



Autism and Refrigerator Mother Theory in Fiction: Pauline Holdstock's *Here I Am!**

Kurgusal Eserlerde Otizm Ve Buzdolabı Anne Teorisi: Pauline Holdstock'ın *Here I Am!* Adlı Romanı

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ABSTRACT

Disability studies, in the beginning, focused on the visibility of impairments, and autistic characters, who do not show any visible symptoms, were disregarded. A multidisciplinary approach has recently resulted in integrating autism into humanities. Autism needs to be studied extensively in literary works since unjust representation is a major factor that causes neurotypicals to have fixed and prejudiced ideas about autistic individuals. Scientific studies, in the past, shaped and redefined people's perceptions of autism. The term 'refrigerator mother', popularized by Bruno Bettelheim, was mentioned in Leo Kanner's account of autism in 1943. The lack of motherliness was considered to be the cause of autism, which formed damaging clichés about autistic children's mothers. Guilt-ridden mothers blamed themselves for their children's autism. Autism, an inseparable identity, was treated as a negative effect of bad parenthood. Literary works, especially novels, may maintain or eradicate unjust perceptions of autistic children and their parents. This unfounded hypothesis called 'refrigerator mother theory' is not sustained today; however, in the past, it damaged the relationships between autistic children and their mothers. Popular opinion was convinced that mothers were to be blamed for autism. This study aims to discuss the relationship between an autistic child and his mother in the novel *Here I Am!* by Pauline Holdstock, a British-Canadian writer. It is clear that this unfounded hypothesis is not supported and reflected in the selected novel since the author offers the reader an intimate mother and son relationship in the novel which is in contrast with the typical cold and aloof mother with high intelligence and a needy child.

Keywords: Autism, Pauline Holdstock, disability studies, *Here I Am!*, refrigerator mother theory

ÖZ

Engellilik çalışmaları, başlangıçta engelliliğin görünürlüğüne odaklanmış ve herhangi bir görünür belirti göstermeyen otistik karakterler göz ardı edilmiştir. Çok disiplinli bir yaklaşım, son zamanlarda otizmin beşeri bilimlerle bütünleşmesiyle sonuçlanmıştır. Haksız temsil, nörotipiklerin otistik bireyler hakkında sabit ve önyargılı fikirlerle sahip olmasına neden olan büyük bir etken olduğundan otizmin edebi eserlerde kapsamlı bir şekilde incelenmesi gerekmektedir. Geçmişte yürütülen bilimsel araştırmalar, insanların otizm algılarını şekillendirmiş ve yeniden tanımlamıştır. Bruno Bettelheim tarafından popüler hâle getirilen 'buzdolabı anne' terimi, Leo Kanner'ın 1943'teki



otizmi incelediği çalışmasında ilk defa ortaya konulmuştur. Annelik duygusunun eksikliği, otizmin nedeni olarak görülmüş ve bu bakış açısı, otistik çocukların anneleri hakkında zarar veren klişeler oluşturmuştur. Kendilerini suçlu hisseden anneler, çocuklarının otizmi için kendilerini suçlamışlardır. Ayrılmaz bir kimlik olan otizm, kötü ebeveynliğin olumsuz bir etkisi olarak ele alınmıştır. Edebi eserler, özellikle romanlar, otistik çocukların ve ebeveynlerinin haksız temsillerini sürdürebilir veya ortadan kaldıracaktır. 'Buzdolabı anne teorisi' olarak adlandırılan bu temelsiz hipotez bugün sürdürülemez bir durumdadır; ancak geçmişte otistik çocuklar ile anneleri arasındaki ilişkilere büyük zarar vermiştir. Yaygın görüş, annelerin otizmin sebebi olarak suçlanması gerekliliği olmuştur. Bu çalışmada, İngiliz-Kanadalı yazar Pauline Holdstock tarafından yazılan *Here I Am!* romanında, otistik çocuk ve annesi arasındaki ilişkinin incelenmesi amaçlanmaktadır. Seçilen romanda, bu temelsiz hipotezin desteklenmediği ve yansıtılmadığı açıktır; çünkü yazar, zeki fakat soğuk ve ilgisiz anne tiplmesine zıt olarak sıcak bir anne-çocuk ilişkisiokuyucuya sunmaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Otizm, Pauline Holdstock, engellilik çalışmaları, *Here I Am!*, buzdolabı anne teorisi

