



BULLYING IN JENNIFER NIVEN'S ALL THE BRIGHT PLACES

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ABSTRACT

This article describes bullying in Jennifer Niven's *All the Bright Places*. In this novel, Niven clearly presents Finch, the main character of the story, as a representation of people who becomes the victim of bullying by his father and his school community and end in committing suicide. This study uses narrative qualitative research and applies literary sociology theory by Wellek and Warren saying that the work of literature, the purpose as well as the things that are implicit in the work itself and that are related to social problems. The analysis is focused on bullying of Finch, the main character of the novel, who committed suicide because he had been bullied physically, verbally and cyberly at home and school. Physical bullying is represented by Finch's father and Roamer. Verbal bullying is represented by Finch's father, Roamer, Amanda Monk, and his other school-mates. Cyberbullying is represented by his school community. He feels no one likes him or understands his feelings neither his parents nor his school community. In conclusion, Jennifer Niven in *All the Bright Places* vividly and beautifully conveys a moral message about bullying and its effect on people which leads to suicide.

Keywords: bullying, physical, verbal, cyber, suicide.

I. Introduction

Social phenomena such as bullying behavior are prevalent in society, particularly among teenagers. The United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund (UNICEF) in 2016 placed Indonesia at the top of the list of bullying cases. Based on data from the International Center for Research on Women (ICRW) survey released by the Indonesian Children's Protection Commission (KPAI), 84 percent of children in Indonesia experience bullying at school. There were 1,672 incidents, with 1,259 at elementary, 355 at middle, and 58 at high school levels in 2022 (Suryani et al. 309; kpai.go.id/).

Despite the widespread prevalence of bullying in schools, many teachers and principals remain unaware of the peer aggression that is already occurring in their classrooms and halls. To prevent such negative events, concrete policy implementation and strict enforcement of

rules are needed. What is worse, Rivkin states that parents and siblings can be bullies too (10). The home, which is supposed to be a safe place for children, can become a place of bullying with violence, threats, and constant belittling, leading to depression and even death.

One of the contemporary American authors who concerns deeply on that kind of phenomena is Jennifer Niven. The relationship between Niven and society has become so important because the society she targets determines the form and type of her work. Niven was born in Charlotte, North Carolina, on May 14, 1968, and raised in Indiana, the setting of *All the Bright Places*. Her mother, Penelope Niven is an author and high school English teacher (Simamora and Hasibuan 40).

She is also one of the top authors in the young adult genre. She cares about the tragic events of teenagers who die every minute due to suicide, which keeps her thoughts focused



on the stigma around mental health and teen suicide, which makes her novels different from other stories. Glenn et al. state that Niven is one of the influential authors known and respected for her willingness to tackle difficult yet important topics that are relevant to so many adolescents and her willingness to engage with challenging topics that center on morality and how it relates to life's meanings and realities (99).

One of her best novels being discussed is *All the Bright Places* for its success in delivering a taboo discourse and its contribution to raising awareness of its importance and urgency, which won the 2015 Goodreads Choice Award for Best YA Fiction. Besides, based on her official website, this novel also won many awards and honors, namely the New Times Bestseller, a Barnes & Noble Best Book of the Year, a Dioraphte Audience Award for Best YA Book, and the Mere di Libri Book Prize for Best YA Book(jenniferniven.com).

"Bullying" infers from the word "bully," in English implies to abuse (qtd. in Christiana 6211). "Bullying" is a noun that refers to actions of a person who threatens or injures someone who is weaker or less powerful, frequently making them do something against their will. The individual who locks in in bullying behavior is alluded to as "a bully." Although the noun "bullier" designates a bully, the term "bully" is far more widely used and frequently preferred (qtd. in wiktionary.org). MacKay argues that a bully is someone who seeks out less powerful peers and repeatedly attacks them using physical, verbal, social, or cyber means (13).

MacKay states that physical bullying is a form of bullying that involves the use of physical aggression or violence to intimidate, harm, or control others. This can include actions such as hitting, kicking, pushing, shoving, tripping, or damaging property (13). When someone uses words or language to injure, distress, or humiliate another person, it

is referred to as verbal bullying. MacKay says that it often takes the form of cruel comments about someone's appearance or behavior, gossip, threats, taunting, insulting, or derogatory nicknames(17). Physical, verbal, and social bullying have long been the mainstays of bullying behavior, but they have been joined by a third form that is increasingly frequent that is cyberbullying, or bullying that takes place virtually. MacKay says that bullies frequently use social media, mobile phones, and the internet to target and assault their victims(21).

