Naveen Shodh Sansar (An International Refereed / Peer Review Multidisciplinary Research Journal)
RNI No.- MPHIN/2013/60638, ISSN 2320-8767, E- ISSN 2394-3793, Scientific Journal Impact Factor (SJIF)- 8.054,
April to June 2025, E-Journal, Vol. I, Issue L (50), ISO 9001:2015 - E2024049304 (QMS)

Depression and Anxiety in Contemporary Young-Adult Fiction: A Critical Study

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Abstract: Contemporary young-adult (YA) fiction increasingly explores depression, anxiety, trauma, suicidal ideation, and psychological distress. This paper examines these representations in John Green's Turtles All the Way Down (2017), Jennifer Niven's All the Bright Places (2015), and Ned Vizzini's It's Kind of a Funny Story (2006). Using qualitative close reading and an interdisciplinary framework informed by literary studies, mental-health discourse, disability studies, and narrative medicine, the study focuses on psychological experience, identity, relationships, stigma, treatment, and recovery. It argues that contemporary YA fiction can humanize mental illness by presenting characters as multidimensional individuals rather than reducing them to symptoms. However, some narratives may romanticize suffering by connecting mental illness with romance, exceptional sensitivity, or tragedy. Responsible representation requires psychological complexity, narrative agency, social context, and realistic possibilities for support and recovery.
Keywords: Young-Adult fiction, depression, anxiety, mental health, adolescents, stigma, identity, recovery.

Introduction - Young-adult literature explores important adolescent concerns such as identity, relationships, family, academic pressure, belonging, and future aspirations. Mental health has become an increasingly significant theme within the genre, with depression, anxiety, trauma, obsessive thoughts, and suicidal ideation frequently placed at the centre of narratives.

Literary representation can challenge stigma and encourage empathy, but it can also reproduce stereotypes or romanticize psychological suffering. Wickham (2018) notes that representations of mental illness are shaped by cultural ideas about normality and difference. Sagara Monaghan (2016) similarly emphasizes the need to evaluate mental-health representations critically.

This study examines three Young-Adult novels: Turtles All the Way Down, All the Bright Places, and It's Kind of a Funny Story. Green focuses on anxiety and intrusive thoughts; Niven explores depression, grief, and suicidal ideation; and Vizzini examines depression, academic pressure, psychiatric care, and recovery.

Research Gap: Previous studies have examined mental illness in Young-Adult literature, including stigma, mental-health literacy, clinical representation, and educational value (Wickham, 2018; Sagara Monaghan, 2016; Deakin & Eastman, 2019). Recent scholarship also emphasizes authentic and non-deficit representations (Olan & Richmond, 2023).

However, comparatively less attention has been given to how **literary form and narrative perspective shape representations of depression and anxiety across different YA texts**. This study addresses this gap by examining narrative voice, psychological interiority, characterization, metaphor, relationships, social context, and plot structure rather than attempting to clinically diagnose fictional characters.

Research Hypothesis

H1: Contemporary YA fiction represents depression and anxiety in increasingly complex and individualized ways, challenging stereotypes while sometimes associating psychological suffering with romance, exceptional sensitivity, or tragedy.

Research Objectives: The study aims to:

1. Examine representations of depression and anxiety in selected YA fiction.
2. Explore the relationship between mental health and adolescent identity.
3. Analyse narrative techniques used to represent psychological experience.
4. Examine family, friendship, romance, and social support.
5. Analyse representations of treatment and recovery.
6. Identify ways in which YA fiction challenges or reinforces stigma.
7. Examine the ethical problem of romanticizing mental illness and suicide.

Research Methodology: The study uses a qualitative and interpretive methodology based on close textual analysis. The primary texts are Green's Turtles All the Way Down,

Niven's All the Bright Places, and Vizzini's It's Kind of a Funny Story.

The analysis considers characterization, first-person narration, internal monologue, symbolism, metaphor, imagery, dialogue, setting, and plot structure. The study draws on literary criticism, mental-health discourse, disability studies, trauma studies, and narrative medicine. The research does not clinically diagnose fictional characters. Instead, it examines how the novels construct psychological experiences and meanings related to identity, agency, stigma, relationships, and social context.

Depression and Anxiety as Literary Experiences: Psychological distress is often invisible. Individuals may appear successful or socially active while experiencing anxiety, hopelessness, exhaustion, isolation, or intrusive thoughts. Contemporary YA fiction represents this contrast between outward appearance and inner experience.

Such portrayals challenge the stereotype that mental illness is always visible. Olan and Richmond (2023) argue for representations that acknowledge both difficulties and the ordinary achievements of characters with mental-health conditions.