Introduction

Autism has always been a controversial subject on the public's agenda. Various causes have been associated with autism although some have never been based on concrete scientific findings. Other than genetics and environmental factors, unfounded hypotheses such as MMR (measles-mumps-rubella) vaccinations and bad parenthood have been blamed as the causes of autism. Autism is the focus of public attention since it is considered to be on the rise. It should also be noted that associating autism with bad parenthood or vaccinations is not entirely based on fabrications. Various scientific studies fortified these claims at a time when little was known about the origins of autism. Bruno Bettelheim's *refrigerator mother theory* was in fact first implied in Leo Kanner's study, then theorized and popularized by Bettelheim. Although these scientific studies have been proved unfounded, maintaining the allegations in fiction will have detrimental effects on both autistic individuals and on their parents and also on the readers.

The aim is to analyse how a character with autism is defined and represented in *Here I Am!* (2019), how society sees a six-year-old autistic boy, and his level of exclusion. The relationship with Frankie and his mother can only be witnessed in Frankie's retrospective narrations, and it is obvious that Frankie and his mother had a caring relationship. She was not aloof, emotionally distant, or strict, which are key personality features that cause mothers to be defined as "refrigerator mothers." This does not mean that being a cold and strict mother deserves to be labelled and blamed. In the novel, it is ascertained that Frankie had a better relationship with his mother than his father. While his father was generally on business trips, Frankie and his mother spent time together.

Disability studies, in the beginning, focused on solely the visibility of impairments, and autistic characters, who do not show any visible symptoms, were disregarded. A multidisciplinary approach was needed, and it has recently resulted in integrating autism into humanities. The medical model of disability studies focuses on the impairment of the body, which means that the disabled individual is in such a condition because of the impairment. The social model, on the other hand, stresses the social conditions which create a disability. If perfect conditions are ensured, disability is out of question, which means a disability can be eradicated (Shakespeare, 2006).

Autism is a neuro-developmental disorder that was first described by Leo Kanner in his article called "Autistic Disturbances of Affective Contact" (1943), and Hans Asperger, at the same time, described this syndrome unaware of Kanner's studies. In *The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (4th ed.), a mild form of autism was called Asperger's syndrome to describe people with milder symptoms, and they were referred as people with high-functioning autism (American Psychiatric Association, 1994). However, in the last edition of the DSM, 'Asperger's syndrome' is no longer a different and separate classification. In the DSM-V, it is also stated that individuals who were once diagnosed with Asperger's syndrome should now be diagnosed with autism spectrum disorder. It should be noted that these people do not have any challenges verbally or intellectually (American Psychiatric Association, 2013, p. 32). These autistic individuals have limited interest in certain subjects, and some difficulties associated with pragmatic competence (American Psychiatric Association, 2013, p. 50). Autism spectrum disorder is now an inclusive category, and it is "diagnosed only when the characteristic deficits of social communication are combined with excessively repetitive behaviours, restricted interests, and insistence on sameness" (American Psychiatric Association, 2013, p. 31). Therefore, 'Asperger's disorder' is no longer a separate condition. People who were diagnosed with 'Asperger's syndrome' before are now on the autism spectrum. The artificial dichotomy between autistic people and people with Asperger's syndrome has thus been eradicated. Dividing people into "low-functioning" and "high-functioning" categories only serves the purpose to make judgements on people with severe symptoms. The autism spectrum is so vastly broad that generalization is not probable; however, there are some common symptoms that the majority show. The DSM-V lists the deficits in communicative behaviours such as understanding body movements and facial expressions such as gestures. Maintaining eye contact is also a challenge for autistic individuals (p. 50). Two main features of autism are thus challenges in communication and excessive behaviours.

