

# Unpacking Teenage Psyche In Jodi Picoult's Nineteen Minutes

R. Shanu<sup>1</sup>, Dr. C. Santhosh Kumar<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>*Ph.D Research Scholar, Department of English, Annamalai University, Chidambaram,  
email id: shanurz1998@gmail.com*

<sup>2</sup>*Research Supervisor, Professor of English (Retd.), Annamalai University, Chidambaram.*

This article examines the underlying invisible factors behind school bullying and violence as depicted in *Nineteen Minutes*, by Jodi Picoult (2007). Attention is paid to conceptualize school bullying as represented in the texts, especially in terms of the role attributed to power and resistance; showing the power of bully and the resistance of the victim. It is interesting to look into various behaviours associated with school bullying: parent-child, boyfriend-girlfriend, student-teacher, peer and sibling rivalry. At times the school administration finds it challenging in dealing with the issue of teenage psyche. When it comes to children certain decision could negatively and in some contexts certain decision positively impact the mind which is an unwritten state of the young learners. Children bear the brunt of decision making. They are young and with the mind of an unwritten state, they easily fall a prey to accusation and equally they are overjoyed with praise. It is imperative for the administrators to take extra caution in dealing with such tender children. Behind the creation of the characters, there is a network of invisible hidden beneath. An exploration of them could result in discovering the psyche of children. At times it is impossible to guess the type of decision they choose. The unpredictability is challenging but the budding children are creative and productive if channelised in the right direction on the other hand when they are misdirected, they may land in a chaotic disaster. A simple direction may make or mar them. They are brittle and must be dealt with emotion. Attempts were made to highlight the individual talents of individuals which in turn earn self-esteem or condemnation based on their calibre. Jodi Picoult created a number of perverted characters who involve themselves in antisocial activities like school shooting and bullying. The stories are so situated that an indepth analysis enable to discover the reason beneath their action. In a way it is a type of psychological study of characters. Fiction acts as an important investigative tool to the national debate about school shootings, and other anti-social events prevalent in the midst of the children, though it does not discuss all the factors behind such events. It also explores the complex web of the multifaceted nature of violence and its profound interconnections. The exploration navigates the cyclical dynamics inherent in violence, in which one manifestation can catalyze the emergence of another. The domino effect of violence is that an initial act of misbehavior can set off a chain reaction of subsequent forms. The interplay between different aspects of violence highlights their interdependence, leading to an amplification of effects. It is essential to understand the complex connection involved in different modes of violence, emphasizing the imperative of taking a holistic approach to intervention. Furthermore, the overall analysis reflects the increased susceptibility of women being victims of this complex pattern of violence. Thus, Picoult delves deep into the teenage psyche and the cause of the perverted behaviours of teenage students apart from explaining the multidimensional nature of violence and the need for holistic approach to foster social transformation and harmony.

**Keywords:** Bullying, violence, antisocial, school shooting, perverted behaviour.

Jodi Picoult's *Nineteen Minutes* explores the aftermath of school shootings. The story centers on Peter Houghton, a bully and socially isolated teenager who loses his temper and opens fire on his classmates at Sterling High School in New Hampshire. The shooting lasted for nineteen minutes, killing ten people and wounding several others. The novel features several prominent female characters who play important role in the story. First, Josie Cormier is a former friend of Peter Houghton and one of the survivors of the school shooting. She is a popular and attractive teenager who struggles with feelings of guilt and shame for her role in Peter's social isolation. Her narrative serves to highlight the complex interplay of social pressures and peer dynamics, which can lead to feeling of isolation and discouragement.

Josie becomes the target of direct physical violence from the attack of her ex-partner, Matt Royston, who inflicts physical injuries on her, resulting in visible bruises in her arm. Violence is characterized by the deliberate use of force or influence in an authoritarian manner, with the clear intention of causing harm, injury, or damage to an individual. This multifaceted phenomenon manifests itself through various modalities, including physical, emotional, psychological, and sexual dimensions. The perpetration of violence can emanate from single individual, organized collectives, or even governmental entities, and occur in a variety of contexts, including domestic settings, educational institutions, workplaces, and broader social domains. The consequences of violence are profound and lasting, affecting both the target and the perpetrator. The aftermath involves physical suffering, psychological distress, trauma-induced suffering, and the potential catalyzing of social and economic disasters in communities. Furthermore, violence often creates self-perpetuating cycle of retaliation and revenge attacks, thus exacerbating the original problem in question.

