

Reciprocal Connectedness as a Protective Factor Against Suicide Ideation: A Study of Relational Healing in Contemporary Young Adult Fiction

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Abstract

Adolescent suicide ideation has emerged as a serious mental health concern and is increasingly represented in contemporary Young Adult fiction. Drawing on Thomas Joiner's Interpersonal Theory of Suicide, this paper examines how meaningful interpersonal relationships help young characters cope with loneliness, emotional distress, and self-destructive thoughts. Through the analysis of selected novels, the study argues that reciprocal connectedness fosters healing by encouraging emotional support, empathy, and a sense of belongingness. Rather than focusing solely on despair, the paper highlights the role of human connection in promoting resilience and recovery. The findings suggest that supportive relationships can act as a protective factor against suicide ideation by helping individuals overcome isolation and reconnect with others. The study concludes that reciprocal connectedness offers a useful framework for understanding healing and recovery in contemporary Young Adult fiction.

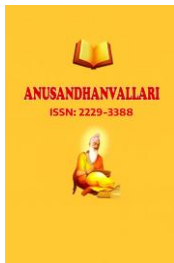
Keywords: Reciprocal Connectedness; Suicide Ideation; Relational Healing; Young Adult Fiction; Thomas Joiner; Belongingness.

1. Introduction

In the 21st century, mental health has become one of the most affecting and worrisome issues that adolescents are facing all over the world. Among the various psychological challenges that the youngsters are facing in their day-to-day life, suicide ideation remains one of the most serious issues that directly influences and affects their emotional well-being, social relationships, and personal development.

In human life, adolescence is often marked as a crucial period when a person is trying to form their identity and find their place and acceptance within society. And this is the period where they feel more confused and emotionally vulnerable to everything around them. Feelings such as loneliness, isolation, and alienation have a greater impact on adolescence, and if they remain unaddressed in the starting stage, they may contribute to self-destructive ideas and behaviors in the future. Ultimately, understanding the factors that help adolescents cope with the psychological distress that they are facing in their lives becomes an important area of academic inquiry.

Contemporary Young Adult fiction increasingly focuses on issues like mental health, depression, anxiety, self-harm, and suicidal thoughts. Unlike earlier works that treated these topics as secondary, today's novels provide detailed portrayals of the emotional and psychological struggles adolescents face. These stories not only show



mental distress but also examine the potential for healing, resilience, and recovery. As a result, young adult fiction offers an important space to explore adolescent mental health and the impact of supportive relationships in overcoming psychological challenges.

Thomas Joiner's Interpersonal Theory of Suicide is a crucial foundation for comprehending suicidal ideas. According to Joiner, suicidal thoughts are greatly influenced by feelings of alienation and burdensomeness. People who feel socially disconnected and believe they are a burden to others are more likely to face emotional distress and self-destructive behaviors. While the theory identifies the factors that lead to suicidal thoughts, it also emphasizes the need for meaningful human connections to create a sense of belonging and emotional support.

The current study looks at reciprocal connectedness as a protective factor against suicidal thoughts. Reciprocal connectedness means the mutual exchange of care, empathy, understanding, and emotional support between people. These relationships help adolescents feel valued, accepted, and emotionally secure. This, in turn, reduces feelings of loneliness, hopelessness, and isolation. By focusing on mutual support instead of individual suffering, reciprocal connectedness provides a helpful way to understand relational healing and recovery.

This paper examines reciprocal connectedness in Jasmine Warga's *My Heart and Other Black Holes*, Jennifer Niven's *All the Bright Places*, and John Green's *Turtles All the Way Down*. These books explore the importance of friendship, companionship, and emotional support in the lives of teenage protagonists who are dealing with psychological difficulties, emotional suffering, and loneliness. In this way, the paper contributes to current conversations about mental health topics in literature and highlights the significance of relational healing in contemporary Young Adult fiction.

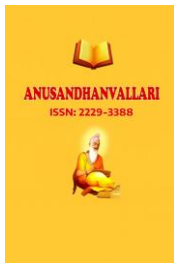
2. Objective

The goal of this study is to analyze how suicidal thoughts are portrayed in a few modern young adult novels using Thomas Joiner's Interpersonal Theory of Suicide. It aims to investigate how adolescent characters' emotions of loneliness and emotional discomfort are lessened by reciprocal connectedness. Additionally, the study explores how interpersonal relationships support recovery, resilience, and relational healing, ultimately demonstrating that reciprocal connectedness serves as a major protective factor against suicidal ideation.

