



Research Paper

Mental Illness Depicted In *Turtles All The Way Down*

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ABSTRACT

Mental illness serves as a stigmatizing notion up to this day. With the exact purpose of creating awareness about the battles and scenarios into the lives of mentally ill people, this paper centralizes on describing mental illness from the novel of John Michael Green. Green associates the picture of mental illness drawn from personal experiences and it can be seated to belief that Green's *Turtles All The Way Down* reflects the real story of his life as Green similar to Aza, suffers from severe anxiety and OCD. In general, Green depends on personal experiences for the background of his fiction as the degree of personal exposure in the novel becomes excessive. Through his substantial narrations of mental illness in the novel *Turtles All The Way Down*, this study looks at the depiction of a character suffering from mental illnesses like OCD and anxiety... "One of the main things I wanted to do in the book was to get at how isolating it can be to live with mental illness and also how difficult it can be for the people who are around you because you're so isolated" (Green, Web).

KEYWORDS: anxiety, obsessive-compulsive disorder, mental illness, turtles all the way down

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I. INTRODUCTION

Mental disorders are conditions that afflict someone's mood or health. A broad range of mental illnesses include depression, anxiety, obsessive-compulsive, autism, bipolar, eating disorders, schizophrenia, etc. Green's *Turtles All The Way Down* chronicles the life of Aza Holmes, who suffers from obsessive-compulsive disorder and severe anxiety. "Obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD) is a mental illness in which people have recurring, unwanted thoughts, ideas or sensations (obsessions) that make them feel driven to do something repetitively (compulsions)" (Web). Whereas anxiety is a mental health disorder that causes anxiousness, fear, worry, stress, etc. The present paper will analyze the battles and scenarios into the life of a mentally ill person and hersocial, personal and psychological process from the existing pattern of mental illness.

Mental illness in *Turtles All The Way Down*

Deterioration of mental health due to stress and anxiety is common these days. It not only affects mentally and physically but also interferes a person's ability to do a given task and daily activities. Similarly, the novel opens with Aza Holmes, a lower-class 15-year-old school girl questioning her mere existence initiated by referring to herself as more fictional than real. Considering herself to be an imaginary person in a work of art, Aza seems to be detached from her real self. In the novel, she often questions how humans are engulfed with bacteria inside their body and that make them up as more bacterial than human. She lives with the idea that she is just a body governed with bacteria. This very thought, more than anything, takes her away from her real-self. In the course of the conversation with her friend Mychal Turner, Aza begins to sense a grappling consumption inside her digestive system, she could feel her stomach eating all the bacteria chewing the slime of peanut butter and this, more than anything, sends chills down her spine. Aza is tied to the bacterial thoughts that can potentially harm her body once it undergoes inside.

Anxiety harms Aza in many ways. She notes how her anxiety makes it worse for her to breathe and concentrate. Asher friend Mychal discusses his new art project with different ideas, Aza gets thrown away by unbounded anxiousness during the same time. A very trivial circumstance serves to exemplify this anxiety in her life. Anxiety makes focusing on tasks difficult and often makes Aza seem like her head is in the clouds. It makes living her life almost impossible at times because even the simple act of listening sets her off the track. She finds herself struggling to keep up with the interaction as obsessive thoughts about intestinal germs starts haunting her and make it a big burden by interrupting her social interactions with people. She is fascinated by Mychal's ideas of different art projects and wanted to listen but her uncontrollable thoughts about microbes took over the conversation by multiplying her mental conflict. Although she is keen to listen to conversations, her OCD and anxiety is a constant threat to live a balancing life. It is reportedly stated that people with OCD find it impossible to pass their obsessive thoughts and compulsions, thus resulting in distress. It is too bad because of the character's dilemmas- Aza is going crazy over thoughts about bacteria, her discussions with her friends are interrupted, the relationship with her friends threatened by mental illness- are all very dreadful, not to mention Aza's breathing problems due to her anxiety - the most dreadful which is Aza realizing her destructive compulsive thoughts, and yet having nothing to solve it.

Just as she thinks about striking a conversation with her best friend Daisy, she notices slight discomfort in her stomach "my stomach wouldn't shut up, which was forcing me deep inside a worry that I'd somehow contracted a parasitic infection" (2). In like manner, OCD does not go away in the blink of an eye and it is something that leads her on and on but arrives nowhere; does no good to her. Aza's fear of infection is so over the top that there is no withstanding to this problems, she continually keeps checking her thumbnail by opening the Band-Aid to make sure that her finger is not infected. "Ever since I was little, I've pressed my right thumbnail into the finger pad of my middle finger, and so now there's this weird callus over my fingerprint. After so many years of doing this, I can open up a crack in the skin really easily, so I cover it up with a Band-Aid to try to prevent infection" (3).

