

## Psychological Struggle of Parenting an Autistic Kid: A Study of Anita Nair's *Eating Wasps*

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### Abstract

The present study, “Psychological Struggle of Parenting an Autistic Kid: A Study of Anita Nair's *Eating Wasps*” gives a major insight into the sufferings of an Autistic or disabled child and how it reflects on the psyche of a mother. Mothers of children with severe autistic symptoms have higher levels of stress, anxiety, and depression than fathers. Autism though not a disease, it is a developmental disorder caused by differences in the brain. It is a complicated condition that include problems with communication and behaviour. This paper analyses the mother character and gives a deep insight into her psychological ordeal with an autistic child. The analyses will also focus on the difficult phases of the disabled, their family members and the influence of the environment on the autistic kid, Naveen.

**Keywords:** Autism, disability, escapism, struggle, trauma.

Anita Nair's *Eating Wasps* explores the life of ten-woman characters of different ages, social background, religion, caste and class. The women have one thing in common. It is the psychological ordeals they face. Different facets of women's life are represented by the author. The female characters in Anita Nair's novel battles with physical and mental struggles. Nair describes the sufferings, regret, and trauma of every woman. The character of Maya is an extension of Nair's previous novel *Mistress*. Some of the characters like Koman, Radha, Shyam, and Naveen are also taken from her previous novel *Mistress*. This paper analyses the difficulties Maya faces in raising her autistic son Naveen.

Autism spectrum disorder (ASD), usually known as autism is a disorder that affects children and is classified as an intellectual disability, commonly identified around the age of three. It is characterised by abnormal reciprocal social contact, delayed and poor communication abilities and the restricted repertoire of activities and interests. Family conflict, arrival of new siblings and migration also worsen the symptoms of autism in children. They are extremely sensitive to even minor alterations in the family and their immediate surroundings. Raising a child with communication and behaviour challenges is incredibly stressful

Alla Katsnelson in her article, “Study Quantifies Prevalence of Autism in India” says that, “About 1 in 100 children in India under age 10 has autism, and nearly 1 in 8 has at least

one neurodevelopmental condition”. India is a country where the population have been approximately estimated as around 139 crore people. More than 2 million people might be affected with the signs of ASD in India. Three types of autism spectrum disorders are there. They are Autistic Disorder, Asperger Syndrome and Pervasive Developmental Disorder.

People with autistic disorders usually have significant language delays, social and communication challenges, and unusual behaviours and interests. Many people with autistic disorder also have an intellectual disability. The second type is the Asperger syndrome. People with Asperger syndrome usually have milder symptoms of autistic disorder. They might have social challenges and unusual behaviours and interests. However, they typically do not have problems with language or intellectual disability. The third type is the Pervasive Developmental Disorder. This is sometimes called a typical autism or PDD-NOS. These people usually have fewer and milder symptoms than those with autistic disorder. The symptoms might cause only social and communication challenges.

Naveen, Maya's son has autism spectrum disorder. Naveen is thirty-nine years old but he has the mind of a six-year-old. Naveen has trouble understanding both spoken words and gestures. When Maya and Vipin first learned that their child will not be able to experience life as other children do, they felt a sense of loss, regarding the child's future and their expectations. But Maya struggles a lot to keep her son's life happily. Additionally, Naveen struggles with social responsiveness and has trouble establishing close friendships. Naveen does not have the tendency to sit in a place and concentrate on a particular work. “Naveen wouldn't be sitting in front of a television, dressed in pyjamas with a print of blue bunny rabbits gambolling on it, waiting for her to lead him to bed and tuck him in as if he were six and not thirty- eight years old” (190). People with autism have trouble understanding and communicating both verbal and non- verbal language. Some autistic adults have limited speech. They often have difficulty in expressing themselves.

Children with ASD experience the world differently from other people. Parents can find it difficult and embarrassing when their child demonstrates unusual behaviour in public. They may find it impossible to eat food of a particular colour and certain types of food. Naveen hates plain milk. He calls it 'Ganda', which means bad. Not just plain milk is Ganda to Naveen, even strangers are ganda, and autorickshaws are also Ganda. Naveen's dislike gets reflected in a different manner. “He needed to slam his forehead hard against the wall. Again and again, again and again, again and again” (199). Many autistic adults struggle greatly with anxiety. It can affect a person physically and psychologically. Autism spectrum condition is characterised by hyperactivity, intense temper tantrums, self-harming activities such as banging their head, poking eyes, biting hands and showing extreme food fads. Naveen's condition is also the same. He slaps himself in the face. Even a loud noise would disturb him and he would hurt himself. As Maya watches, “Any loud noise would set him off, and he would begin to hurt himself. It was hard to watch the mindless brutishness with which he inflicted pain on himself.... She watched Naveen slap his own face viciously” (193). Anger, grief and sadness are some of the common reactions. Sometimes parents become angry with the child when the child's behaviour is hard to handle.

