

# Addressing Psychosomatic Disorders: A Select Study of Young Adult Novels

Dr.Lakhimai Mili

Associate Professor  
Department of English  
Pondicherry University

**Abstract:** An individual in today's world encounters many problems both physical and psychological. Though certain illnesses can be easily explained and treated either by the medical world or mental health providers, they remain complex and go unexplained because of their ambivalent nature between mind and body. Those indefinable issues are better known as psychosomatic, which are more complex and myriad in their forms when it comes to adolescence. The intricacies of psychosomatic disorders can be broadly understood by our reading of young adult fictions. The present paper highlights how the three different types of psychosomatic disorders found in adolescent people can be addressed and analyzed through young adult novels.

**Keywords:** Young adult novels, psychosomatic disorders, body-mind dispute, asthma narrative, medical conditions, cancer narrative, somatoform disorders, anxiety narrative.

## Introduction

Psychosomatic disorders are psychiatric conditions that are concerned with both physical and psychological causes. In other words, they can be termed as psycho-physiological disorders in which psychological issues could adversely impact the physiological (somatic) functions or vice versa. Their development usually banks on a genetic propensity to mental health problems, and can be induced by stressful events in our life. Psychosomatic illnesses are often challenging and complicated ones for physicians and mental health professionals to deal with and treat (Weiss, 2015).

The word "psychosomatic" comes originally from two "Greek" terms; "psyche" which means "mind", and "soma" which implies body. The concept of psychosomatic disorder entails the ideas that mind and body are very much intertwined with each other and they are inextricable. A psychosomatic illness is therefore a condition which has its basis in the psyche but manifests in body through physical symptoms. It is necessary to remember that these diseases exist as mere imaginary ones in the mind of a sick person. They could prove to be very real and often debilitating physical ailments. The characteristic feature of psychosomatic problems is that they are triggered, to a significant degree, by psychological disturbances, not only because of physical issues (Claybrook, 1967,p.2).Based on these definitional confinements, we can classify psychosomatic disorders into three types- a)Psychological and Physical Conditions , b) Medical Conditions, and c) Somatoform Disorders. The present paper tries to highlight as to how young adult fictions (novels) address these three different forms of psychosomatic disorders with their eponymous characters.

**a) Psychological and physical Conditions:** In this first category of psychosomatic illness, a sick person has both psychological and physical problems. This type is the most challenging and complicated one because it leaves the medical professionals in dilemma in the treatment as they have to deal with both psychological and physical problems, as the one complicates the other. Though anti-depressant medication is administered, treating physical symptoms are also equally important in such cases. Of all illnesses such as Fibromyalgia, Idiopathic environmental intolerance (IEI), Irritable bowel syndrome, Photophobia, Asthma, and Allergies, Asthma can be considered as the most prevalent illness and a well-known to today's world.

The asthmatic narrative in literature gets its distinct precedence from the writings of Marcel Proust. His letters and fictions bear witness to his own unending struggle with asthma. Modern writers some of whom are asthmatic themselves have tried to understand the various ways asthma could impact one's life and identity formation through their own distinct style of writing. With regard to asthmatic narrative in Young adult literature, William Golding's *Lord of the Flies* represents asthmatic teen with its character of Piggy. His struggle with asthma makes him an isolated and docile outsider from rest of the fellow children. Some of the young adult books that deal with asthmatic main characters include Martin Amis' *Rachel Papers* (1973), Sandra Scofield's *Walking Dunes* (1992), Leif Enger's *Peace Like a River* (2001), *Debbie Spring's Breathing Soccer* (2008).