Her thoughts, she notes, is not the real Aza but the opposite of what she is. She believes that she is just living inside the mind that produces thoughts that are nowhere close to what she thinks. Besides the breakdown of her relationship with friends and mother, Aza soon finds the same in her romantic relationship with Davis. As she sits beside him wondering how couples hold hands as she had so apparently trampled upon her sweaty hands mixing up and this would be nothing too, like the romance. She points out how she thinks only about bacteria and not her partner, where she contemplates upon the discourse of her compulsive thoughts rather than romantic ones. She further notes "The part where they say, "What are you thinking about?" And they want you to be, like, "I'm thinking about you, darling," but you're actually thinking about how cows literally could not survive if it weren't for the bacteria in their guts, and how that sort of means that cows do not exist as independent life-forms"(26). These monotonous and obsessive thoughts continued all the while, and sometime after, she lists down how she gets anxious about specific parts of a relationship like kissing which could transfer millions of microbes on an average per kiss, and holding hands could twice the hands to sweat profusely. She experiences a pounding heart, sweaty palms, and persistent obsessive thoughts in her mind. The condition begins now to be, though not less miserable as to her way of living, yet much normal to her mind. Her thoughts being directed by a constant single-celled organisms known as bacteria had a lot of problems within which she had nothing to solve. The general effect of what her mind produces is tiresomely repetitive. All possibility of deliverance from this condition seems to be entirely taken from her as she has no notion of anything being called deliverance.

Needless to say, Aza's mental illness did not only sweep away her sense of conscience but also her physical body. We get the first picture when she presses her wounded thumb constantly to remind her existence. She also constantly changes her Band-Aid to avoid any discomfort "then you dig your thumbnail all the way into the crack in the callus until it starts bleeding, and you squeeze the blood out for as long as it comes, and then you blot the wound dry with a tissue. You take a Band-Aid from inside your jeans pocket, where there is never a shortage of them, and you carefully reapply the bandage" (37). What this reveals is that Aza is forced upon by her OCD to act upon illogical thoughts such as opening her Band-Aid and pinching her finger to remind herself that she is real. She could avoid for a while but the real selves would soon assert herself and tear her apart from within.

"Obsessive-compulsive disorder is a complex mental illness where people may find that they are troubled by recurring unwanted thoughts, images or impulses as well as obsessive actions and repetitive rituals. People with OCD are usually aware that their symptoms can be irrational and excessive, but they find the obsessions uncontrollable and the compulsions impossible to resist." (Dr. Blanchard, web). Similarly, we learn in *Turtles All The Way Down* that OCD is a recurrent factor in Aza's life. Her physical and mental state is put into uncomfortable situations where she would open Band-Aid to remind her existence and her mental thoughts would be directed towards bacteria and infections. It has proceeded to debilitate Aza's entire life as she always feels the need to review those thoughts injected by her obsessive-compulsive disorder despite recognizing its irrationality. Such is her mental illness that she is unable to concentrate on anything else than her monotonous thoughts about bacteria and infection. In the cafeteria, when Aza sits down to have a conversation with her

friend, she is taken in consume by her obsessive thoughts and compulsions so much that she remains mentally absent all the while despite being physically present:

I don't know, like, I'll be at the cafeteria and I'll start thinking about how, like, there are all these things living inside of me that eat my food for me, and how I sort of am them, in a way—like, I'm not a human person so much as this disgusting, teeming blob of bacteria, and there's not really any getting myself clean, you know, because the dirtiness goes all the way through me. Like, I can't find the deep down part of me that's pure or unsullied or whatever, the part of me where my soul is supposed to be. Which means that I have maybe, like, no more of a soul than the bacteria do. (52)

Aza proposes to take part in discussions but her OCD stands out in between her discussions, which estimates her impact on the illness. It grows integrally out of her life. "Her thoughts circle and circle in a widening gyre (the Yeats's references spin only slightly out of control), and Green offers page-long streams of consciousness that render the feeling of being trapped in obsessive thoughts" (Jonathan Alexander, Web). Aza is here obsessed with her thoughts about bacteria and infection and with the fact of the time moving on relentlessly and pushing her constantly to a destructive life. The agonized and helplessness match perfectly the anxiety which dominates Aza from the beginning of the novel. The fear and stress of anxiety make Aza's life everyday tasks challenging because it makes her sweat uncontrollably while also disallowing her to pay attention to any conversations.