3. Literature Review

The increasing representation of mental health concerns in contemporary Young Adult (YA) fiction has attracted significant scholarly attention in recent years. Researchers have examined how YA literature portrays depression, anxiety, trauma, self-harm, and suicide ideation, arguing that such narratives provide important insights into adolescent psychological experiences. Studies in this area emphasize that YA fiction not only reflects the emotional struggles of young people but also serves as a medium through which issues of identity, belonging, and resilience are explored. Opperman et al. (2015) examined adolescents at elevated suicide risk and found that low family connectedness combined with perceived burdensomeness significantly predicted suicide ideation.

A substantial body of research on suicide ideation has been informed by psychological and sociological theories. Thomas Joiner's Interpersonal Theory of Suicide has emerged as one of the most influential frameworks for understanding suicidal thoughts and behaviours. The theory identifies thwarted belongingness and perceived burdensomeness as key interpersonal conditions that contribute to suicide ideation. Recent studies employing Joiner's framework have primarily focused on identifying risk factors, patterns of social disconnection, and the



psychological circumstances that intensify suicidal vulnerability. Research based on the theory continues to highlight the centrality of belongingness in understanding adolescent mental health. Expanding upon Joiner's work, Van Orden et al. (2010) argue that suicide ideation emerges when individuals simultaneously experience thwarted belongingness and perceived burdensomeness. The authors emphasize that a lack of meaningful social connections increases psychological vulnerability and contributes to suicidal desire.

Research on Jennifer Niven's *All the Bright Places* has largely examined suicide, social integration, bullying, grief, and adolescent psychological needs. Existing studies frequently analyse Theodore Finch's emotional struggles and the significance of social support systems in addressing mental distress. Simamora and Hasibuan (2023) examine the themes of loss and depression in Jennifer Niven's *All the Bright Places*, focusing on the psychological struggles experienced by Violet Markey and Theodore Finch. The authors argue that Violet's grief following her sister's death and Finch's depression resulting from parental neglect, family dysfunction, and bullying significantly influence their emotional well-being.

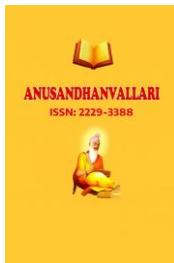
Similarly, critical discussions of John Green's *Turtles All the Way Down* have focused on anxiety, obsessive thought patterns, mental illness, and the challenges of maintaining interpersonal relationships while experiencing psychological distress. Scholars have particularly emphasized the novel's representation of anxiety and emotional vulnerability. Wihlborg (2024) examines the novel through the concepts of narrative empathy and medical humanities, arguing that Green employs metaphors and allegories to portray intrusive thoughts and promote understanding of OCD among readers.

Research on Jasmine Warga's *My Heart and Other Black Holes* predominantly addresses adolescent suicide ideation, depression, alienation, and the emotional journeys of the protagonists as they navigate feelings of hopelessness and social isolation. Fitri, Widisanti, and Taufik (2022) examine the portrayal of depression in Jasmine Warga's *My Heart and Other Black Holes* through the lens of literary psychology. The study identifies Aysel as experiencing major depression characterized by psychological, emotional, social, and motivational symptoms, which eventually lead to an obsession with suicide. The researchers further argue that Aysel's recovery begins through emotional openness, interpersonal understanding, and the support she receives from Roman and her family.

Although existing scholarship has contributed significantly to the understanding of suicide ideation and mental health narratives in YA fiction, most studies concentrate on the causes, symptoms, and consequences of psychological distress. Comparatively little attention has been paid to the role of reciprocal connectedness as a mechanism of healing and recovery. Furthermore, the selected novels are often studied individually, with limited comparative analysis of how interpersonal relationships function as protective factors against suicide ideation. Therefore, the present study addresses this gap by examining reciprocal connectedness as a form of relational healing in Jasmine Warga's *My Heart and Other Black Holes*, Jennifer Niven's *All the Bright Places*, and John Green's *Turtles All the Way Down*. By shifting the focus from suicidal vulnerability to recovery, resilience, and mutual emotional support, the study seeks to extend current discussions on mental health in contemporary Young Adult fiction.