The most common effects are mental health problems, such as anxiety disorders, depression, and suicidal thoughts as Professor Frisen says that victims of internet bullying have no refuge (Cited in MacKay 22). MacKay states that victims often feel lonely, worthless, and hopeless, emotions that are hallmarks of depression. These conditions are closely linked and can be life-threatening, leading to suicidal thoughts and even suicide attempts.

II. Research Methodology

This is a narrative qualitative research proposed by Creswell stating that narrative is a kind of qualitative in which the investigator illustrates the lives of characters, accumulates and tells stories about individuals life, and write narratives of characteristic experiences(54). Data are collected from dialogue of the characters and narration by highlighting the important events, various books, and some online dictionaries.

This study employs literary sociology. Wellek and Warren say that literary sociology is the medium of language to represent a life that consists largely of social reality (109). They argue that the relationship between literature and society can be classified into three points. First, the sociology of the author; second, the content of the literary work, the last is the impact of literature on society (112). The study focuses on point number



two, that is the work itself. They add that literature reflects and expresses a life in which the author must be sensitive to social situations (110).

III.Result and Discussion

All the Bright Places, a novel of 292 pages written by Jennifer Niven, is a story about a young boy who committed suicide because he had been bullied by the people around him. After years of physical and emotional abuses by his father which left scars on his body and heart, he also gets bullied by his school friends. All his peers call him a "freak" and "weirdo," and they often make fun of his strange behavior. One of his biggest bullies at school, who often punches him in the face several times until he is injured and bleeding, continuously pushes him in the hallways, tells him that he should kill himself, and makes other snide comments. Besides, the Barlett Dirt published an embarrassing article about him, and rumors spread rapidly. His school counselor, teachers, and principal do nothing to stop the bullying towards him, which makes him feel isolated and alone. In the end, he chooses to end his life in a miserable way by drowning in the river to leave the cruelty of the world.

The main characters are Violet Markey, Theodore Finch, Gabe Romero, Amanda Monk, and Finch's father. Round character is Violet Markey. The minor characters are Finch's Mother, Kate, Decca, Ryan Cross, Sheryl Markey, James Markey, Mr. Black, Mr. Embry, Mr. Kappel, and Principle Wertz.

Theodore Finch is one of the protagonists, a seventeen-year-old boy, in a senior high school who has a tall body and handsome face with dark hair color. He is smart, quick-witted, good at arranging words, and always knows what to say, that is why Violet said that he should have been a writer. Finch admits that he always does well and gets a good score on tests, but despite these, other peers at school refer to him as

"Theodore Freak, Theodore Weirdo."

The novel is set in a fictional town Bartlett, Indiana. The three most important settings are school, Finch's room, and the house of Finch's father. Finch portrays the school as a place where he is continuously treated unjustifiably, bullied by classmates, and disregarded by the instructors which makes him estranged by everybody. Finch's room is described as a big room with deep red walls and ceilings, but when he is in severe depression, he changes it to the bright blue of a swimming pool to help him find peace and quiet. He makes his closet as a place he lives and sleeps because for him smaller is better. The wall is filled with notes about what happened to him every day, but mostly the bad things. He describes his father's new home as hell. He really needs a father figure, but he gets abused both physically and verbally so he hates going back there.

3.1 Physical Bullying

The author vividly presents physical bullying which can be found at home and school. Finch's father is the representation of physical bully towards his son as Rivkin states that adults in the house can be physical bullies too by using aggressive physical contact, for example, shoving, punching, and anything in between, to show their power over the victim (10).

Since he was a child before his parents' divorce, his father always bullies him in their old home, which is shown through scars on his stomach. He also tells Violet about his father's cruel when he is in a bad mood. Violet asks:

"Where did you get the scar?"

"My dad gets in these black moods. Like, the blackest black. Like, no moon, no stars, storm's coming black" (174).

The conversation between Violet and him shows that the father is so bitter and cruel that hitting his son is just a normal for him to



show his power over his son. The poor living conditions in their old house make the father cruel by beating Finch trying to show his power so that he can be controlled easily.