In literature, mental illness is often portrayed with several stereotypes in a negative light. However, it also draws attention on topics that are usually left untouched on the subject of mental illness. Fyodor Dostoevsky is amazing in his *Crime and Punishment*, he takes us into the mind and behavior of a 23-year-old man Rodion Romanovich Raskolnikov who is infused with extreme guilt after committing a crime, thus leading him to confess and seek redemption at the end of the novel. In terms of maintaining relationships, people with mental disabilities as rightly displayed in literary terms, suffer a great degree in forming strong connections that prevent them from seeking fulfilling relationships. In Jeffrey Eugenides *The Marriage Plot*, Madeleine Hanna, an English major, faces the trials and tribulations of the relationship with her boyfriend Leonard Bankhead, who suffers from manic depression. Overlooking the signs of Leonard's mental illness, she decides to get married to him. As Leonard faces bouts of manic depressive state on their honeymoon and in daily life, he feels sorry for becoming extremely dependent on Madeleine. Soon after, Madeleine is overwhelmed with her husband's illness and she comes across her friend Michelle and gets intimate with him only to move on from Leonard. Either by choice or not, individuals with psychological disorders are innately unable to process healthy relationships. What Aza in effect tries to do is to hold back the invasiveness of her disorder, meanwhile affecting her relationship with friends. Incidentally, what Aza does not notice is that she is now already affected by the illness. The coming of the new thoughts of her OCD can hardly bring greater torment for her than that which already afflicts her at this point. Again the line, "I tried to smile and shake my head at the right times, but I was always a moment behind the rest of them. They laughed because something was funny; I laughed because they had" (58). The passage in this scene expresses the experience of Aza in a kind of extreme uneasiness. It sums up the problems that brought Aza to feel like she could not focus on the conversations around her friends. From being disconnected from the preceding conversations, Aza refers to them continually and is continually referred to by them, "I was thinking about how part of your self can be in a place while at the same time the most important parts are in a different place, a place that can't be accessed via your senses. Like, how I'd driven all the way to school without really being inside the car. I was trying to look at Mychal, trying to hear the clamor of the hallway, but I wasn't there, not really, not deep down." (43). This short scene introduces the element of her absence while being present. Despite involving herself in discussions yet not being able to concentrate in it brings out the terrible aspect of her illness, producing brooding fear about some contingency.

The extremes of intrusive thoughts and anxiety, hatred and pain, shame and helplessness -these are the swings of the pendulum in Aza. Not only has her life been put at risk but so is her relationship with other people. In chapter one, Daisy asks her if she is listening to her conversation and Aza asserts that she is, when she in fact was thinking about the cacophony of her digestive tract. Although Daisy and Aza have known each other since they were very little, Aza seems to ponder "Sometimes I wondered why she liked me, or at least tolerated me. Why any of them did. Even I found myself annoying" (4). The fact that Aza associates herself as a bad friend is enough to drop her insecurity in her friendship with Daisy. For the most part, it has been shown that Aza is not fully able to draw her attention to Daisy due to her intrusive thoughts. The incident of it is seen in chapter eleven "was trying to pay attention to her, but the problem was I wasn't really in the bank. I was inside my head, the torrent of thoughts screaming that I had sealed my fate by not changing the Band-Aid for over a day, that it was too late, and now I could feel the heat and soreness in my fingertip, and you know it's real once you can physically feel it, because the senses can't lie. Or can they? I thought, It's happening, the it too terrifying and vast to name with anything but a pronoun" (80)

People with OCD go through several bouts of unwanted sensations, ideas and thoughts with the compulsion to perform those thoughts. On the other hand, a person without OCD rarely face any such irrational thoughts. People around Aza are unable to interpret the battles that she constantly fights. She is devastated with

the raging emotions of misinterpretation, helplessness and misunderstandings. Her OCD makes her feel trapped by not being able to stop the flood of intrusive thoughts that continually runs over her head. She is devastated by the raging emotions of helplessness, misunderstandings and hopelessness because even her best friend could not understand the crux of her illness. Her relationship with Davis is dealt differently but with the same failure as her other relationships. Aza makes it plain that she does not hate intimacy but the microbial exchange is what scares her the most. As she enjoys herself in the presence of Davis and his warmth feeling, she is intrigued about kissing him but gets interrupted by her OCD "he could have campylobacter he could be a non symptomatic E. coli carrier get that and you'll need antibiotics and then you'll get C. diff and boom dead in four days" (94). However, she reminds herself that normal people kiss and so should she. Finally, she kisses him and knows no little how it will worsen her OCD. After their kiss, she panics about Davis' bacteria and at the same time, she is anxious not to appear too plain. She starts thinking that her tongue will be mixed with Davis's tongue that contains its own micro biomes and once he starts sticking out his tongue, his microbes will remain in her mouth for the entire life. After that incident, she dwells into a seemingly anxious state, filled with regret of kissing. "Why did you even try to kiss him? You should've known. You could've had a normal night, but you chose this. Right now needs to be about Noah, not me. His bacteria are swimming in you. They're on your tongue right now. Even pure alcohol can't kill them all" (113).