Refrigerator Mother Theory

Leo Kanner was the first to diagnose some children with autism. He listed the common autistic features and made a clear classification. However, Kanner led the way to blame mothers for autism. He concludes his study by implying that mothers might be one of the reasons. Kanner and Bettelheim ended up creating a major and hurtful cliché. Kanner, as a pioneer in the field, tends to blame autism on parents: "It is not easy to evaluate the fact that all of our patients have come of highly intelligent parents. This

much is certain, that there is a great deal of obsessiveness in the family background" (1943, p. 250). Kanner continues to say that "there are very few really warm-hearted fathers and mothers. For the most part, the parents, grandparents, and collaterals are persons strongly preoccupied with abstractions of a scientific, literary, or artistic nature, and limited in genuine interest in people" (1943, p. 250). Kanner's search of the source of autism in psychoanalytical explanations is understandable because he lived in an era when psychoanalysis was a breakthrough. Both the popularity of psychoanalysis and Kanner's status as a pioneer contributed to the spread of this hypothesis among common people. Kanner, in 1949, once again stresses the education level of the mothers (420-421). Thus, intelligent but cold mothers were targeted, and they were assumed to be responsible for their autistic children:

Some time ago, I went to see an autistic child, the son of a brilliant lawyer. I spent an evening with the family. Donald, the patient, sat down next to his mother on the sofa. She kept moving away from him as though she could not bear the physical proximity. When Donald moved along with her, she finally told him coldly to go and sit on a chair. (Kanner, 1949, p. 422)

Kanner, based on his observations as a psychiatrist, surmised that autistic children had disciplined and cold mothers. In 1949, however, Kanner focused more on the biological causes rather than psychological ones (Grandin & Panek, 2013, May 01). Explaining autism through psychological factors was a mistake. This mistake was supported and popularized immensely by Bruno Bettelheim. He asserted that autism was probably biological, like an inclination, and had to be combined with bad parenthood to demonstrate itself. This unfounded deduction created guilt-ridden parents, especially mothers who were considered to be the primary individuals responsible for bringing up their autistic children. People thought that if it had not been their inadequate parenthood, those children would not have been autistic. Bettelheim states his opinions that are not grounded on any scientific explanations. By simply basing the cause of autism on bad parenthood, Bettelheim leaves no room for further insight because people in that period openly embraced the idea that a child's relative normality was disrupted by an inadequate parent. The child's sudden withdrawal is thus explained by psychoanalytic reasoning. Bettelheim accepts the fact that autism is a biological reality but advocates that it is triggered by the mother's negative feelings. Bennett et al. conclude that the popularity of the Freudian theory was the cause of such a quick

judgement and accusation. They also state that although the refrigerator mother theory is a scientifically disproven one, it continues to have detrimental effects on parents (2018).

Bruno Bettelheim's book titled *The Empty Fortress: Infantile Autism and the Birth of the Self* (1967) created controversy since the author deduced that emotionally distant mothers could be the cause of autism, and he also gave a name for these mothers as 'refrigerator mothers'. This is a highly problematic cause and effect relationship. This unfounded hypothesis created great suffering among parents for decades as they accused themselves of their children's autism. Later, Bettelheim's false credentials were proved. This false and hurtful hypothesis is no longer taken seriously; however, a common view was established. It should be underlined here that medical writings immeasurably affect the social life of autistic individuals by establishing an unjust stereotype. In this example, not only do autistic individuals suffer, but their parents are also subjected to unfair prejudice.

Bettelheim clearly states that the mother's unwillingness to have an autistic child may trigger the onset of autism. He undoubtedly accuses mothers of their children's autism. This is a devastating remark made by a then-popular scientist, Bettelheim. There were various factors that caused Bettelheim to popularize such a hurtful theory that maintained its popularity for a long time. Harry Harlow's experiments, for example, clearly affected Bettelheim's views (van Rosmalen et al., 2020). Harlow left some monkeys socially isolated to see the effects of social deprivation. Baby monkeys were fed by wire monkeys, and they were deprived of maternal care. Bettelheim used this experiment as a justification and strengthened his views on the connection between autism and the absence of maternal care. Kanner stated, for example, that "genuine lack of maternal warmth" (1949, p. 422) was a common trigger that causes autism. It was the main remark that supported Bettelheim. Bettelheim's popularity as a psychiatrist contributed greatly to the 'refrigerator mother' theory (Chown & Hughes, 2016). According to this theory, "[t]he autism was latent—until poor parenting came along and breathed life into it" (Grandin & Panek, 2013, May 01). This latent condition was considered to turn into autism because of bad parenthood. The bad parenthood was regarded to stem from cold mothers rather than fathers, and thus "[a] cold, distant, and career-oriented mother, known as the *refrigerator mother*, was the prevailing explanation as to why some children develop severe emotional and behavioural problems" (Davidson, 2017, p. 404). The attempt to find a psychological reason for autism leads to disregard the biological

reality of it, so this makes people tend to psychoanalytical explanations. In this study, the somatic reality of autism is stressed.