4. Methodology

The present study follows a qualitative research design and employs close textual reading to examine the portrayal of adolescent psychological experiences in contemporary Young Adult fiction. Guided by Thomas Joiner's Interpersonal Theory of Suicide, the analysis focuses on the emotional struggles, feelings of alienation, and



interpersonal challenges encountered by the protagonists. The study further explores the significance of companionship, empathy, and mutual understanding in shaping their responses to adversity. Through a comparative examination of the selected narratives, the research investigates how interpersonal bonds facilitate personal growth, emotional well-being, and the negotiation of psychological vulnerability.

5. Discussion

Thwarted Belongingness and Emotional Isolation

Thomas Joiner's Interpersonal Theory of Suicide identifies thwarted belongingness as one of the primary conditions that contribute to suicide ideation. The selected novels portray adolescent protagonists who experience varying degrees of loneliness, alienation, and emotional disconnection from their families, peers, and social environments. These experiences create a sense of isolation that intensifies their psychological distress and makes them vulnerable to self-destructive thoughts. Joiner states, "The need to belong is a fundamental human motive. When this need is thwarted, numerous negative effects on health, adjustment, and well-being have been documented" (Joiner, 2005, p. 118)

In *My Heart and Other Black Holes*, Aysel struggles with feelings of social exclusion and self-blame associated with her father's criminal history. Her perception that she is fundamentally different from others prevents her from establishing meaningful relationships and reinforces her emotional withdrawal. "Anna tried her best to comfort me, but I pushed her away. I knew it would be the best thing for her to disassociate herself from me" (Warga, 2015, p. 23) Aysel's decision to distance herself from Anna reflects her inability to accept emotional support from others. Her belief that separation would protect her friend reveals an internalized sense of alienation and unworthiness. This self-imposed withdrawal reinforces the condition of thwarted belongingness, as she actively disconnects herself from potentially supportive relationships.

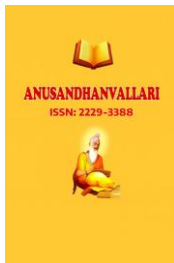
Similarly, Theodore Finch in *All the Bright Places* experiences a profound sense of invisibility and misunderstanding. Despite being surrounded by people, he remains emotionally isolated and unable to communicate the depth of his suffering. "Decca, who's eight, clearly, she was a mistake, which she figured out at the age of six. But we all know if anyone is the mistake here, it's me." (Niven, 2015, p. 35) Finch's statement reveals deep feelings of inadequacy and self-devaluation. By identifying himself as the "mistake," he perceives his existence as problematic within the family structure. Such perceptions contribute to emotional isolation and strengthen the sense of disconnection that Joiner associates with suicidal vulnerability.

In the same way, in *Turtles All the Way Down*, Aza Holmes confronts a different form of isolation. Her obsessive thoughts and anxiety create barriers that separate her from those around her, making it difficult for her to fully engage in interpersonal relationships.

Although the circumstances differ, all three protagonists experience a disruption in belongingness. Their inability to feel understood, accepted, or emotionally connected reflects the interpersonal conditions that Joiner identifies as significant contributors to suicide ideation. The novels therefore demonstrate that psychological distress is often intensified by social and emotional disconnection rather than existing as an exclusively individual experience.

Reciprocal Connectedness as Emotional Support

While the selected novels depict emotional isolation, they simultaneously illustrate the emergence of relationships that challenge such isolation. The concept of reciprocal connectedness becomes particularly significant because



it emphasizes mutual emotional exchange rather than one-sided assistance. Healing begins when individuals recognize that they are not merely recipients of support but also active participants in meaningful relationships.

The relationship between Aysel and Roman in *My Heart and Other Black Holes* exemplifies this process. Both characters initially approach each other from positions of despair, yet their shared vulnerability gradually develops into emotional understanding and companionship. Their relationship demonstrates how mutual recognition can reduce feelings of loneliness and create possibilities for hope. "He's no longer the person I want to die with; he's the person I want to be alive with." (Warga, 231) This statement marks a significant transformation in Aysel's emotional outlook. Initially united by a shared desire for death, Aysel and Roman gradually develop a relationship grounded in trust, empathy, and mutual understanding. The shift from seeking death to embracing life illustrates the therapeutic potential of reciprocal connectedness. Their companionship enables both characters to move beyond despair and recognise their value within a meaningful interpersonal bond.

