

SPIRALS OF THOUGHT AND STRUCTURES OF CARE: RELATIONAL NEURODIVERGENCE IN JOHN GREEN'S *TURTLES ALL THE WAY DOWN*

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Abstract: John Green's *Turtles All the Way Down* depicts neurodivergence as a relational phenomenon, which is the outcome of the interplay of lived cognitive experience and care structures. The present study gives a psychological study of Aza Holmes, the protagonist of the novel and explores how her obsessive-compulsive disorder carries experiential intensity as a lived and embodied reality rather than just as a clinical condition. The compulsive thought, anxiety, and intrusive cognition of Aza are brought out through the narrative devices like interior monologue, recursive structuring, and the recurrent spiral metaphor. The state of neurodivergence is attained by Aza through experiential consciousness and the interpretive frameworks, which are imposed on her by therapy, friendship and social expectations. Such frameworks aim to offer her a conditional structure but they meet shortcomings in describing her cognitive experience accurately. The present study explores how the relational neurodivergence model in Green's *Turtles All the Way Down* is based on care, ambiguity and narrative mediation. An attempt is taken to assert that mental health of an individual is culturally and relationally created and thus fix the novel in the context of literary and health humanities.

Keywords: Neurodivergence, Obsessive-compulsive Disorder, mental health, self-comprehension and external interpretation

Introduction

John Green's *Turtles All the Way Down* stands apart in the context of literary and health humanities, by offering a phenomenological, first-person perspective on obsessive-compulsive Disorder. The fictional story, centred on Aza Holmes, the protagonist is capable of bridging the gap between clinical texts and real human experience by capturing the exhausting reality of living with a chronic mental illness. The reality of Aza is decided by her intrusive thoughts and compulsions. The Turtle myth, indicated by the title of the novel captures the occurrence of the unending anxious thinking of Aza. The novel can be termed as the Care narrative as it enables the readers to discriminate Aza, the person from the patient within her. The greatness of Green lies in emphasizing that mental illness is a manageable mental condition, rather than a personality flaw. The caregiving service, extended by Aza's family and friends navigate the boundaries.

Turtles All the Way Down is grouped in literary and health humanities, as it highlights the role of the narrative in shaping the perceptions of mental sickness. The novel emphasizes the relationship between the experiences of the individual and the interpretation by the outer world. By depicting the obsessive-compulsive disorder of the protagonist in *Turtles All the Way Down*, John Green challenges the prevalent theories on mental health and well-being in contemporary literature. The purpose of the present study is to substantiate those clinical studies of neurodivergence can be replaced by the examination of mental health in the contexts of relational interaction and narrative representation. This sort of in-depth study enables re-evaluation of neurodivergence as a way of being and a constant product of contact. In fact, neurodivergence is not a fixed or isolated condition, liable to clinical studies.

Theoretical Framework:

Literature portrays neurodivergence as a self-contained psychological disorder, existing only within the individual. Green's fiction differs from the usual track of presentation by picturing it as a complex web of relational, interpretative, and narrative framework. The experiences of Aza Holmes, the protagonist create an unusual phenomenon. Instead of being self-constrained internal cognitive disturbances, they interact with the on-going care systems, such as therapeutic discourse, interpersonal relationships and culturally embedded expectations about behaviour and emotional regulation.

Significance of Study:

Turtles All the Way Down gains momentum by challenging the supremacy of clinical frameworks, which stabilize mental disease through therapeutic intervention and diagnostic classification. In fact, these frameworks prove to be insufficient in conveying the depth and meaning of the daily experiences of Aza. The logical explanations of Aza do not provide her clear-cut notions; instead they increase her complexity. Medical approaches to mental health emphasize classification according to the intensity of neurodivergence. But, *Turtles All the Way Down* deviates from the usual medical approaches to mental health. There is no reduction in the care system, working out well in the narrative. The care system is reframed as relational process, characterized by ambiguity, compromise and emotional complexity.