Mother and Son Relationship in Pauline Holdstock's *Here I Am!*

Autism has recently been highly popular in the USA and in other countries, and one of the most persistent metaphors is to show autistic people as strangers (Broderick & Ne'eman, 2008). It is evident that before the diagnosis of autism, there were autistic people that were depicted in literary texts (Brown, 2010). In media, there is a frequent misrepresentation as beating autism. It is generally depicted as an illness that needs to be overcome (Aylott, 2003, p. 11). Disability is also regarded to be a kind of personal tragedy that needs to be prevailed against (Barnes, 2012, p. 12). People with extraordinary bodies are expected to explain their conditions and also comfort others (Couser, 2005, p. 604). It should be kept in mind that rather than an illness or tragedy, autism is a form of identity. Loftis stresses this feature: "[d]econstructing cultural stereotypes of people on the spectrum and exploring autism's incredibly flexible alterity as a signifier of social and cognitive difference . . ." (2015, p. 2).

Social support is considered to be a crucial means of enabling autistic individuals to feel comfortable with others. While providing the support needed, the attempt to classify people according to their needs is unfair. Thus, defining the value of autistic people based on their abilities, with terms such as high-functioning, is regarded to be damaging (Murray, 2010). However, it is evident that Frankie has less severe symptoms.

Frankie's logic to go to France is problematic because it is based on an old promise made by his parents. As a family, they were supposed to travel to France, but this promise did not become reality due to his mother's sudden and unexpected death. Frankie has a sharp memory, which may be stereotypical, but his retentive memory is not the focus of the novel. In this study, Frankie's relationship with his mother is of primary importance since the novel clearly does not reflect the prejudice that autism can be caused by emotionally distant mothers. Frankie cannot cope with stressful situations. He rocks his body and tries not to think of it. Her mother's death is too much to deal with for him. Frankie is depicted as a child with extraordinary power of memory, which is still a stereotype. However, the scope of this study is limited to Frankie's relationship with his mother. Although as a reader we can observe their relationship only retrospectively from Frankie's recollections, we can sense that his mother had an

essential role in Frankie's life. The protagonist cannot cope with his mother's death, and in order to forget, he gets on a ship and travels to France. As revealed in my dissertation titled *Representation of Autism in Contemporary English Novel*, fathers are mostly depicted as aloof characters who cannot sustain healthy relationships with their autistic children. On the other hand, mothers are reflected to be caring, responsible, and loving (Tulgar, 2020, p. 60). However, in the late 1940s, a damaging cliché was put forward to allude that mothers should be held responsible. This is also worrying in terms of feminist studies because although fathers are equally responsible for bringing up children, they are not held accountable.

The story is told through alternating points of view but mainly Frankie's. His mother's death is narrated by several witnesses like his grandmother, his father Len, and his teacher Miss Kenney. Frankie's recollections are written in a childish manner, from the perspective of a six-year-old. Thus, they contain grammatical and spelling mistakes. Frankie is a clever child with acute observation skills. However, his pragmatic competence is not adequate to interact with other people without difficulty. His relationship with his mother is only understood through a retrospective narrative. Frankie narrates the events in detail, which makes the passages long and boring. He has a photographic memory that helps him memorize any visual input, which makes his memoir lengthy and elaborate. Even at the age of six, Frankie grasps the fact that normalcy is praised and appreciated in society. Thus, he tries to find ways to look 'normal' even when he is a fully grown-up person. He imitates the behaviours of others to look 'normal': "It made me feel funny too because I don't like touching strangers but I did it because that is what you're supposed to do if you're normal" (Holdstock, 2019, p. 4)¹. Touching and being touched invade his personal space, and this is the main reason he avoids this act. Other than that, most symptoms are invisible. Murray (2006) stresses that the autistic person cannot show that they are disabled due to the invisible disabled status of autism (p. 29). Another problem arises from the fact that disabled bodies' perspectives are absent in a way that able-bodied individuals try to reflect their own perspectives which are not likely to be in parallel with the experiences of the disabled (Linton, 1998, p. 526). This is especially true for autistic people since those with severe symptoms are unable to reflect how they see the world. As a result, one-sided retelling of experiences by neurotypicals who have autistic children increases, which creates the construction of identity in terms of their subjectivity. Murray underlines the fact that there have been numerous representations of autism on TV and media; however, those are limited

