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A Psychodynamic Perspective of the Protagonists in the Novel “Turtles all the Way Down” By John Green

Areej Fatima

National University of Modern Languages Islamabad

Email: areejfatimashah2k1@gmail.com

Muntazar Mehdi

Assistant Professor (English) Faculty of Arts and Humanities,

National University of Modern Languages Islamabad

Email: mmehdi@numl.edu.pk

Abstract

The purpose of this study is to extract the elements of Obsessive–Compulsive Disorder hereinafter OCD found in the personality traits of the main character of the novel Turtles All The Way Down written by an American author John Green. As defined by Csigo, 2021, “OCD is a disorder of personality organization and ego-organization.” The novel operates at the two levels of the story: on one level, there is a romantic story going on between Aza Holmes and Davis Pickett while on the other hand, there is an inner conflict of Aza that is because of her mental illness, known as OCD. To demonstrate the traits of mental illness in the character of Aza, the Psychodynamic Theory of OCD has been applied to the selected content of the novel. The method for study is based on qualitative research method and the model is descriptive. The references from the novel has been extracted to carry out the analysis of the novel in the light of Psychodynamic Theory of OCD. It has been found and confirmed by the results of analysis that the female protagonist of Green’s novel is patient of Obsessive Compulsive Disorder and the traits of OCD are reflected throughout the novel in Aza’s behavior.

keywords: Psychodynamic, Protagonist, inner conflict, Mental illness.

INTRODUCTION

As the new era is emerging and different issues are arising in the society, writers have started considering the subject and themes of their writings accordingly. In contemporary world, people are getting more and more obsessed with technology and electronic gadgets. In the novel, *Turtles All The Way Down*, Green has considered young adults and their sufferings due to changing circumstances and different arising issues. For instance, in the novel, Aza and her friend Daisy want to get money and they idealize the lifestyle of Pickett's family. On the other hand, Davis Pickett and her brother are having all the luxuries but they are living alone as their mother died when they were kids and their father got accused of corruption so he disappeared. The family is broken and the brothers are looking for love, care and affection. Similarly, Daisy is passionate and keen interested in writing fan fiction which also reflects the traits of modern youngsters. The generation now is looking for fiction because they either want to escape the reality or they are having lost identities so they doubt their originality like Aza Holmes.

Moreover, increasing mental illness issues are of a great concern and challenge to the world in the present times. Every other person is suffering from some sort of mental illness because of the mechanized lifestyle that people are living in either by choice or due to the circumstances. Therefore, many writers pointed out these issues and they addressed such disorders through their writings. Similarly, Green portrayed the picture of a mental disorder called Obsessive Compulsive Disorder, through the character of his female protagonist Aza Holmes.

According to World Health Organization (WHO) "there are five types of mental illness, they are bipolar, schizophrenia, anorexia, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), and obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD)". OCD is comprised of two parts as pointed out by Nolen-Hoeksema (2014): "Obsessions are thoughts, images, ideas, or urges (e.g., to harm oneself) that are persistent, that uncontrollably intrude on consciousness, and that usually cause significant anxiety or distress. Compulsions are repetitive behaviors or mental acts that an individual feels he or she must perform". (p. 139)

The disease deals with a vast variety of symptoms. Based on a study, it is said that two individuals might be suffering from OCD but their patterns of symptoms vary to a greater extent from each other. One patient of OCD may have security concerns and therefore the person repeatedly

overthinks about getting some sort of accident and they make situations in mind that are too far from reality. Such obsessive thoughts leads to anxiety and the person feels compulsion to do some behaviors for their satisfaction. As a result, they may keep checking door locks or stove knobs and perform other such behaviors.

However, the other person who has the same disease, have different obsessive thoughts and thus different compulsive behaviors. For instance, a person may have health concerns and they keep thinking about getting contamination from something. As a result the person keeps washing hands and other measures for cleanliness that is beyond normal. (Leckman., et.al. 1997)

One such case was reported in a study that a woman aged 33, has compulsive behavior of washing hands. She was into this to the extent that she use to spend two to six hours a day in washing hands. Also, she feels urge for checking door locks and stoves before she leaves the house. Though Washing hands and check for doors and stove is a common human behavior ad it is completely normal but what makes it abnormal is the frequency and consumption of time over these tasks. (Jenike, 2004)

We see the same pattern of thoughts and compulsive behaviors in the character traits of Aza. She forgets about the surroundings and whatever is going on when she feels the urge to change her bandage. Similarly, she gets stuck in thoughts of germs and is lost in the world of microbes that leads her to think she has no control over herself. Thus, she pinch herself to make sure if she is real or not.