Leif Enger's *Peace Like a River*, is a splendidly reminiscent fiction, narrated by an eleven year old Reuben Land. The author has created a story that could be relished by a wide readership. The book is a top pick for teen-adult discussion group. This beautiful novel borrows its title from a traditional American song lyric. Some of the most significant themes in the books include illness, faith, family and miracles. The book has done a genuine depiction of its narrator's suffering and burden in his dealing with asthma. Reuben, the book's hero, has bronchial asthma from the time of his birth. He experiences symptoms like breathing difficulty, shortness of breath, coughing, wheezing, a sense of tightness of the chest. The idea that asthma is a physical ailment can only be considered as partial truth. The text also shows that Reuben's disease could also be psychogenic. Though his asthma is caused by hypersensitivity to cold weather or substances that he inhales, the narrative also sheds light on Reuben's mental problems that keeps him as a perpetual asthma patient. His asthmatic symptoms are triggered only when he encounters stressful events in his life.

In the text, the narrator encounters his asthma attack, when he undergoes stress and anxiety. It is interesting to know that even in the coldest nights and environment, Reuben survives asthma. The illness does not affect him much when he is mentally happy. Only

when he feels depressed, he begins to evince asthmatic symptoms. For instance, his asthmatic symptoms does not show when he is on his hunting trip to Dosata, where he sustains colder weather and nights. The occurrence of asthma attack takes place only after he comes to know of the clash between his Janitor father, and two teen bullies, Tommy and Finch, his elder brother Davy's classmates. He feels distress at the sight of his house-door being tarred from top to bottom and he starts growing anxious about the adversaries of his family. It is only after this, his asthmatic symptoms emerge out gradually. The difficulty of breathing while asthma attack is explained by the narrator with a metaphor of bellows as follows:

Think of a bellows, such as you use to rouse a fire. Really moves the air, doesn't it? Now imagine a tiny, malignant, wind-carried seed entering that bellows on the inhale and sticking inside. Slowly— slowly!—a sponge begins to grow. You don't even notice, early on; you just have to work a little harder to get a flame. But as time passes you see that the bellows won't close all the way; it's taking shallower gulps. And down inside the sponge keeps growing. You shut your eyes and concentrate, hoping to head this off. Air in. Air out. You imagine the Arctic, its clean snowcap where no pollens lie. You imagine a great white bear trotting on the ice pack under a cold blue sky; he's been trotting that way for days—air in, air out—his bellows a happy machine; look at him cover the ground. You think, I am the bear. It works for a short while, or seems to. The snow creaks, your nostrils steam, you trot, you breathe—but soon you give it up. Despite all stratagems, your bellows is sponge bound. Your breaths are sips, couldn't blow out the candle on a baby's cake (Enger, 2001, p. 20)

Reuben is naturally very sensitive to the situations on many occasions. He could not bear the sight of his father, Jeremiah, being insulted and fired by his school superintendent, Mr. Holgren in front of his entire class. Jeremiah in turn slaps the Mr. Holgren and heals his horrible acne. He could not take the bare reality that his hero-like father is punished by the superintendent and therefore his discourse about his father's miracle of healing the acne could be viewed as a mere part of his defense mechanism. This is also one of the situations that lead to his Reuben's distress and so contract asthma.

The protagonist is regularly obsessed with his asthma which deteriorates his health and his asthma shape his identity and this bears great significance in the storyline. Reuben's role and character in the novel could be better captured in two key words; asthmatic and believer. Though his identity as a believer in religion seems a positive one outwardly, it's what helps the sustenance of his identity as an asthmatic. Since his childhood he has never believed so much in religious miracles as he does in his adolescence. Reuben's religious father has inculcated in his mind that he is an asthmatic by birth. He enjoys recounting the miracle his father performed for saving his life. Reuben did not breathe for 12 minutes, when he was born. Once his father commands the baby to breathe, he starts breathing. This miracle gets deeply entrenched in Reuben's psyche which makes him rely solely on religion for every problems of his life and believe that only miracle can absolve him of his illness. Consequently, his very thought that he has an unending illness renders him to be more fragile and anxious. It is vivid that psychological elements could worsen the physical problems, i.e, in Reuben's case, asthma.

**b) Medical Conditions:** The second form of psychosomatic disorder concerns symptoms of mental conditions which are worsened by serious and deadly medical illness such as Cancer, Aids or Diabetes. This may be not because of the actual diseases themselves but because of the medical diagnosis of such diseases. The diagnosis remains as a life-altering event in an individual's life.