A similar pattern can be observed in *All the Bright Places*. Through her interactions with Finch, Violet learns to confront grief and re-engage with life after a period of emotional withdrawal. Although the novel presents a tragic outcome for Finch, the relationship nevertheless illustrates the transformative potential of interpersonal connection. Their companionship provides moments of acceptance and understanding that challenge emotional isolation.

In *Turtles All the Way Down*, friendship functions as an important source of emotional stability. Aza's relationships, particularly with Daisy and Davis, offer spaces of acceptance that help her navigate anxiety and intrusive thoughts. These relationships do not eliminate psychological suffering; rather, they provide emotional grounding that enables her to continue coping with it. The novel thereby suggests that connectedness does not require complete recovery before meaningful relationships can exist. In this way, connectedness functions not merely as companionship but as an essential source of emotional strength and hope.

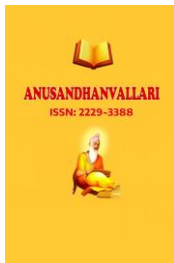
Relational Healing and the Reconstruction of Belonging

The selected novels move beyond portraying psychological distress by emphasizing the possibility of healing through meaningful interpersonal relationships. Rather than presenting recovery as an individual achievement, the narratives highlight the role of companionship, empathy, and emotional affirmation in fostering resilience among adolescent characters. In each text, healing emerges when individuals experience acceptance and validation from others, enabling them to challenge feelings of isolation and reconnect with their social worlds.

The protagonists' experiences demonstrate that recovery becomes possible when relationships are grounded in mutual care, understanding, and emotional recognition. Such relationships create opportunities for self-worth and belonging, allowing individuals to perceive themselves as valued members of a supportive network. This process is particularly significant because suicide ideation often develops alongside experiences of social disconnection and emotional abandonment. By fostering meaningful engagement with others, reciprocal connectedness functions as an important protective mechanism against psychological vulnerability.

The novels further suggest that healing is not a linear or complete process. Characters continue to encounter emotional difficulties even after establishing supportive relationships. Nevertheless, these connections provide stability, encouragement, and hope that enable them to navigate their struggles more effectively. Recovery is therefore represented not as the absence of suffering but as the capacity to move forward despite adversity.

A significant contribution of the present study lies in its emphasis on reciprocal connectedness as a framework for understanding the reconstruction of belonging. While Joiner's theory explains how thwarted belongingness



contributes to suicide ideation, the selected novels reveal how meaningful emotional engagement can restore a sense of connection and purpose. Through reciprocal relationships, the protagonists challenge feelings of burdensomeness, rebuild trust, and develop greater resilience in the face of psychological challenges.

Ultimately, the selected narratives suggest that interpersonal relationships are not merely supportive elements within recovery stories but essential components of healing itself. By foregrounding mutual emotional exchange, contemporary Young Adult fiction presents connectedness as a powerful response to loneliness, despair, and self-destructive thoughts. Reciprocal connectedness thus emerges as a significant protective factor that promotes relational healing and facilitates the reconstruction of belonging among adolescents.

6. Conclusion

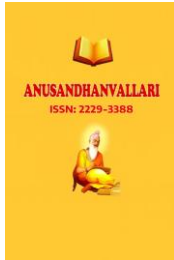
The present study explored the significance of reciprocal connectedness in shaping the emotional journeys of adolescent characters in *My Heart and Other Black Holes*, *All the Bright Places*, and *Turtles All the Way Down*. Through the application of Thomas Joiner's Interpersonal Theory of Suicide, the analysis highlighted how experiences of alienation and interpersonal disconnection intensify psychological vulnerability among young individuals. At the same time, the selected novels demonstrate that meaningful relationships offer spaces of acceptance, understanding, and companionship that help characters negotiate their inner struggles.

The study reveals that interpersonal bonds extend beyond mere social interaction and become essential sources of strength during periods of emotional crisis. The protagonists' experiences suggest that connection with others can foster self-worth, encourage hope, and create opportunities for personal growth. Rather than portraying suffering as an isolated experience, the novels emphasize the transformative potential of shared emotional engagement.

By foregrounding the role of mutual relationships, the study contributes to ongoing discussions on mental health in contemporary Young Adult fiction. It argues that reciprocal connectedness provides a valuable perspective for understanding how adolescents confront adversity and move towards a renewed sense of purpose. Ultimately, the selected narratives affirm that human connection remains one of the most significant resources in navigating psychological challenges and sustaining emotional well-being.

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