conventional deficit narratives frequently assume that autistic individuals lack emotional awareness. However, contemporary scholarship challenges this assumption. Kapp et al. (2013) prove that autistic empathy often manifests differently from neurotypical expectations, while Milton's (2012) formulation of the double empathy problem proposes that communication breakdowns arise from mutual differences in perception rather than from individual deficiency (p. 884). The narrative dynamics of *Mockingbird* illustrate this relational model of empathy. Caitlin's communication difficulties arise not from emotional absence but from interpretive asymmetry: her literal expressions are misinterpreted within neurotypical frameworks. The novel therefore reframes social misunderstanding as a product of divergent communicative styles rather than intrinsic emotional incapacity.

Recent interdisciplinary research further reinforces this interpretation. Empirical studies of neurodivergent adolescents show that emotional regulation develops through interaction between cognitive style and social context rather than through normative emotional conformity (Pavlopoulou et al., 2025). Similarly, psychological research highlights that emotional wellbeing in neurodivergent populations involves diverse coping strategies shaped by relational environments (Pincus & Beller,

2025). These findings support the novel's portrayal of Caitlin's emotional reasoning as reflective and adaptive rather than deficient.

At the same time, the analysis acknowledges the potential tension between neurodiversity affirmation and the risk of romanticization. Scholars caution that narratives celebrating neurodivergent difference may inadvertently aestheticize autism while overlooking structural barriers faced by autistic individuals. Davidson (2008), for example, warns that representations emphasizing expressive richness must remain attentive to the social conditions that produce marginalization. Within literary narratives, this tension often appears in developmental arcs that suggest harmonious integration as the endpoint of personal growth.

Mockingbird addresses this tension with relative balance. Although Caitlin's search for "closure" structures the narrative progression, the novel does not frame development as assimilation into neurotypical norms. Caitlin's cognitive style, marked by literal reasoning and structured interpretation, remains intact throughout the narrative. Her growth occurs through expanded relational awareness rather than through the abandonment of neurodivergent identity. In this way, the novel portrays adaptation as mutual negotiation rather than unilateral conformity.

From a literary perspective, the novel also reflects broader transformations in the representation of autism within children's literature. Kuldiurova (2024) identifies a significant shift from externally narrated autistic characters toward insider perspectives that grant narrative authority to neurodivergent voices. *Mockingbird* exemplifies this movement by centering Caitlin's internal reasoning and emotional processing. Similarly, Shareef (2025) highlights the novel's portrayal of emotional resilience, emphasizing reflective coping rather than sentimental heroism. These representational strategies allow the narrative to avoid both tragic reduction and inspirational stereotyping.

The aesthetic dimension of the novel further strengthens its ethical significance. Research on narrative engagement demonstrates that literary immersion can reshape readers' interpretive frameworks and emotional responses (Abou Adel et al., 2025). Through first-person narration, Erskine situates readers within Caitlin's cognitive perspective, thereby encouraging experiential understanding of neurodivergent perception. Holbah et al (2025) argue that literary texts can function as transformative spaces that reorganize ethical and cognitive perspectives through sustained narrative engagement. In this sense, *Mockingbird* operates not merely as a representation of neurodivergence but as an epistemological intervention that challenges normative assumptions about empathy, intelligence, and belonging.

Thus, the discussion confirms the central argument of this study: *Mockingbird* negotiates neurodivergent difference without romanticizing it. The novel simultaneously resists deficit narratives and acknowledges relational complexity. By integrating cognitive precision, emotional depth, and communicative negotiation within Caitlin's developmental journey, the text presents autism as a

relational and socially mediated form of identity rather than a pathological condition.

Consequently, the findings support the study's objectives by showing that *Mockingbird* expands contemporary understandings of autism representation in children's literature. The novel reframes neurodivergence as a legitimate and meaningful dimension of human diversity while maintaining critical awareness of social and cultural tensions surrounding disability. Through this balanced representation, *Mockingbird* contributes to ongoing conversations within Disability Studies, neurodiversity theory, and literary ethics, illustrating that responsible representation requires complexity, relational awareness, and interpretive humility.

Conclusion

This study has examined how Kathryn Erskine's *Mockingbird* represents neurodivergent identity and emotional depth by reframing autism from a deficit-oriented construct to a multidimensional form of cognitive and relational difference. Guided by Disability Studies and the Neurodiversity Paradigm, the analysis demonstrated that the novel's first-person narration grants epistemological authority to Caitlin's perspective, thereby challenging traditional medicalized interpretations that equate autism with impairment. In doing so, the study addressed the research objective of exploring how literary representation can reshape prevailing assumptions about empathy, communication, and identity in neurodivergent contexts.

The findings indicate that *Mockingbird* redefines empathy as a process of reciprocal negotiation rather than a normative emotional performance. Caitlin's structured reasoning, literal language, and reflective engagement with grief illustrate that emotional depth can emerge through analytical cognition and relational persistence. By presenting growth as mutual adjustment rather than assimilation, the novel avoids both deficit-based portrayals and romanticized interpretations of autism. These results contribute to filling a gap in existing scholarship by integrating neurodiversity theory with literary analysis to demonstrate how children's literature can ethically represent cognitive difference while acknowledging social complexity. These findings are consistent with recent interdisciplinary research that positions neurodivergence as a relational and context-dependent form of human diversity rather than a pathological deviation (Pincus & Beller, 2025).

The study also highlights broader implications for literary criticism and disability studies. By positioning neurodivergent identity as dynamic and relational, *Mockingbird* encourages readers to reconsider normative assumptions about intelligence, empathy, and belonging. Such representations can contribute to more inclusive cultural narratives and pedagogical approaches to neurodiversity. A limitation of this study lies in its reliance on the textual analysis of a single literary work. Future research may extend this inquiry through comparative studies of contemporary autism narratives or through reader-response and pedagogical research that examines how neurodivergent representation

influences interpretation, empathy, and educational practice. Thus, *Mockingbird* expands the interpretive framework through which neurodivergence is understood in children's literature, presenting cognitive difference not as deviation but as a meaningful dimension of human plurality.

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Declaration

This manuscript is original work and has not been submitted or published elsewhere in full or in part. The research, analysis, and arguments presented in this article are the author's own. AI tools, if used, were solely for language refinement, grammatical clarity, and formatting assistance. No AI tool was used for generating the core ideas, analysis, interpretations, or findings of the research.

About the Authors

Ms. Rachel Glory. R is a research Scholar in the department of English Literature at Nirmala College for Women, Coimbatore, Tamil Nadu, India - 641018.

Dr. M. Mary Neena is an Associate Professor in the Department of English Literature, at Nirmala college for Women, Coimbatore in India, with an M.A., M.Phil., and Ph.D. in English. She has 26 years of teaching experience, with 36 research publications, and 28 conference presentations.

ORCID Id: <https://orcid.org/0009-0003-2753-6817>

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