Anxiety in Turtles All the Way Down: John Green's Turtles All the Way Down presents anxiety through Aza Holmes, whose intrusive thoughts and obsessive fears affect her relationships and daily life.

The novel's psychological interiority allows readers to experience Aza's repetitive thought patterns directly. Importantly, Aza understands that some of her fears are excessive but cannot simply control them through rational thinking.

Aza is not defined solely by anxiety. She is also a student, daughter, friend, and romantic partner. Her relationships provide companionship but do not function as a cure. This multidimensional portrayal challenges deficit-based representations of mental illness.

Depression and Suicide in All the Bright Places: Jennifer Niven's All the Bright Places explores depression, grief, suicidal ideation, and emotional isolation through Violet Markey and Theodore Finch.

Finch appears energetic and humorous despite his psychological difficulties, demonstrating that depression may not always be outwardly visible. Violet's distress is connected to grief following her sister's death and her difficulty imagining a future.

Their romantic relationship provides emotional connection but also raises ethical concerns. The close association between romance and psychological suffering may risk presenting mental illness as part of romantic intensity or emotional exceptionalism. Thus, the novel illustrates the difference between making mental illness visible and representing it responsibly.

Depression and Treatment in It's Kind of a Funny Story: Ned Vizzini's It's Kind of a Funny Story follows Craig Gilner, whose depression is connected partly to academic pressure, perfectionism, and fear of failure.

Craig's experience in a psychiatric facility allows him to step away from competitive educational expectations and reconsider his understanding of achievement and success. The novel presents mental health as connected not only to the individual but also to social and institutional environments.

Humour and ordinary interaction coexist with psychological suffering, preventing Craig from becoming merely a tragic figure and supporting a more complex representation.

Identity, Agency, and Social Support: A major theme across the three novels is the relationship between mental health and identity. The protagonists are not reduced to their psychological conditions. Aza is more than an anxious teenager; Craig is more than a depressed student; and Violet is more than a grieving young woman.

Agency is equally important. Their decisions, relationships, and attempts to understand themselves contribute to their identities.

Family and friendship also influence mental health. Family expectations, academic pressure, grief, communication difficulties, and social relationships can contribute to psychological distress. At the same time, emotional support should not be treated as a replacement for professional treatment.

Stigma and Mental-Health Literacy: Young-Adult fiction can challenge stigma by placing mental-health struggles within ordinary settings such as schools, families, friendships, and communities. This shifts the representation of mental illness from an experience of "otherness" to a lived human experience.

Research suggests that YA literature can support classroom discussions about anxiety and depression and encourage mental-health literacy (Deakin & Eastman, 2019; Shephard &Garrison, 2024). However, literary texts should not be treated as clinical manuals. Their value lies in encouraging understanding, empathy, and discussion.

Romanticization and Ethics: A major ethical concern is the romanticization of psychological suffering. This may occur when depression or anxiety is associated with creativity, emotional depth, romantic intensity, or tragic beauty.

This concern is particularly important in narratives involving suicide. Responsible representation should:

1. give characters narrative agency;
2. avoid reducing them to symptoms;
3. acknowledge psychological and social complexity;
4. avoid presenting romance as a cure;
5. represent treatment without stigma; and
6. provide possibilities beyond psychological crisis.

Findings and Discussion: The study demonstrates that contemporary Young-Adult fiction generally presents depression and anxiety with greater psychological complexity than stereotypical representations.

First, narrative perspective enables readers to experience intrusive thoughts, hopelessness, anxiety, and emotional conflict. Second, psychological distress is connected to social factors such as academic competition, grief, family expectations, relationships, and institutional structures. Third, the protagonists retain identities beyond their mental-health conditions, including friendship, creativity, humour, ambition, and emotional connection.

However, visibility does not automatically ensure responsible representation. Some narratives may associate psychological suffering with romance or tragedy. Therefore, Young-Adult literature requires critical reading rather than automatic celebration.

Conclusion: Depression and anxiety have become significant themes in contemporary Young-Adult fiction. Turtles All the Way Down, All the Bright Places, and It's Kind of a Funny Story demonstrate different approaches to representing psychological distress, including intrusive thoughts, grief, hopelessness, academic pressure, institutional treatment, and recovery.

The analysis shows that mental health is closely connected with identity, relationships, family expectations, social pressures, and institutional environments. Effective representations avoid defining characters solely through their mental-health conditions and provide space for agency, support, and recovery.

At the same time, YA literature must address the ethical risks of romanticization and stereotypical portrayals, particularly in narratives involving suicide. When represented with complexity and contextual awareness, Young-Adult fiction can contribute to mental-health literacy, empathy, and destigmatization.

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