The Thought Spiral of Aza:

The mental condition of Aza is presented in *Turtles All the Way Down* as an experiential reality of obsessive-compulsive disorder. In fact, her obsessive thought is incorporated in the narrative itself. Spiral is the prominent metaphor, used by Green to capture the recurrent, escalating, and unavoidable intrusive thoughts of Aza. She herself describes her condition of being stuck in a thought spiral. She compares it to being "... stuck inside a prison cell that is exactly the size of you ... realize that you're not in a prison cell. You are the prison cell." (*Turtles* 150) Thus, the spiral metaphor serves as a symbolic motif and a structural principle; it directs the course of the narrative. The main focus of the novel is on Aza's specific anxieties, especially which are related to contamination and bodily vulnerability.

Representation of Obsessive Thought

The rhythms of obsessive thought of Aza could be felt by the readers due to the recursive narrative structure, which goes beyond traditional representation. Her thought process is attributed with circles of repetition; her oft-repeated anxieties appear with escalating intensity; in a way, they defy resolution and closure. The obsessive-compulsive disorder is exhibited through her lived experiences; her thought process could never be ignored; it gains momentum by its persistence and intensity. As the narration proceeds, Aza is seen to be preoccupied with the microorganisms in her body. At one stage, the spiral metaphor weakens the distinction between self and body.

In a way, the obsessive-compulsive disorder is linked to Aza's identity; it is evident from her behavioural patterns and self-analysis. Aza questions the dubious nature of her compulsions and complexities. She explores herself to fix whether she is in real or imaginary space; she reflects: "I might be fictional ... your life is a story told about you, not one that you tell". (*Turtles* 11) At one stage, the conflict arising out of the disorder remains intrinsic to her identity. She starts her peculiar analysis whether she travels in her physical body as a passenger or becomes a slave to her abnormal thoughts. Her booming emotions dominate her attention and interactions with Ms. Holmes, her mother and Daisy and Davis, her friends. While her physical presence is fixed, her mind travels elsewhere. Aza is conscious of the obsession disorder, undergone by her; she criticizes her own self as, I don't decide any of that—outside forces do. I'm a story they're telling. I am circumstances". (*Turtles* 109) Monaghan describes how "the protagonist's/narrator's illness experiences allow the reader to draw parallels between her life and experiences and those represented in the narrative". (Monaghan, 2016, p.39) There is a visible disruption of subjectivity, where the self of Aza is liable to invasion and loss of control.

Relational Dynamics and the Construction of Neurodivergence

The present study reveals the fact that the obsessive-compulsive disorder and anxiety of Aza are constructed not in vacuum but through her relationships. It is proved that mental illness cannot be fully isolated as a neurological deficit; it is shaped and sustained consistently by the way Aza navigates her environment and connects with others. To Aza, her own self is a prison and her obsession disorder is an inescapable whirlpool, shrinking her world. She does not intend to consider her disorder as an inherent part of her identity. Infinite regressions are caused as the result of the thought patterns of Aza. As indicated by the turtle metaphor, her internal dialogue creates an inescapable reality within her. The tension of Aza's mental illness arises out of the constant struggle between her intrusive thoughts and her functional presence in the external, neurotypical world

It is evident that Aza's experience of neurodiversity is inseparable from her social relationships. She feels shame and self-hatred because she views herself as abnormal. Her anxiety increases whenever she thinks of her life, career or relationships. She is being taunted by her inner voice, hinting at her abnormality. "Everyone in this conversation knows you're a freak. (*Turtles* 157) Such deviance from normality brings humiliating personal failure to Aza. It is only her interaction with Karen Singh, her therapist that facilitates her ability to control her negative ideas. She begins to move away from in favour of adopting a more positive self-image. Her aims and standards become more realistic.

Conclusion:

John Green is at his best in highlighting Aza's internal cognitive difficulties and the close connection between her experience of neurodiversity and social relationships. The present study proves that the persistent gap exists between clinical interpretation and embodied cognition of Aza's actual experience. This existing gap indicates the limitations of external attempts in understanding neurodiversity in the fullest sense. As an alternative, relational dynamics gains weightage in the process of comprehending mental health of any individual. It can be elicited that neurodiversity is not a stand-alone condition. It is actually co-constructed through continuous relational engagement processes.

Aza Holmes's experiences substantiate how the frameworks such as medical advice, friendliness and familial care play significant role in interpreting and modulating her mental well-being.

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