1 From now on, only page numbers will be given for the citations from *Here I Am!*, by Holdstock 2019.

to certain issues. These representations are regarded to empower various stereotypes about autism, the most important of which is exceptionality related to superior intelligence (2008a, p. 246). Osteen criticizes the inconsistencies within the disability studies such as the lack of a theoretical framework and its stress on the visible impairments rather than the invisibility (2008, p. 3). Autism, in this respect, is frequently ignored due to the lack of any visible symptoms, and thus this makes disability an “extraordinarily unstable category” (Davis, 1995, p. xv). In movies, the vast majority of characters have savant skills (Draaisma, 2009, p. 1477). Since the public has no direct contact with autistic individuals, representations in literary texts help construct a definition (Baker, 2008, p. 229).

Guilt-ridden mothers blamed themselves for their children’s autism for decades before it was finally revealed that mothers could not have been the cause. Autism, which is an inseparable identity, was treated as a negative effect of bad parenthood arising from failed marriages. Bettelheim (1967) states that while some biological factors may come into light in the future, mothers’ discouragement stemming from the fact that their hopes were not satisfied, since they did not have neurotypical children, might have been the primary cause of autism:

Throughout this book I state my belief that the precipitating factor in infantile autism is the parent’s wish that his child should not exist. While the same wish may not cause the same disturbance in other children, and while at some future time we may learn that some organic factor is a precondition of autism, the fact is that almost all organic conditions that have so far been linked to this disease are also present in nonautistic children. (p. 125)

Maintaining this unfounded hypothesis called “refrigerator mother theory” is today not possible thanks to new findings; however, in the past, it was a damaging cliché that affected mothers in their communities. In the novel, this damaging stereotype is not supported with further examples.

Various features of autism are reflected throughout the novel. Frankie is, for example, sensitive to too much noise and light, which is one of the core features of autism. According to Uta Frith, there are three core features of autism, and these are difficulties in socializing, communication, and imagination (1991, p. 2). She also stresses that

people experience these difficulties in different levels. Social interaction, language development, and imagination, together with repetitive behaviours form “the triad of impairments” (Wing & Gould, 1979, p. 13); after Lorna Wing’s studies, autism is usually defined in terms of these three core symptoms. Frankie demonstrates these core features of autism; what is more, he also wants to be accepted by his peers, and that is why he tries to be like everyone else. He uses the word “normal” when he speaks of other nonautistic people. He is not ready to accept his true identity. Normalcy is praised by society, and Frankie is aware of this fact: “I learned very quickly that the trick to fitting in is to fake affect” (p. 238). He uses upsetting words such as “disorder”, “abnormal”, “normalize” (p. 238) to point out that he has always been ostracized by people around him. People anticipate that the result of being alienated by society is to become more courageous. This unfair expectation is criticized by the author. Frankie writes in his memoir: “I thought brave was only when you have to get a splinter out or rescue someone from a fire. I didn’t think you had to be brave all the time” (p. 138). According to neurotypicals, being autistic inevitably requires the autistic person to be brave. However, this notion is defied in the novel in view of the fact that autism is an identity rather than being an obstacle that makes them brave. Frankie clearly asserts that being autistic and being brave are completely different.

