



Psychic Struggles and Identity Formation: A Study of Student Mental Health in Contemporary Narratives

Dr. Sheeba Parveen¹, Dr. Ansar Ahmad²

¹Assistant Professor, Department of English, R.B.D Mahila Mahavidyalaya, Bijnor, UP, India

²Assistant Professor, Department of Teacher Training & NFE (IASE), Faculty of Education, Jamia Millia Islamia, Delhi, India

Received: 29 Mar 2026; Received in revised form: 25 Apr 2026; Accepted: 27 Apr 2026; Available online: 03 May 2026

©2026 The Author(s). Published by Infogain Publication. This is an open-access article under the CC BY license

(<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

Abstract— Literature has always been a medium of social exploration and articulation and through literary narratives such experiences and issues related to the psychology and mental health of students are explored and articulated. In contemporary time period students face issues such as academic competition, social expectations, pressure of making successful future, social comparison, identity conflict and anxiety related issues. Therefore students' mental health becomes very essential and significant concern in contemporary time period. This paper examines students' psychological and emotional vulnerability, anxiety disorder and identity conflict in selected contemporary literary narratives and also reflects upon contemporary youth culture. This study argues that when students face pressure of social expectations that demand success and conformity, they go through anxiety, identity conflict and psychological disorder. Sylvia Plath's novel 'The Bell Jar' (1963) and John Green's 'Turtles All The Way Down' (2017) have been taken for this study. Both these literary narratives deal with the inner psychological conflict and anxiety disorder faced by the young protagonists of the novels. This paper articulates on the topic from the theoretical perspective of cultural and identity theory, particularly theory of Identity given by Erik Erikson and the concept of discourse developed by Michel Foucault. Through the characters of the protagonists, the author has tried to articulate on the negotiation of social expectations and the sense of self and identity. There is portrayal of stigma surrounding mental health. This paper depicts how literature plays a vital role in promoting empathy and awareness about psychological problems faced by students and emphasize upon the possibility of recovery and healing from mental health struggles. This paper also offers symbolic representation of isolation and depression and reflects upon conflict and anxiety disorder, created by too many life expectations and possibilities in student life.



Keywords— Mental health, identity conflict, contemporary literature, social and cultural expectations, anxiety disorder, contemporary youth culture.

Students mental health issues have become growing concern of today's time period. Literary narratives offer realistic presentation of the struggles that young protagonists have to face and reflect upon questions related to their identity, belongingness and purpose of life. According to Raymond Williams, "literature offers deeper insights into the emotional structure of society and remains connected to social experiences". (Williams 1958) While research provides data about the psychological and mental health issues of students, literature has become a very

significant medium of making readers feel the emotional and psychological experiences of students and develop better understanding of psychological complexities, faced by students in everyday life. These literary narratives negotiate cultural and social pressure and psychological and emotional vulnerability among students. There are many factors that contribute to the problem such as: academic competition, societal pressure, social comparison and family expectations. As a result students go through emotional vulnerability and anxiety. This study explores

students' psychological and emotional issues and experiences in Sylvia Plath's novel *'The Bell Jar'* and John Green's novel *'Turtles All The Way Down'*. Both these novels navigate issues related to student psychological and anxiety related disorder, caused by social and cultural pressures and expectations. It becomes essential to analyse these literary narratives from theoretical perspective for the better understanding of students' psychology. The famous cultural theorist Michel Foucault developed the idea of how normal behaviour and mental health norms are constructed by the society. According to Foucault: "Social institutions such as medical systems and schools play a vital role in giving shape to the roadmap of how psychological experiences are comprehended and interpreted". (Foucault 1978) In many cases all those students who go through anxiety and psychological disorders feel that their behaviour or purpose of life does not align with the prevalent normal cultural expectations of success and stability. The theory of psychological development given by Erik Erikson proposes the idea that early childhood and adolescence are critical stages of life when individuals try to establish a consistent and coherent sense of identity. Erikson has depicted this stage as "identity and role confusion". At this stage young individuals face the situation where they have to explore future possibilities and at the same time they have to define their social roles and personal values. (Erikson 1968) students feel pressurised by social comparison and cultural expectations as the society and educational institutions emphasise upon success, productivity and achievements which lead to anxiety and depression among students who fear future uncertainty and failure.

Literature has become a very significant medium of providing space to examine and criticize social expectations and pressures. By representing young individuals emotional experiences, literature poses challenges to the stigmatizing attitudes toward mental illness and motivates readers to reflect on those cultural conditions and different aspects that contribute to psychological distress.