This manifestation of violence confirms to Galtung and Fischer's framework of direct violence, where the perpetrator referred to as the subject of violence intentionally engages in harmful acts aimed at another individual. They develop this construct, emphasizing its intentional nature and the motivations that cause harm. This conceptualization of direct violence converges with Zizek's notion of "subjective violence" which defines visible aspect of violence characterized by distinct signs, such as criminal acts and acts of terror, enforced by physical aggression. The description of Josie's experience and the accompanying analytical framework highlight the multifaceted nature of violence, revealing the complex interaction of subjective and direct violence and their deep connection to the emotional and psychological trajectories of the characters. Furthermore, Josie's encounters also involve the realm of violence as defined by the deprivation of basic human needs. In this setting, one of Josie's basic needs for well-being is systematically denied by the malevolent actions of her former romantic partner. The calculated deprivation subjects him to experience misery and morbidity, provoked by acts of physical aggression accompanied by overt threats. Galtung and Fischer's perspective emphasizes the importance of recognizing threats violence as a distinct manifestation of violence in itself. They point out that mere act of threat constitutes a form of violence, causing an "insult to the mind and spirit" that catalyzes psychological distortions and provokes a sense of despair through the looming shadow of fear. The perspective provided by Galtung and Fischer's theory allows for a nuanced interpretation of Josie's situation, in which her experience of violence transcends the limits of physical harm. She ventures into the realm of psychological and emotional distress, unraveling the complex interplay of the denials

of basic human needs, the perpetration of threats, and their lasting implications for mental and emotional well-being.

Her "identity needs" are also denied when she becomes involved with the popular crowd at her school.

Being in the limelight forces her to her true originally considered desire for friendship with Peter. It is here that Josie's "socialization" is focused, that is, she is desocialized from her real friend and resocialized into another group of familiar friends. Galtung places "desocialization" and "resocialization" as the category of direct violence. This evolution of self-adjustment make individuals to fit into their aspired team. A character with the inherent of characteristic of trouble shooting select friends accordingly and form a team of trouble others and the one with the innate feeling of helping others may fall into the category of such individuals and form a team. This is the universal unwritten law of selection of friends.

Josie's final act of shooting and fatally wounding her ex-partner, Matt, at the climax of the story, can be interpreted as a manifestation of her desire for freedom from the agony. In this context, Matt's actions position him as a potential oppressor who offers Josie a figurative opportunity to submit to his dominance. This is emblematic of the loss of the notion of freedom and identity, transcending the spectrum of physical disability or handicap. Josie's shift from being a victim to becoming a perpetrator is deeply complicated. Her behaviour can be interpreted as a desperate attempt to escape the violent pattern embodied by Matt, even though she does so in an extreme way. The equation of Josie's actions with the liberation of the world from violence is particularly evident in Galtung's theoretical framework, which emphasizes the connection between violence and restriction of basic freedom.

Furthermore, the portrayal of Josie as a victim is considered as an evidence of bullying. His process includes derisive behaviour from his companions, exemplified by the circulation of baseless rumours about his past relationship with Peter. This corresponds to Zizek's conception of bullying as a form of symbolic violence, based on rudimentary recognition of the target. His framing summarizes the internal power dynamic inherent in bullying, where the act itself is based on the recognition of other's existence. Therefore, Josie's involvement in the act of shooting went beyond simple impulsivity, appearing as a consequence intertwined with a wider framework of social and psychological pressures, constituting manifestation of structural violence. The story begins with exploring complex interactions characterize the parent-child dynamic, apart from exploring complex obstacles educators and law enforcement agencies face while dealing with the incident of school violence. Many multiform determinants underlie the occurrence of direct violence, including aspects such as economic inequalities, conditions of poverty, social marginalization, discrimination and availability of weapons. Addressing these fundamental elements can properly prevent violence and promote the creation of safe and harmonious communities.