There are a wide range of literary works such as autobiographies and fictions that represent life-threatening diseases in first person point of view. If young adult genre became mainstream part of literature and thus turned a little prestigious, John Green's contribution is inevitable in it. Serious conversation about topics such as teen mortality, suicide, grief, mental illness became current issues of discussion and debate.

Of all his works, his blockbuster, "The Fault in our Stars", gained its prominence in placing young adult genre the reputation it has today. *The Fault in our Stars* is an appealing young adult novel, published in 2012. It is a coming of age account of a teen living with cancer. Besides Cancer, the novel also touches on the subject on love, friendship and parental relationships as well. It is Green's sixth novel and was listed as New York Times bestselling book in 2012.

The young adult protagonist, Hazel Grace Lancaster in *The Fault in our Stars* is a thirteen-year-old thyroid cancer patient. The book details the heroine's fight and survival against the cancer. Thyroid-cancer occurs in thyroid glands which deal with regulating body's metabolism and calcium balance. The gland develops many problems such as benign nodules, autoimmune disorders and goiters. Thyroid cancer in its earlier stage may not have any symptoms but at later stages, a swelling and pain can be felt and even gradual impairment with lungs is also possible.

Hazel, the protagonist, due to her lungs problem is supported with an oxygen tank, which is portable. She is also encouraged to join "Support Group" gatherings to gain confidence in life. Her encounter with another cancer patient teen, a boy Augustus by name, transforms her life. He teaches her to see the optimistic side of life and brings her confidence in life. Both of them fall in love and yearn for living together for long. They support each other in their battle against cancer. Besides Hazel, the book also contains many other supporting characters in its relevance to the illness narrative. Almost all the teen characters whom the heroine encounters are cancer patients.

Hazel's first response to the diagnosis of her cancer is worth mentioning in order to capture her mental disposition at that point of time. On getting informed by the doctors that she is in the stage IV thyrod-cancer, Hazel gets a mental shock. She also associates her disease to her pubescence. She also assumes herself that it is because of the occurrence of her first period, she's going to die. Her shock and loss of hope as well as her unnecessary anxiety over her first menstruation are expressed in the following words- "I told Augustus the broad outline of my miracle diagnosed with stage IV thyroid-cancer (I didn't tell him that the diagnosis came three months after I got my first period. Like Congratulations! You are Woman. Now die). It was, we were told, incurable" (Green, 2012, p. 24).

The female protagonist unlike a normal teenager spends most of her time at home, pondering over her impending death. She seems depressed about her cancer disease and death. The concerned mother wanted her to join a cancer support group. When her mother expresses her wish, Hazel explains that her depression does not result from her cancer but from her fear of death. She also sleeps a

lot which is also another sign of a depressed teen. Hazel's account reveals the whole lot of indications to her depression as expressed in the lines- "I rarely left the house, spent quite a lot of time in bed, read the same book over and over, ate infrequently, and devoted quite a bit of my abundant free time to thinking about death" (Green, 2012, p. 1).

**c) Somatoform:** Psychosomatic disorders in its third dimension are somatoform disorders. They are purely psychological problems expressed through physical symptoms and illness. To put it another way, psychological issues actually triggers the physical symptoms. All psychic problems such as hypochondria, conversion disorders, and illness caused by anxieties and stress. As far as somatoform is concerned, the problems exist only in the patient's mind.

Social anxiety disorder also called social phobia is a type of somatoform which involves a fear of being in social situation. This disorder is common among all age groups. Yet, it is most prevalently found in teenagers, as they suffer constant fear of being judged by others. Young adults' irrational fear of this sort could result from their imaginary audience, a type of egocentric attitude. Teens having chronic social anxiety disorders express symptoms such as extreme fear of new social situations, rapid heartbeat and profuse sweating, stomach upset and pain, avoidance of social situations, and low self-esteem.