The Bell jar by Sylvia Plath presents one of the most influential literary portrayals of identity crisis and mental illness among young women. This novel follows Esther Greenwood who is a highly talented college student and wins an internship at a prestigious magazine of New York City. Though from the outside, Esther Greenwood appears to be very promising and successful but internally she struggles with feelings of confusion, depression and emptiness. The metaphor of the "bell jar" is one of the most significant symbols in the novel. Esther depicts her mental condition as if she has been trapped inside a glass container that separates her from the outside world around her. She explains that life under the bell jar makes everything very

suffocating and distorted. Through this powerful metaphor of *the bell jar*, isolated nature of depression has been symbolised.

Esther Greenwood goes through psychological distress and this kind of distress is the result of all those expectations that are placed upon a young women in the 1950s. Although Esther is gifted with academic talent but her intellectual talent and ambitions are suppressed by the social expectations of marriage and domestic life. The society does not expect from her to be a brilliant academic and intellectual personality but gives priority to domestic sphere in the life of a young women in 1950s. This situation leads to the conflict of identity crisis. Esther's uncertain situation and conflict has been symbolized in the novel through the imagery of a fig tree. She connects her condition with the fig tree and imagines that different figs suggest different paths of life such as to be a wife, a mother, a professor or a poet. In this way the fig tree in the novel symbolises the uncertainty and identity conflict of a women's life. The misery of Esther's life is that if she chooses one path, she will have to lose another one. She faces dilemma of uncertainty and indecision. The theme of anxiety and conflict, created by too many life expectations and possibilities, has been introduced through this moment in the life of the protagonist. This situation of conflict and uncertainty represents the uncertainty in the lives of so many students who are pressurized by too many expectations and possibilities and which path to choose that will determine their entire life and future. The novel also gives portrayal of stigma that surrounds mental illness. Esther has to undergo psychiatric treatment for her mental health problems and this kind of treatment appears to be very frightening and stressful initially. The novel highlights society's limited comprehension of mental health issues and provides a ray of hope about the possibility of recovery and healing. Through the experiences of the protagonist, the author has tried to suggest that by realisation and acceptance of mental health issues, one can cope with the psychological and anxiety related disorders. Esther recognises and accepts her problem and starts a gradual process of recovery and healing.

'Turtles All The Way Down' is another novel that attempts to highlight student anxiety and distress. This theme finds depiction in the novel from contemporary point of view. In this way, while the bell jar presents the conflict and social issues of the mid 20th century, *'Turtles All The Way Down'* focuses on providing contemporary depiction of students' psyche and anxiety issues. This novel is about Aza Holmes, a 16 years old student who faces severe anxiety issues and obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD). Unlike many other traditional literary narratives of mental illness, this novel presents a detailed portrayal of Aza's internal thought

processes. Her mind often remains dominated by many intrusive thoughts about illness and germs. All such thoughts create a constant cycle of anxiety and fear that she always struggles to control. For example, Aza remains repeatedly worried about the thoughts that some harmful bacteria are present in her body. This fear and anxiety leads her to perform impulsive behaviours such as reopening a wound on her finger and cleaning it repeatedly. All these actions show how anxiety can manifest itself psychologically as well as physically.

The novel also explores how everyday experiences such as romantic relationships and friendships are affected by mental health. Aza's anxiety and fear make it very difficult for her to feel comfortable in such a social scenario. Many a times she has to face the fear that her mental health issues prevent her from making genuine relationship with others. However, the novel is also successful in portraying supportive relationships that help Aza cope with her fear and anxiety. Aza and Daisy are friends and this kind of friendship symbolises the importance of empathy and understanding in life. Emotional support is provided to Aza through the loyalty and patience, showed by Daisy in their relationship. Aza feels supported and empowered to navigate all her fears. The impact of contemporary youth culture has also been discussed in the novel. The experiences of the characters in the novel are shaped by social media, digital communication and academic expectations. Through the story of Aza, the novel emphasizes that anxiety is not merely the name of imperfection but a complex psychological problem that demands support and consideration.

Mental health struggles and youth anxiety found one of the most nuanced contemporary literary representations in *Turtles All the Way Down*. The novel revolves around the life of Aza Holmes who is a sixteen-year-old high school student and suffers from severe anxiety and obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD). Through Aza's first-person narration, the novel makes readers understand how anxiety and intrusive thoughts form her perspective about herself and the world that surrounds her.