Picoult masterfully describes the root cause of interconnected violence, revealing its underlying nature in which one manifestation of violence can serve as a catalyst for the emergence of another variant. This profound insight highlights cyclical and self-perpetuating dynamics of violence. The story unfolds as a testament to the domino effect of violence, explaining how an initial act of violence, whether physical, psychological, or structural, can ripple through the social fabric, setting off a chain reaction that generates other forms of

violence. This interplay highlights the intertwined relationship of different aspects of violence, which often leads to reinforcement. An act of physical aggression, for example, can escalate into psychological distress, thus perpetuating cycles of harm. Similarly, structural inequalities can help create fertile ground for various forms of violence, creating a context in which violence thrives itself. Women are particularly likely to be victim of this complex pattern of violence. The intersections among gender discrimination, social norms and power imbalances can amplify the impact of violence on women. Cases of violence against women, both overt and subtle, can lead to a range of subsequent damages, like psychological trauma, social exclusion and economic powerlessness.

According to Franzak and Noll, when violence becomes deep in the fabric of a culture or society, it often appears as an accepted norm or an inherent component of everyday life. This normalization occurs when violence is not critically examined or challenged. The portrayal, Picoult highlight is intended to understand complex connections present in different forms of violence. She recognizes that combating violence requires a comprehensive approach that transcends isolated protests. When we see that violence has many causes and connections, we can create better plans to stop it at different points. This can lead to real change and help build a more peaceful and caring society.

School bullying has become a key area of research across disciplines, taking into account the ramifications it takes in the recent times. Young adults can have the opportunity to assess their own reactions to any topic through these stories that explore the most vital emotions and issues in their lives. Therefore, narrative writing provides a good opportunity to explore bullying in school. Thus, a new sub-genre, anti-bullying fiction, of young adult literature has been developed, to address the issue. This study compares different types of bullying themes like adaptability discrimination in the classroom, sexuality, school shootings, and resistance. Michael Cart, an expert on young adult literature, speculates that "A very fast-paced subgenre of young adult literature that continues to explore many aspects of this issue with insight and sensitivity is the only positive and beneficial outcome of the Columbine High School attack on April 20, 1999. Bullying is considered one of the common aspects of school affairs" (Michael Cart 113).

Jodi Picoult's *Nineteen Minutes* provides an optimistic outlook by providing the school bullying, the school environment, and the chance to change the culture within the school community. Picoult addresses the young adult reader in the exposition section of the text: "To the thousands of children who are a little different, a little scared, a little unloved: this is for you" (Picoult 3). She tells this reader that "there were two ways to be happy: improve your reality or lower your expectations" (Picoult 31). The narrative describes in detail the students at Sterling High School and their daily routine. Through flashbacks, the climax reveals the beginning of the year in the text when one day, on the morning of March 6, 2007, a loud noise arises from the school's parking garage. Recently, the sound was said to be a bomb going off in Matt's car. After that explosion, shots were fired.

This entire spree lasted nineteen minutes in the life of Peter Houghton, but the evidence will show that its effects will last forever. There are a lot of witnesses, and there is a lot of testimony to come... but by the end of this trial, you will be convinced beyond a reasonable doubt that Peter Houghton purposefully and knowingly, with premeditation, caused the death of ten

people and attempted to cause the death of nineteen others at Sterling High School (Picoult 467).

At the beginning of *Nineteen Minutes*, readers consider Peter as an antagonist. However, during the engage of the novel, he seems to be the protagonist of the text. The reader's question now is whether Peter, the one who shot, is a victim or a perpetrator. In other words, is Peter a bully or a victim? Peter seems humiliated and submissive, so he has to resist the bullying, and, in the end, he sees himself as a bully. The narrative, which goes back to before and after the school fight, shows that Peter and Josie are close. Peter is regularly and severely bullied, while Josie, who acts as a bystander, generally approves and supports him. However, they gradually become less popular. To protect herself, Josie joins the favourite group. She now believes that her allusion to Peter humiliates her. Furthermore, Picoult depicts lack of support from the members of family, showing Peter as rejected and submissive even at home. Peter's mother, Lacy, ignores his brother Joey's humiliation of Peter.