Research Question(s):

1. How are the traits of OCD portrayed by John Green in his female protagonist?
2. How does the character of Aza Holmes justify the postulates of psychodynamic theory of OCD?

LITERATURE REVIEW

John Green has written many Young Adult (YA) novels from which his writing style of Adult fiction can be analyzed. His fiction is based on describing the mental and psychological illnesses that most adults of this generation are suffering from. His characters are witty, well-read, and

introspective. These characters are interested in multi-dimensions as in *The Fault in Our Stars*, Augustus Water's is interested in basketball, reading, and playing video games. (Hays, 2018).

Similarly, in his novel, *Turtles All The Way Down*, Daisy is interested in writing fiction, while Aza is into too much reading encyclopedias and pathology whereas Noah is always playing video games. In YA novels, writers attempt to highlight and portray the difficulties, sufferings, or common desires of adults. Moreover, in contemporary YA novels, mental illnesses are of significant importance. Along with these aspects, romantic relations are also discussed in YA fiction (DaCosta, 2018).

Moreover, John Green has portrayed his protagonist, Aza, who is suffering from a mental health disorder. The type of illness she was suffering from is Obsessive Compulsion Disorder OCD and the way she attempts to struggle with her disorder. Her Ego and Superego have been suppressed by her Id and the way she has to take medicines and cope up with therapy treatments is evident in the novel. The theory of Psychoanalysis by Sigmund Freud has been applied to the novel in order to analyze these factors (Khotimah and Setyabudi, 2019).

Nirmal and Latha have worked on the novel *Turtles All The Way Down* by applying the theory of self-determination by Deci and Ryan, in order to highlight the sufferings and struggles of the female protagonist, Aza Holmes. In their work, they have proved how she was suffering and self-motivating herself in order to overcome his abnormalities. (Nirmal and Latha, 2021).

Due to the growing issue of mental health disorders among high school children, it has been a major subject of concern for modern-day writers. The aim is to encourage children for speaking out about their problems as it is suggested that "a growing acknowledgment that talking about mental illness and depression is a lot healthier than not talking about it" (S. Corbett 20). Concerns about mental health are of crucial importance as "the onset of depression is occurring earlier in life today than in past decades" (Jones 32). Charlie Ghent, in his study, has carried out research on mental illness in young adult literature. For this purpose, he has taken into account some novels including *Turtles All The Way Down* by John Green to study the presentation of mental illness and exploration of literary elements (Ghent, 2019).

Palarani and Hadyanto (2022) have discussed the personality traits of Aza from the psychoanalytical perspective based on the ideas of Sigmund Freud. They have talked about the internal conflict of the protagonist in the light of Id, Ego and Superego. According to their study, Aza does not have a strong ego and that is the reason for her internal conflict. Eventually, the

conflict arises anxiety and to overcome that anxiety, she performs certain actions that is called ego defense mechanism.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Obsessive Compulsive Disorders are the interrupting thoughts or the repetitive behaviors that a person feels necessary to be done. However, in life we may perform some actions regularly as a part of our routine but they are not counted as the symptoms of OCD. If a person's thoughts or compulsive behaviors are so severe that they are disturbing their important matters then these are the symptoms of OCD. For instance, if a person is having an important meeting and meanwhile the thoughts of bacteria or some germs occur and the person forgets about the meeting and rush for washing hands. Also, this is something that keeps happening with that person then it means the person is suffering from the disorder.

Psychodynamic Theory of OCD states that “obsessions and compulsions are signs of unconscious conflict that you might be trying to suppress, resolve, or cope with. These conflicts arise when an unconscious wish is at odds with socially acceptable behavior.” Aza was suffering from both of these things as she was obsessed with the fear of getting *C.diff*, a chronicle disease that leads to death, and also having weird thoughts such as feeling that her body is not her or she is not real. Also, she often feels the sudden urge to check for the wound on her middle finger.