These breakdowns, then, are useful in giving us an insight into the psychological decline of Aza. We get the feeling that under the effects of mental illnesses, an individual tends to lose her dignity and a sense of stability. As days of confusion and failure pile up, Aza, eventually goes mad at one point, "Can't kiss anyone, can't drive a car, can't function in the actual sensate populated world. How could I even fantasize about going to some school far away where you pay a fortune to live in dorms full of strangers, with communal bathrooms and cafeterias and no private spaces to be crazy in? I'd be stuck here for college" (140). These frustrations create a volatile mass of unspoken resentment that explodes in a series of confrontations, splitting away any goodness present in her.

In olden times, mental illness has been regarded as a supernatural view of abnormal behavior and the work of evil spirits, demons, gods, or witches who took control of the person. People practiced exorcism which is a practice to cast out demonic spirits through prayer, magic, starvation, noise-making, or having the person ingest horrible tasting drinks. In literature, characters representing mental illness have been forthwith categorized as 'crazy', 'incompetent,' 'disturbed' "dramatic' ,and 'attention-seeker', which associates them with alienation, stigmatization, abuse, discrimination and furthermore pressure. Stigma is defined in a way a person is looked upon for his/her illness rather than what they truly are. For example, they might be labeled 'depressive' rather than a person experiencing depression. Similarly, Aza's mental illness seems to not be understood by people close to her. Her best friend Daisy tells her to get away from her anxiety instead of empathizing with it. Daisy assumes that anxiety is easy to get rid of.

Conflict in Aza's life is of two kinds: outer and inner. Outer conflict occurs between the protagonist and her outer circumstances which is unfavorable or hostile to her. These circumstances include certain mental illnesses that try to thwart away her aspirations and endeavors, into the clash on account of her opposed aims and objects. Inner conflict means the conflict in Aza's own mind. The inner conflict takes place because she finds herself pulled in opposite directions or torn between two alternatives one of which she must choose. In the novel, the protagonist meets her downfall because despite a strong will-power and determined efforts, she proves unequal to the forces (outer and inner) opposing her.

Aza's acquired knowledge about her spiral thoughts cannot give her answers different from those she already knew all her life. Indeed, her plight is that she cannot find anything to do really worthy of removing this aspect that she has obtained. Aza, tightened up by her obsessions and compulsions brings out a significant example of someone who "cannot will what she wills". A lot of things flew through her mind, the thoughts are just there. Nothing she can change about that. She cannot decide which thoughts to focus on even though she has a free will as OCD cannot influence the direction of consciousness.

This realization is critical to the way Aza lives. It is the difference between "I can't but feel this way" and "I feel this way because OCD decided to make me feel this way". The emphasis is on mental illness and that is what this book is about. When one learns about the extreme suffering of an individual with mental illness, it is not hard to understand why Green inserted several scenes of mental illness in the middle of the novel. Yet to judge only from the scenes admitted to be Green's and from the ending that Green decided for the book, it is conceivable that Aza should ever be able to overcome her mental conflict which she mentions in page 144 "And along the way, I realize that I have agency over myself, that my thoughts are—as Dr. Singh liked to say—only thoughts. I realize that my life is a story that I'm telling, and I'm free and empowered and the captain of my consciousness and yeah, no". In the face of adversity Aza is provided with no hope and a sense of belonging in the sociological and psychological aspect. Green vividly captures a person's life with mental illness by dramatically contrasting Aza's severe anxiety and obsessive-compulsive disorder. Consistent with the narrator's contention that "Man can do what he wills, but he cannot will what he wills." the protagonist's plight is emphasized by descriptions of impact from mental disorders. The novel culminates in a reflection on the

permanence of the person's mental illness, which, it is declared to interfere with the remainder of her life concisely.

II. CONCLUSION

Mental illness, like any other illness, is a severe health condition and should be referred with concern and empathy. Neither does it occur by choice and nor does it go away by choice, it reflects an uncertain and destructive wave of health issue. In literature, writers are extending their works on narrating the different sides to mental illness and it is impressively helping to present the battles that a mentally ill person fights on a daily basis. When such narrations are expressed in literary studies, the analysis dissects to a large degree. Thus, through John Green's *Turtles All The Way Down*, we learn that awareness is the principle to generate understanding and empathy towards mentally disabled people. It then helps create a world that does not live by stigma, mistreatment, discrimination and misinterpretation towards people with mental illness.

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