Some plot points are fairly predictable, to balance this, Picoult introduces a few surprising twists and develops characters, such as Peter, who could easily be someone encountering in everyday life. Picoult's research led her to explore the psychological realities behind adolescent violence, a perspective that resonates with Dr. James Garbarino who introduced the idea in *The Lost Boys*, stating: "The fact is that, for the vast majority of kids who resort to violence, the monster is not all that different from the boy living upstairs in your own house, most likely as scary as that is to imagine" (5). Jodi Picoult's *Nineteen Minutes* echoes this perspective by showing how seemingly ordinary adolescents can become violent under certain pressures. Together, both authors highlight the unsettling truth that the roots of violence often lie much closer to home than we assume. Thus, this story does not boast a classic protagonist and antagonist, and raises numerous difficult questions, making the reader to trigger series of awareness. This is where its strength lies. As the critic Sue Corbett notes, Picoult accomplishes her goal of "keeping readers on the precarious edge of forming their own opinions" (69).

Finally, it is discussed that young people benefit greatly from reading stories that revolve around real-world issues and dangers, thereby creating empathy apart from educating the reader. Young people can feel sympathy for the victims of bullying, understand their position and anxieties, and even learn from it, thus avoiding becoming victim. Almost all readers can identify with the horror of bullying in such stories. It not only focuses bullying and violence but also to the psychological aspects of the characters. Picoult also convinces the reader outside to become sympathize with the victim of bullying. They support those who are being bullied and help readers who might be in that situation, while also giving advice to those who might be the bullies.

## References

1. Altheide, David L. "Children and the Discourse of Fear." *Symbolic Interaction*, vol. 25, no. 2, 2002, pp. 229–250. ProQuest accessed 29 Feb. 2016.
2. Baker, J.A. "Can't we see the forest for the trees? Considering the social context of school violence". *Journal of School Psychology*, vol. 36, no. 1, 1998. Pp 29-44.
3. Cart, Michael. *Young Adult Literature: From Romance to Realism*. American Library Association, 2010. Collins, Randall. *Violence: A Micro-sociological Theory*. Princeton University Press, 2008.

4. Coloroso, Barbara. *The Bully, the Bullied, and the Bystander*. Harper Collins, 2003. Corbett, Sue. *Rev. of Nineteen Minutes*, by Jodi Picoult. *People*, vol. 67, no. 15, 16 Apr. 2007, pp. 69.
5. Cotterell, John. *Social Networks in Youth and Adolescence*. Routledge, 2007.
6. Foucault, Michel. *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings, 1972–1977*. Edited by Colin Gordon, Pantheon Books, 1980.
7. Franzak, Judith, and Elizabeth Noll. “Problematizing Violence in Young Adult Literature.” *Journal of Adolescent and Adult Literacy*, vol. 49, no. 8, 2006, pp. 662–672.
8. Garbarino, James. *Lost Boys: Why Our Sons Turn Violent and How We Can Save Them*. Free Press, 1999.
9. Horton, Paul. “School Bullying and Social and Moral Orders.” *Children and Society*, vol. 25, no. 4, 2011, pp. 268–277.
10. Galtung, Johan, et al. *Johan Galtung: Pioneer of Peace Research*. Springer, 2013.
11. Picoult, Jodi. *Nineteen Minutes: A Novel*. 1st Atria Books hardcover ed., Atria Books, 2007.
12. Wiseman, A. M., and J. S. Jones. “Examining Depictions of Bullying in Children’s Picture Books: A Content Analysis from 1997 to 2017.” *Journal of Research in Childhood Education* vol. 32, no. 2, 2018, pp. 190-201.
13. Žižek, Slavoj. *Violence: Six Sideways Reflections*. Picador, 2008.