Aza's anxiety finds expression through her recurring obsessive thoughts about illness and bacteria. She suffers from a constant fear that many harmful microbe exist inside her body. This fear overwhelms her so much that in order to disinfect a small wound on her finger, she repeatedly reopens it. This impulsive behaviour illustrates upon how anxiety leads to some physical actions that relieve psychological distress for a short-time period but eventually reinforces and promotes the cycle of fear.

The metaphor of "spiral thought" is used in the novel to describe Aza's mental condition. Aza feels herself trapped

in a continuous loop of anxious thoughts that is not in her control. She gives expression to her experience by saying:

"My thoughts were like a spiral going deeper and deeper, and I couldn't stop it." (Green, 2017)

Through this metaphor of spiraling thoughts the overpowering nature of anxiety disorders has been represented, where individuals get trapped within the thoughts of their own minds.

Another important aspect of Aza's anxiety disorder is her continuous struggle with self-identity. Because her mental life is dominated by her intrusive thoughts, she begins to introspect whether she truly has any power or control over her own identity. At one point she reflects:

"I was beginning to learn that your life is a story told about you, not one that you tell." (Green, 2017)

This statement presents the central theme of the novel: the tension between psychological constraint and personal agency. Aza realises that her thoughts control her identity .

The novel also investigates how friendships and social relationships get effected by anxiety. Daisy Ramirez, who is closest friend of Aza, plays a vital role in the narrative. Daisy's humorous , supportive and energetic personality provides emotional balance to Aza's too much anxious and introspective personality. However, through their friendship the challenges of living with mental health issues are also revealed. At many times Daisy gets upset as she feels that Aza's fear and anxiety makes her unable to fully participate in their friendship. Despite all such tensions, Daisy remains very supportive, demonstrating the significance of companionship and empathy in coping with the struggles related to mental health.

Another character in the novel is Davis picket. He is the son of a billionaire but his father disappears mysteriously. Relationship between Aza and Davis forms another narrative thread in the story. Both Aza and Davis share in common, psychological and mental health struggles as both passes through inner conflict and loneliness. It becomes very difficult for Aza to have romantic intimacy with anyone as she remains all the time obsessed with the thought of germs inside her body and it does not allow her to make physical intimate relationship. In this way it is illustrated in the novel that mental health struggles complicate everyday aspects of life such as: friendship, love and school life. Though the novel has given expression to modern youth culture, anxiety disorder and mental health issues, it has successfully navigated the issues related to contemporary youth culture and how it is shaped by social media, digital communication and pressure upon youth to achieve success but at the same time it gives a very optimistic message in a positive tone. In the novel Aza

realises that mental illness can be managed if not completely disappear. It can be managed with the help of understanding and supportive environment as she utters:

“Your now is not your forever.” (Green, 2017)

she gives the message that all emotional struggles are short lived and healing and recovery is possible. Thus the novel *Turtles All The Way Down* offers an optimistic view about anxiety disorder as a part of modern life not as an illness and promotes feeling of empathy for those individuals who goes through anxiety or psychological disorder.

The Bell Jar and *Turtles All the Way Down* illustrate a strong representation of anxiety and identity crisis in young individuals. Despite the fact that the novels were written before five decades, they offer shocking similarities in terms of emotional conflicts that young individuals have to resolve, in accordance with social norms, academic demands, and self identity. Experience of psychological isolation is one of the most important parallel in the two novels. In *the Bell Jar*, Esther Greenwood experiences alienation with the world surrounding her. Though she has academic achievements in her name and a bright future, she feels loneliness and anxiety. She has the feeling of alienation and isolation which does not allow her to find a meaning in the opportunities that she has. The isolation is well illustrated in the metaphor of the "bell jar" and there is a very strong indication that Esther is imprisoned in her own mind.

Furthermore, in *Turtles All the Way Down*, Aza Holmes feels psychological isolation due to her intrusive thoughts and anxiety disorder. Although she has supportive friends and family members, she tends to believe that nobody can really know her intense mental suffering. She defines her anxiety as a spiral of uncontrollable thoughts, which explains how mental illness can become an obstacle between the world and the mental sphere. Another notable parallel between the novels is the identity forming contest. The two protagonists are trying to establish themselves while they face contradictory expectations. Esther is trapped between her intellectual desires and the norms of society that requires women's priority to marriage and domestic life. The production of this conflict is a severe identity crisis, which is represented by the metaphor of a fig tree where Esther realizes all the possible futures but feels unable to commit to any of them.