Dealing with excessive stress causes certain repetitive behaviours such as rocking, clapping and flapping. Frankie cannot focus on his surroundings under great stress. As a coping mechanism, he blocks all sensory input, resulting in him being assumed to be aloof and pretentious. Bright lights, colours, loud noises create distress that causes him to lose his attention. “The playroom was nearly as noisy as the cocktails and all bright colours” (p. 13). Hypersensitivity to certain stimuli is evident in autistic individuals. In a study, of the 46 subjects, 23.9% of them were diagnosed as highly sensitive to sound and two of them were uncomfortable with intense sounds (Gomes et al., 2004, p. 797). Gomes et al. state that 90% of autistic individuals respond to sensory stimuli abnormally (Gomes et al., 2008, p. 280). The auditory abnormalities in autism are primarily comprised of auditory hyposensitivity, auditory hypersensitivity, phonophobia, and peculiar interests in certain sounds (Tan et al., 2012, p. 33). Autistic individuals may have low tolerance for sensory perceptions, and amplified pain may be one of these core features of autism (Clarke, 2015, p. 2). Unexpected and sudden sounds are highly disturbing for him, and what’s more, as a hypertactile, the fear of being touched is overwhelming for him.

Frankie narrates to the reader how he found his mother dead in the armchair. It is obvious, from the nicknames her mother gives to Frankie, that they had an intimate relationship: "So when I went in the sitting room I saw MyMum in the big armchair. She didn't turn round and say Good morning Sunshine! She didn't even move. I said Mum! I'm up! And she still didn't turn round" (p. 16). However, Frankie's calm nature while coping with his mother's death alludes to his lack of empathy. He is portrayed as a fairly cold character devoid of feelings. Nevertheless, it should be stressed that neurotypical's reactions to tragic events may dominate people's behaviours. An autistic person's reaction to death cannot be criticized or undermined by comparing it to a neurotypical's.

Anyway I was exhausted. I was exhausted for what had happened to MyMum and exhausted for trying to make people understand and exhausted of being mad with them and their stupid faces and all of the stupid lies you can hear in their stupid voices when they say things they don't really mean and you know they don't understand and they think you are lying anyway when you are not. (p. 6)

Frankie's mother had diabetes and drinking problems. The mother figure is portrayed as a character who is overwhelmed with the responsibilities and duties. She is the one who is mainly responsible for Frankie whereas her husband is frequently away on business. The father is a character with fewer responsibilities, and he prefers staying away from the daily problems to being a part of the family life. The father, Len, is portrayed as aloof, insensitive, and selfish. At the end of the novel, it is implied that the reason behind the mother's death might have been suicide. It should be asserted that the autistic child is depicted as the main reason for the couple's failing marriage in the novel. The mother and father figures, on the other hand, are merely reflection characters. In novels featuring autistic children, the enduring mother and irresponsible father figures have so far been stereotypical. The mother's comments on her husband show that the father figure is stereotypical in the novel as well: "I know he loves me even if he's a bit useless like My Mum says. Said" (p. 211). Frankie knows that his father is confined to a rather passive role in the family: "Gran wasn't as fiery as my mother but she was nowhere near as passive as Dad" (p. 231). Len's mother describes her daughter-in-law and criticises her son: "Tantrums, panics, silly behaviour, screaming — none of it mattered when push come to shove. She put up with it all. And more. Seven days a week. Unlike Len" (pp. 20-21). Len alienates himself from his family. His mother is aware of the fact that Patti suffers psychologically and physically. "Bloody Len. He was never

there, for God's sake! Always some excuse why he had to add another day" (p. 21). It is surprising that Frankie does not even consider his father a part of his family. Len, as a father, cannot be compromising because his need to be alone away from responsibilities now predominates. Although it may be the case, it is unfair in terms of true representation. It has been found that marriages of those who have autistic children are not necessarily doomed to end. Establishing a relationship between failing marriages and autism is clearly a damaging approach that could produce devastating effects on the autism community. Those problems arising in Patti, the mother, and Len's marriage cannot be linked to Frankie. These unfair attributions made to determine the cause of a situation create false expositions. For example, Kanner stresses that spouses are rather cold to each other, but they rarely get divorced. The mutual respect they have for each other continues the marriage:

Matrimonial life is a rather cold and formal affair. There is no glamor of romance in premarital courtship, no impetuosity in postnuptial mating. On the other hand, there are no major animosities. There has been only one separation or divorce of any of the 55 couples. The parents treat each other with faultless respect, talk things over calmly and earnestly, and give to outsiders the impression of mutual loyalty. (Kanner, 1949, p. 421)

In literary texts, the marriages of those with autistic children seem to suffer from the lack of communication and lack of equal share of responsibilities. While the father figure is evasive, the mother figure is portrayed as strong and responsible.