From a psychodynamic perspective, we assess the symptoms of obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD) and obsessive-compulsive personality disorder (OCPD) by observing the excessive maladaptive efforts to cope with potential risks brought with aggressive or sexual instincts and incomprehension and rigid perspective models lacking tolerance of ambiguity. Moreover, in the psychodynamic perspective, the obsessive compulsion phenomena is assessed against the normal childhood development and variations in the development of etiquette as well as the concepts of ordered boundaries/contraventions and hygiene/contaminations determined by the cultural values. This helps in understanding the subjective endurances of OCD and OCPD patients. Although, the typical psychodynamic therapy seems ineffective in curing the fundamental symptoms of compulsions and obsessions, however, this approach helps in understanding the effects of such symptoms and subsequent responses of the patients. Resultantly, we may formulate a therapeutic alliance to facilitate further evidence-based methodologies.

METHODOLOGY

Most of the literature-based researches are of qualitative type as there is no need for static data collection. Similarly, this paper is aimed to interpret the novel in the light of the Psychodynamic Theory of OCD in order to highlight the suffering of the protagonist of the novel from mental illness. Hence, the study is of qualitative type. This study justifies the postulates of the theory by applying it to the novel. Qualitative research attempts to give a detailed description, explanation, and interpretation of a piece of text. Then, in data analysis, collected data from the source is analyzed while keeping in mind the facts. As there are many instances in the novel which are evident for Obsessive Compulsive Disorder of Aza Holmes. Therefore, I will try to find out how much her situation is identical to that mentioned in the postulates of the theory. For doing so, I will be quoting statements from the novel and will discuss them in relation to the theory.

DISCUSSION

The whole essence of this research focuses upon the disease/mental illness of the protagonist; therefore, all the related shreds of evidence are collected from the novel. Obsessive–Compulsive Disorder OCD is a twofold disease. It operates on one level with obsessions and on the other level with the compulsion of carrying out certain activities that are the reaction of obsession. To support the argument, findings extracted from the novel are provided here:

“And then two or five or six hundred minutes pass before you start to wonder, *Wait, did I get all the pus out? Was there pus even or was that only sweat? If it was pus, you might need to drain the wound again.* The spiral tightens, like that, forever.”

(Turtles All The Way Down, 2017: 61)

This extract from the novel is evident in how she is obsessed with changing her band-aid and overthinking about it. In her imagination or illusion, she exaggerates that her wound is getting worse and it will cause giant trouble while in reality, it is a minor cut on her middle finger. These thoughts are inevitable for Aza, and her unconscious overcomes her conscious which she tries her level best to suppress but always fails to do so. As the psychodynamic theory of obsessive compulsive disorder states that people are obsessed with some acts that they find necessary to do.

Moreover, these obsessions pave way for carrying out compulsive behaviors. In the above extract, the writer has measured her time in minutes so that the figure seems big to the reader. Green has used this strategy to make the reader realize the situation of the protagonist. For Aza Homles, even two hours was a huge time to spend without changing her bandage as she was suffering from OCD at a greater level.

Aza was also in conflict with herself at the point where it was hard for her to decide whether there is puss on her wound or it is just her sweat. But as she was too much concerned about her wound and was too afraid of getting some disease from that minor cut, she never takes risk of ignoring it.

“... I felt like a perfectly normal person, who was not cohabitating with a demon that forced me to think thoughts I hated thinking,..... *The medicine has made you complacent, and you forgot to change the Band-Aid this morning.*”

(Turtles All The Way Down, 2017: 153)

In these lines Aza is narrator and she describes her situation, her feelings that how helpless she is against her inner self that forces her to think other way. She feels like she is moving towards betterment as she is not thinking about the things anymore that she does not like thinking about. She thinks that it is because of the medicines that she is taking but soon she is again haunted by her own thoughts. Few minutes prior she was thinking differently that her medicine is bringing betterment in her but soon her thinking patterns change and she consider medicines harmful. She thinks that her pills are a sort of trap that are making her forget about changing he bandage. It shows that how much she is obsessed with changing bandage that if she is somehow forgets to change it, she feels it is some collusion. These are the strongest symptoms of OCD that one can trace in the character of Aza. According to the psychiatrists, it is the most difficult disease to cure as making a connection with the OCD patient is the hardest thing to do. It is because these patients consider therapists as their rivals. As in this case we can see that Aza at the one end feels like she is getting better due to medicines but soon after that her negative thought process make her feel that the medicine is not good but it makes her forget to do things which should be done necessarily or else they cause a great trouble.