Representation of social anxiety disorders in literature is as old as that of adolescent characters in it. Adolescence is inevitably linked to myriad psychological problems. Social anxiety disorders can be considered as one of the defining mental problems of young adulthood to the extent that no classical texts in young adult literary canon go without dealing with the disorder. Some of the classic works which mentioned and depicted social anxiety disorder include Judy Blume's *Then Again, May Be I Won't* (1971), Stephen Chbosky's *The Perks of Being a Wallflower*(1999), and John Green's *Turtles All the Way Down*(2017).

Judy Blume's *Then Again, May be I Won't* is truthful in its addressing the issue of social anxiety disorder in teenagers. In this novel, the adolescent character, Tony undergoes social anxiety disorder along with his adolescent transformation. The novel makes a splendid projection of three key changes of adolescence that the protagonist experiences- physical, psychological and socio-emotional. The very title of the book hints at adolescence's journey as a turbulent one, as Tony does not want to have this phase again in his lifetime.

As the book opens, Tony's narrative reveals that everything in his life had been calm and fine until he steps into teen years. This is an implication of the fact that he had not experienced any drastic changes in his body and avalanche of serious issues until adolescence. When he grows to be a twelve-year-old boy, he becomes aware of the pubertal changes in his body. He is sexually active and develops an infatuation with his friend, Joel's elder sister, Lisa, who is his neighbor. He is interested in peeping into Lisa's bedroom from his window side, as their windows were side by side. Then Tony begins to have an erection and wet dreams. He is terrified by these changes that happen in his body. At first, he could not explain this physical phenomenon. He also feels sick of his wet dreams and immediately wants to visit his family physician, Dr. Holland, thinking that all of a sudden something went wrong in his body. He says, "I woke up suddenly. It was morning. I felt wet and my pajamas were sticky. Oh God! There is something wrong with me. Really wrong. Dr. Holland doesn't know what he's talking about! I am so sick. This proves it" (Blume, 54). He immediately gets a stomach ache which is also a sign of his social anxiety disorder. Tony takes his raincoat wherever he goes in order to hide his situation as he thinks that it may occur in public space.

As he had already known of wet dreams from his earlier discussion with his school peers, he could recognize it. Yet, Tony feels extremely embarrassed and depressed of needless anxiety. His fear comes from his fancy that his family members would find out his wet dream and the dirtied bed sheet and pajamas. He recounts it as follows: "Will Maxine knows? I suppose I could change my sheet ... but that would look worse, wouldn't it? Then she might think I wet my bed like a little kid. No ... leave the sheet on and check it first thing after school to make sure nothing shows up" (Blume, 1971, p.55).

All these leads to Tony could not being able to concentrate on his day today activity. He does not focus on the lesson when the teacher teaches it. He is scolded by the class teacher for not paying attention. He is always pondering as to what his family members would think of him. He presupposes that his family would look down on him. This is where his imaginary audience leads to his much depressed self in his endless series of negative feelings set forth with endless presupposed imagination. He supposes of his mother who would say "I don't buy the best sheets for you to mess up, Anthony!"(Blume, 1971, p.55). Then he imagines that his brother Ralph would say, "If you hadn't been thinking about that girl this never would have happened." He also presumes that his father, "I expected great things from you, Tony ... and this are what I get!" (Blume, 1971, p.55). After reaching home from school, as he predicted, his parents had discovered his secret. But much to the contrary of his whims and fancies, they did not react or response it a much serious as he had imagined. They handle it very genuinely. Thus the book beautifully depicts the mental disorder of its protagonist and the possible causes and symptoms he undergoes.

## Conclusion

Psychosomatic Disorders involve both physical and mental problems and their representation in young adult texts remains as an important platform for the discussion of mind-body dispute with regard to certain complex illnesses and disorders. Emotional turmoil pertaining adolescence could be reasoned for a teenager's vulnerability to psychosomatic disorder. Young adult readers can attain a greater knowledge about their own physical and mental problems by reading illness narratives which would enlighten them with its medical discourse and awareness. Literature plays an important role in influencing the life of the society in many ways. And novels as genre can have positive impact on the readers in sensitizing and addressing the issue of psychosomatic disorders.

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