Patti lost a baby before Frankie's birth, and this loss as well may be a trigger for Patti's psychological distress. The stressors in her life are difficult to cope with; however, linking the cause of a possible suicide attempt to autism is both worrying and damaging. Her loneliness, combined with overwhelming responsibilities, alludes to a possible suicide. Frankie feels that her mother needs a friend in her life since she is usually alone in her thoughts. She is in a relationship that is unsettling and disturbing. She may not have found the strength and support to continue her life. Frankie describes his mother as "someone who might be lonely, who might like a friend" (p. 238). He also knows that his mother loves him the way he is. Remembering the past reveals some disturbing facts about Frankie's mother. She may have used a number of pills that led to an overdose. Frank, as an adult, interprets her mother's past and concludes that she might have committed suicide: "Too many pills, taken in a haze of grief after Uncle Jack — or

a too-sudden withdrawal, under pressure from Dad” (p. 233). Frankie’s mother appears to be a tragic character, and what is more worrying is that society perceives her to be a failure and a mother without warm feelings.

The author narrates Frankie’s behaviours after his initial discovery of his mother’s death: “I said You’re dead aren’t you. That’s when I knew. She didn’t burst out laughing like she would if it was a trick” (p. 16). His daily routine is not disrupted by his mother’s death. This scene has the potential to be disturbing since Frankie is reflected as an unfeeling and cold-hearted character. He completes his morning routine:

but it was time to eat my cereal so I got down and ate it. I sat beside her on the floor with my shoulder next to her leg. When I had finished it was time to go to the toilet and brush my teeth and comb my hair. (pp. 16-17)

He makes a cup of tea, and then he goes to school like he does on a normal day. Before leaving for school, he waits for his grandmother, but she does not show up. He tries to find a priest since he knows that a priest can bury people. He washes his hands thirteen times. The grave difference in Frankie’s reaction to his mother’s death from the one of a neurotypical’s may be disturbing for people who are not familiar with autistic individuals. To the layman, this different way of responding to a tragic event can mean that autistic individuals lack empathy and any real emotions. Frankie’s teacher, Miss Kenney, who is also one of the narrators in the novel does not believe Frankie and dismisses the possibility of his mother’s death. Although she later regrets and feels ashamed, she is one of the main reasons for Frankie’s escape from home. Miss Kenney feels ashamed of herself for not believing Frankie. She does not sleep for three days. She tries to justify herself by saying that Frankie generally likes exaggerating: “He was just exaggerating to get attention. Or making it up. Like when he told me there’s a bird that can fly backwards” (p. 105). While Miss Kenney does not think much of Frankie, he criticizes his teacher’s actions and manners that are not appropriate to her profession. As a teacher, she lacks the empathy and knowledge that are necessary to know an autistic person. Miss Kenney chooses to ignore Frankie: “She likes ignoring. Ignoring is probably her favourite thing” (p. 146). Her ignorance results in Frankie’s escape from home. Although he does not disclose the death of his mother to his grandmother or father, he believes that he will not be understood properly by the people around him.

Losing his mother, as his sole supporter and a person who understands him better than anyone else, affects him gravely because he is now like an orphan: "I am like a whole orphan. Like a baby orangutan. Everyone was deciding where I should be and what I should do" (p. 211). His escape from home is the result of his mother's death since he does not want to live in a home where his mother does not exist: "I did not want to go home to my house where MyMum used to be. I did not want her to be missing" (p. 94). From the excerpt, it is clear that Frankie has a loving mother who is the only person that truly understands him. He is clearly treated differently by his peers, and his father is not usually around. His mom is the only person who spends most of the day with him. They have respect for each other, and his mom never implies that she does not want an autistic child as a son. Bettelheim's refrigerator mother theory is certainly not applicable, and it should be disregarded. The fact that he lost the most precious person in his life has devastating effects on Frankie. The cold mother stereotype is not sustained by the author, and a mutual loving relationship between a mother and a son is thus reflected in the novel. Frankie is also withdrawn for fear that he might offend his mother's legacy or reflect his mother's personality unrightfully. He writes: "Now I feel bad I wrote about MyMum because you will think she is not a nice person. But she is. Was. I know she was. That's why I don't have to cry" (p. 74). It is clear in the novel that the refrigerator mother theory is not maintained and supported.