“I was pretty sure I had actually changed the Band-Aid right after waking up *And you left the same Band-Aid on for—God—probably thirty-seven hours by now, just letting it fester inside that warm, moist old Band-Aid.*”

(Turtles All The Way Down, 2017: 153)

Now here comes the conflict part which is one of the most prominent trait/symptom of OCD. According to Freud, the mind of the person who suffers from OCD, goes through a phase of conflict between her unconscious sexual or aggressive id impulses and the reality or conscious. In the above reference from the reader realizes that the protagonist is going through such a conflict between her unconscious and conscious. Green has used different font of writing to distinguish between the demands of Aza's conscious and unconscious as if they are the two characters arguing with each other. The conscious self of Aza is making her realize the reality of things and suppressing her negative thoughts that are result of overthinking. However, the dominance of her unconscious impulses is shown by the use of capitalized letters by the writer.

“I glanced down at the Band-Aid. It looked new. *You didn't*. I think I did. *Are you sure?* No, but ... *You know it doesn't have to be*—Please just stop I will change it at the bank—*YOU KNOW I'M RIGHT.*”

(Turtles All The Way Down, 2017: 154)

According to the postulates of the psychodynamic theory of OCD “obsessions and compulsions are signs of unconscious conflict that you might be trying to suppress, resolve, or cope with.” The above passage from the novel confirms the postulate of theory as Aza is trying to suppress her unconscious to behave like a normal human. She tries hard to resolve the attacks of her unconscious over her conscious but is unable to do so. After a huge debate regarding if she has changed her bandage or not, she eventually surrenders before her obsession. Though she knows that this is something awkward and one should not behave like this as it is not a normal behavior. Yet, she is helpless and her id impulses get over her and finally she follows her obsessed thoughts to make herself feel comfortable. This is exactly what Obsessive Compulsive Disorder is that Aza is suffering from.

“I liked making out with so many layers on ... and then you'll get C. diff and boom dead in four days please fucking stop just kiss him **JUST CHECK TO MAKE SURE.**”

(Turtles All The Way Down, 2017: 152-153)

When Aza tried to date Davis Pickett (for whom she has been in love since childhood), she again got stuck by her horrible unconscious thoughts which she could not overcome, and eventually, she left. She kept on saying and fighting the battle with her inner self that there is nothing wrong and

nobody dies just because of kissing other humans but her thoughts took control over her. At that moment there was nothing that can stop her from thinking the about the things that she was obsessed with. She was normal until her id impulses started functioning and soon her unconscious got hold over her conscious and mature thoughts.

Despite all the efforts she took to overcome her thoughts but she failed and eventually oddly left him. This behavior of her confirms the postulate of the theory: “These conflicts arise when an unconscious wish is at odds with socially acceptable behavior”. Her unconscious behavior does not match with the normally accepted behavior in the society which was the source of trouble for her. Kissing, dating and making love is a natural human behavior and all humans have desire for physical love. In contrary, Aza was too afraid from the microbes and getting some disease from the human exposure that she could never understood that desire of her body. The reason for this is her mental illness that does not allow her at any cost to think in a different way.

As she said to herself: “just be fucking normal”, while she was struggling to enjoy the moments with him but the force within him was strong enough to compel her to stop doing so. Her frustration can be felt through her words and the way her conscious was responding to her unconscious.

Whenever human mind has to make a decision, there are two options either accept it or deny it, either do it or do not do it. In this process of decision making, human choose to follow the option that satisfies them of what they logically feel fruitful. In contrast, people suffering from OCD does not make decisions logically or based on real facts. They are slaves at the hands of their unconscious which does not allow them to think logically or do realistic things. Consequently, they follow and act the way they feel comfortable or find themselves satisfied with, completely ignoring the realistic or logical fact even when they know it.