Aza Holmes faces equally complicated but a kind of different identity crises. As her mental life is being dominated by her obsessive thought, she starts to wonder whether her identity is really her own or not. She is afraid that her illness showcases her existence, and she struggles to determine herself and her true self and the intrusive thinking that her anxiety disorder generates. Although there

are some similarities, yet the novels also portray some significant differences that show how social attitudes to mental health change. In *The Bell Jar* psychological distress, mental illness within a social background can be clearly seen. Esther confront medical interventions that seem detached and scary, which can be attributed to the lack of knowledge about mental health in the middle of the twentieth century. *Turtles All the Way Down*, on the contrary, introduces a more contemporary point of view on mental health. After proper therapy and medication of Aza, her situation is disclosed among her friends and family. Despite the stigma and lack of understanding she faces, the society that can be seen in the novel is just starting to acknowledge the significance of mental health awareness. The other disparity is in the tones of the narratives. In her novel, Plath tends to echo away a feeling of despair and existential insecurity, highlighting the repressive social systems that add to the mental health problems of Esther. Though the novel by Green still believes in the continuation of anxiety, the picture is more optimistic with aspects of resilience, friendship, and emotional turmoil.

Both *The Bell Jar* and *Turtles All the Way Down* demonstrate the importance of literature and its role in creating empathy and mental health awareness. These stories enable the reader to get a glimpse of the emotional facts of anxiety and depression, by showing the inner world of their protagonists. Arthur Frank believes that ‘narratives of illness enable individuals to transform personal suffering into meaningful stories that can be shared with others’ (Frank 1995). In this regard, literature plays a significant role in breaking the silence of mental health struggles. The novels also break social stereotypes of mental illness. They do not showcase anxiety as a state of weakness, contrary to what most people would do, but rather, as a human experience, influenced by social pressures and personal conditions.

Additionally, literature stimulates the readers to demonstrate the institutional arrangements that facilitate student anxiety. The competition and achievement aspects of the education system may result in a higher psychological strain on students. The emotional impacts of such pressures of literary narratives challenge the readers to rethink about the values and expectations that define the contemporary society.

The themes covered in these literary works are closely related to the present debate on student well-being. Studies have proved that most of the students live anxious lives due to stress about their career, future, social expectations and social comparison also troubles them. Therefore it has been realised by many universities and educational institutions that mental health support services should be provided to

students and initiative have been taken in this direction. Through some initiative such as peer support programs, counselling and awareness campaigns, psychological support can be provided to students. Literature highlights and discusses the mental health issues of students to carve out new ways of social improvement and better understanding of the issues faced by students. When the readers read the experiences of the characters in literary narratives about mental health issues, they develop a better understanding of such issues and psychological problems. In this way, literary narratives promote social understanding of psychological issues. These literary narratives do not just perform the task of being a medium of giving artistic expression but the presentation of student psychological issues in contemporary literature contributes to the development of better understanding of the emotional difficulties and social pressures, faced by the students. 'Turtles All The Way Down' and 'The Bell Jar' have proved powerful works of contemporary literature as both reflect upon burning issues of the time such as identity crisis, anxiety disorder and mental vulnerability. It has been indicated through these works that cultural expectations and the setup of institutions can be held responsible for promoting mental health struggles among students. By narrating the inner conflict that is experienced by the protagonist and the identity conflict that the protagonist has to undergo, these literary narratives promote empathy and compassion for psychological distress. Literature plays a very vital role in making readers' comprehension better about the issues related to anxiety, identity conflict and other psychological issues in contemporary society.

REFERENCES

- [1] Baig, Mahrukh. Sylvia Plath's The Bell Jar as A Psychological Space, Quest Journal, 2014.
- [2] Boyer, M. (2004). The Disabled Female Body as a Metaphor for Language in Sylvia Plath's The Bell Jar. Women's Studies, 33, 199 - 223.
- [3] Chandran, Navya. A Psychoanalytical study of Sylvia Plath's The Bell Jar, Iss, International, 2016, Page n. 411-414
- [4] Erikson, Erik H. Identity: Youth and Crisis. Norton, 1968.
- [5] Foucault, Michel. The History of Sexuality. Vintage Books, 1978.
- [6] Frank, Arthur. The Wounded Storyteller. University of Chicago Press, 1995.
- [7] Green, John. Turtles All the Way Down. Dutton Books, 2017.
- [8] Hunt, Justin, and Daniel Eisenberg. "Mental Health Problems and Help-Seeking Behavior among College Students." Journal of Adolescent Health, 2010.
- [9] Plath, Sylvia. The Bell Jar. Harper & Row, 1963.
- [10] Williams, Raymond. Culture and Society. Columbia University Press, 1958.