Reflections of an Autistic Adult

At the end of the novel, it is revealed that Frankie is now in his sixties and conducts neurological research at Cambridge. His once-written memoir is a reminiscent of his autistic self which is naïve and unconfident. He remembers his adventure as a little boy. His retrospective interpretation of his past is revealing since he now has the ability to evaluate the circumstances clearly and maturely. He accepts his autistic identity and cherishes it. He is now aware of some psychological challenges he has. Frank may have self-diagnosed himself with avoidant personality disorder (p. 233), or he may have been officially diagnosed with it. Although he does not give details about the diagnosis, he is willing to accept and defy those challenges. His memory lane also unveils various unanswered questions about his parents. Frank questions whether his father was unfaithful or not, and whether his mother had suicidal ideas or not. His past may be more bleak than reflected in his memoir.

The main reason behind his escape from home was people's lack of understanding of what constitutes the autistic identity. Frankie's emotions were not in accordance with the societal values; and thus, he was considered to be a boy without empathy. People around Frankie did not regard it possible that there might be an unconventional way of coping with a traumatic situation. He was judged by neurotypicals on the grounds that he did not show his feelings appropriately. Appropriateness is seemingly determined by the dominant group, and Frankie's reactions to his mother's death were not accepted by society. In the novel, Frankie was clearly in mourning for his mother; nevertheless, neurotypicals' attitudes forced him to flee. He, as an adult now, is aware of neurotypicals' prejudices:

Looking back, I can see — I think — why people had difficulty believing me. If my story were true, they reasoned, why wasn't I in floods of tears, sobbing with fear and grief? They couldn't understand it. And what people still find disturbing is the thought that I was devoid of "real" emotion. They regard my six-year-old self as quietly horrific, some unnerving Stephen King creation. (p. 238)

The disturbing comparison set up between Frank's old self and a horrific creation without real emotions shows that autistic children are misrepresented. It is deemed unlikely that they can show their emotions in a different way than neurotypicals. Frank asserts that he loved his mother in his own way: "In the short time I knew her, I loved my mother. I know what I know. I loved her in my own way, not the 'normal' way, and she understood" (p. 238). Complying with social norms for autistic individuals is not comprehensible since they fail to understand the point. The damaging stereotype that autistic people lack empathy and the ability to love and build intimate relationships is worrying, and Frank clearly suffers from this cliché. Kissing or touching is not a way of showing affection for Frankie to even his parents: "I never like kisses. They are too close to my head where all my mind is. I like it to be private there" (p. 116).

Conclusion

In the past, some unfounded hypotheses affected societies gravely. 'The refrigerator mother theory', which was first introduced by Leon Kanner and later popularized by Bruno Bettelheim, implied that children had autism due to the cold manners of their mothers. The novel *Here I Am!* by Pauline Holdstock depicts a six-year-old's adventures

on a ship after finding out his mother's death. In the novel, the mother figure is represented as a caring and loving one while the father is depicted as an aloof character who does not wish to assume responsibilities. Frankie and his mother have an intimate relationship. It is clear that in the novel 'the refrigerator mother theory' is not supported. Frankie's mother is a tragic character who may have attempted suicide in the past. It is a cliché to assume that Frankie had a cold mother with little empathy because she was a caring mother with a sense of responsibility based on Frankie's recollections. In literary texts, maintaining such a damaging stereotype is highly dangerous because it can affect the public opinion in an adverse way, and cause neurotypicals to have biased ideas that are reflected as facts. It should be asserted that with the help of literary texts which address not only to the challenges autistic individuals suffer from but also to the richness of their worlds surely with objectivity and unbiased statements to promote the autistic identity as unique and validated as those of neurotypicals', autistic people can be portrayed impartially in other literary texts, too.

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