Naveen's father Vipin loses his temper whenever Naveen doesn't do what he is asked to do and sometimes Vipin slaps him out of despair and he doesn't know what else to do. The Doctor advises slapping and yelling at Naveen won't help. Instead, they are advised to speak

with Naveen again and again to get a work done, “tell him again and again what you want him to do. One thing at a time” (194). Naveen associates’ anger with beatings. Any loud noise makes him angry, and he expresses it by hurting himself. As his frustration mounts, Vipin Naveen’s father becomes impatient and he turns to alcohol in order to reduce his pain. The Father is the most important person in the family. He is the head and financial supporter of the family. The attitude of the father shapes and encourages children throughout their lives. He nurtures a child’s passion and intellectualism but Vipin is not like that, he does not have patience to take care of Naveen. If the father of the disabled child does not provide emotional support, the family would break apart. Children’s mental health is impacted by their fatherless upbringing. Therefore, it is the father’s responsibility to raise his child with love and self-confidence.

Mothers of children with Autistic Spectrum Disorder have a higher-level psychological distress and care giving burden. They undergo health-related problems, lower level of resilience and they also face problems in various areas of family life including marital relationship, sibling relationships, and family socialization. It had a negative effect on the mothers’ social life and mental well-being. Communication with family members and friends help to increase the understanding level and it offers an alternative social contact for the child to build a stronger support system. Children with disability can achieve anything with the emotional support of their family. What they expect from the family is to be treated as a normal person. The reality is that family is the only system that tries to bring back the disabled to being abled. So, the family has to contribute a lot to the disabled. If the family considers the disabled as a burden, then familial love does not gain importance nor significance. Observing and identifying potential triggers is very much useful to discipline a child. An article entitled “Parenting a Child with Autism” in the website Psychology Today states that “Parents may then seek to implement a system of rewards for positive behaviour and punishment for negative behaviour. Following this plan consistently can help the child understand the consequences of their actions”.

Naveen’s father Vipin shows no concern for his child. He makes no effort to get Naveen speak or give him a normal life. He escapes the situation by abandoning Maya and Naveen. One of the causes of Vipin’s departure from home is Naveen’s autism. Escapism is never the answer to a problem but Vipin decides to leave the circumstance and thus results the divorce of Maya and Vipin. The failure of the marriage has other reasons like Vipin’s intoxication and his loud angry words. Maya feels more relieved than devastated when Vipin leaves her life. A woman is expected to delight in taking care of her home and family. Maya understands that Men doesn’t take responsibility and they will leave it all to a woman. After her husband’s betrayal, Maya moved to Chennai and lives with her autistic son. Having a child with autism is one of the biggest challenges a single parent has to face. Maya sacrifices her own life for the sake of her son. “After a while, Maya had no use for passion in her life. It was best, she decided, to become a shadow. She was Naveen’s shadow. Once she had put her hopes and her mind to rest, she thought she found a sense of contentment” (195). Maya always considers her child as very special. Mothers are even ready to sacrifice their life for their children. Though Vipin abandons her, Maya stands as a single parent and takes care of Naveen.

Anita Nair sheds light on a mother's psychological suffering and demonstrates how a single mother tackles challenges and manages to raise her autistic child. After many years Maya meets Koman, a Kathakali dancer. Maya discovers that his love is so vital for her to survive each day. Koman accepts Naveen as his son. He says "I am not a perfect man. Not even a good man. But you are the woman I love and Naveen is our son. I am not going to tire of you or him" (197). Koman is good and kind to Maya. Unfortunately, Koman dies after a few years of togetherness. The grief takes over Maya physically, emotionally, mentally and spiritually. Her sadness is nourished by her ideas and emotions. Maya struggles to survive and she hides her emotions from the external world. The analysis of her psyche, clearly shows, that the instincts in the unconscious mind shapes her. At midnight, when Maya is about to turn seventy- one and Naveen, thirty- nine. Maya with much struggle takes the decision to take Naveen's life on his thirty ninth birthday. It is because she worried about what would happen to him if she passed away. Naveen loves to eat badhushah. So, Maya makes badhushahs with rat poison she is not able to end her son's life. Maya does not serve the poisoned badhushah. She tossed the sweets in to the bin and offered him a chocolate bar. Maya hopes that they would find something new to do the following morning. Nair allows the reader to draw their conclusions this tale too in *Eating Wasps*.

The attitude of the society on viewing the disabled and their parents needs to change. Their potential qualities are different from those of normal human conditions. Therefore, the society should not despise or undervalue people with disabilities and their parents. While autistic children struggle with communication, they excel at picking up musical instruments and grasping mathematical concepts. Therefore, people with disabilities are more talented and superior than average people in alternative ways. Flexible work schedules can be designed for the disabled to provide them access to the same circumstances as normal people have access to. They should not be excluded from the society. Acceptance and concern towards autistic kids and their parents is an important aspect that has to be seriously comprehended. Maya successfully counters her psychological ordeal for thirty-nine years. In her 70s she doesn't find an alternative hand to hold her responsibility towards Naveen, and this fact that her son may get abandoned without care makes her contemplate suicide. But again, she breaks down and thwarts the plan and embraces her son. Lot of sacrifices on Maya's part have made her resilient even amidst troubling waters. Thus the psychological ordeals of parenting an autistic child is beautifully captured through Maya and Naveen in *Eating Wasps*.

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