According to the theory, “Compulsions are repetitive behaviors or mental acts that an individual feels he or she must perform”. A few examples from the novel below are being provided to support the argument.

“Could be sweat, of course, but also might be water from the river ... You return to the couch to watch TV, and for a few or many minutes, you feel the shivering jolt of the tension easing, the relief of giving in to the lesser angels of your nature.”

(Turtles All The Way Down, 2017: 60-61)

Aza was not only obsessed with the thoughts of getting *C.diff* or any other fatal microbial disease, but she was also facing the urge to do things in response to her obsession as if they are compulsory. She feels compulsion of changing Band-Aid from her finger within few hours and if she forgets to change it, she gets worried. Her compulsions are so severe that if the thought comes to her mind that she has not changed the Band-Aid, she gets so worried to the extent as if a huge disaster has occurred. This compulsive behavior of Aza is the reaction of her overthinking and the negative thoughts that are always there to haunt her. Her obsessions compel her to think about things which leads her to perform compulsive actions.

In this reference from the text of the novel, Aza is again having a conflict with herself but this time her realistic thoughts are very mild. First she thinks that it could be sweat but then she does not argue with her unconscious and just changes the bandage after washing it with sanitizer. Moreover, her finger burns like hell when she cleans her callus with the sanitizer yet she bears all the physical pain because of the thoughts that she was having. She thinks that if she does keep changing the bandage or cleaning her wound, she is at the risk of getting some severe disease. Therefore, she find it better to bear this pain and remain too concerned about her little wound. Normal people have this thing in their mind that a small wound should be treated with little concern as it is not a matter of life and death. However, for Aza, being a OCD patient, was so difficult to make herself comfortable without paying much attention to a mild cut.

“Ever since I was little, I’ve pressed my right thumbnail into the finger pad of my middle finger... I slipped the Band-Aid off my finger and dug my thumbnail into the callused skin until I felt the crack open.”

(Turtles All The Way Down, 2017: 10)

These lines describe how Aza got this wound on her middle finger and why she does have it from childhood up till now? This reason behind this small cut to remain eternal is that Aza never let it get completely healed. It is because she always keeps the crack closed with a bandage so that it does not get infected. If this is the case, then it should have healed but there is some problem and that is Aza feels that there is already some infection in her callused skin so she reopens the wound. This same case keeps happening and therefore, she has the wound that is never healed fully since

her childhood.

The negativity of her thoughts are the reason for her to keep pinching her finger again and again and then trying to recover it but then again opening it by pinching. This behavior is the reaction of OCD that she suffering from.

Apart from this, her thoughts are not only regarding the fear of getting c.diff or some other disease but her obsession of reading encyclopedia also troubles her thoughts. She frequently reads about the microbes on encyclopedia and then after learning that there are millions of microbes that lives inside the human body, she concludes that she is more microbial inhibited then she is herself. Eventually, she thinks to the extent that she feels like her body is not her own but host to countless microbes living inside her. Being surrounded by her thoughts, she feel compulsion that she must tell herself that she is living real human and her body and thoughts belong to her. However, her unconscious keeps on giving her the impression that according to biologists your body is not yours and that logic compels her to place questions on her existence as a real being. Consequently, the primary reason for pinching her finger is to realize whether she is real or not.

CONCLUSION

The research has been carried out to discuss the mental illness of Aza Holmes, the female protagonist of the novel *“Turtles All The Way Down”* by John Green. In this article, evidences from the novel have been provided to show the sufferings and difficulties faced by Aza Holmes. The paper also discusses the reaction of Aza over her own behavior and it shows that the person suffering from OCD is helpless against his/her own thoughts. The person might seem to be independent in making a decision but there is some underlying force which controls them and they are like chained slaves of their unconscious desires.

The research has also attempted to describe and analyze the type of Aza’s illness that is Obsessive–Compulsive Disorder OCD. By providing evidences from the novel, the research has justified the application of postulates of the Psychodynamic Theory of OCD.

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