Apart from his father's well-established life in his new home, he also experiences physical violence by him there. Finch comes to his father's house with Kate and Decca, for their weekly obligatory family dinner, their father is in the basement. He goes there and describes his father's cruel deeds like this:

And then he's off the couch and lunging for me, and he catches me by the arm and wham, slams me into the wall. Before he can grab me again, I'm up the stairs... he gets there, and the sight of his shiny new family makes him remember himself. He says, "Something smells good," gives Rosemarie a kiss on the cheek (121).

From the above treatment we know that the father is very powerful, and has ill-tempered who wants to harm and control him by behaving like that. After shoving, lunging, slamming, and damaging property at his son, which leaves a crack in his skull, he shows his good attitude towards his new family, which indicates he has two personalities. When with his origins family, he is in bed-temper, whereas with his new family, he is presented as a father figure.

Then the author keeps guiding us to see the brutal deeds of his father by beating, slamming, and hitting Finch. It is clearly proven when Violet's parents are so worried about Violet who goes out with Finch without permission. It makes his mother call her ex-husband, hoping he knows where Finch is. It becomes an opportunity for him by coming to the old home to harm and intimidate Finch because she cannot handle her family problems, and is still dependent on her ex-husband by asking him to solve this problem.

His father's brutal deeds shown in the quote below:

My father doesn't say a word to me, just sends me flying across the kitchen and into the door. I stand up, shake it off, and the next time he raises his arm (185).

The repeated physical bullying behavior above carried out by his father shows Finch is in a situation that his father hates and does not want him. A house that should be the most comfortable place for someone, ironically, turns into a place of misery. By accessing Finch's thoughts, we know how disappointed he is with his father; he does not want this to happen. However, he still hopes for a caring father and mother to comfort him in his sadness.

The author then vividly shows physical bullying at school through characters Roamer, Amanda Monk, Finch's classmates, Mr. Black, and Mr. Kappel. Roamer is presented as the biggest bully at school who often harms and looks for trouble with Finch. He has power in the school because he is a student president so that he feels free to do anything, besides, he has many friends who support him. Meanwhile, Finch does not have anyone. Finch always tries to avoid him because he does not want to make trouble at school. He narrates:

Outside of class, Gabe Romero blocks my way. As usual, he is not alone. Amanda Monk waits just behind, hip jutted out, Joe Wyatt and Ryan Cross on either side of her. Roamer walks past me, knocking me in the schest-hard-with his shoulder.... Mr. Black watches from the doorway, and I try to give him a casual nod to show him everything's cool (24).

This quotation shows that Roamer is arrogant and has many supporters so he feels safe bullying Finch. He is so cruel and inhumane.



by hitting, blocking, and knocking Finch without any fear or shame.

Violet describes the physical bullying carried out by Roamer towards Finch on the edge of the river through image as Gill defines when phrases, words, or ideas in a written piece arouse our senses of sight, smell, taste, touch, etc (23). The cruel and sadistic act clearly shown through the image below. We can feel Finch's pain to stand Roamer's long hittings, smashings, and pushings. We can smell and feel the blood flowing from his face due to Roamer's blows, and we can feel how much pain he feels both emotionally and physically. The way Violet narrates the bullying physically behavior arouses our sense of touch and pain to make us feel Finch's suffering, misery, and pain. She narrates:

Roamer jumps on Finch, and the two of them go rolling down the bank into the water. Joe and Ryan just stand there, and I say to Ryan... Roamer swings and hits Finch's face with a thud. His face is bloody, and he doesn't wait or look back (137).

The author keeps focusing us on Roamer's cruel deeds by slamming and punching Finch until blood flows on his face which leaves scars and bruises:

In the locker room, Roamer corners me. And then he slams me into the locker and, before I can even blink, punches me in the eye, and then again in the nose. It's all I can do to stay on my feet. "Is there a problem here?"... But then Kappy says, "We're done here, Finch. You can go (158).

We can see his suffering through our five senses and focus on smell, sense of touch to make us feel his suffering, misery, and pain. We can feel that Finch is in a battered situation, so we can smell the blood flowing from Finch's face where Roamer hits him

hard in the face. He physically assault him by shoving and punching to control him. Such actions are rude, embarrassing, or threatening for Finch. He intends to stay away from Roamer and forgets all about his cruel deeds. He tries to be as casual and normal-looking as they want him to be by accepting everyone's unequal behavior.

3.2 Verbal Bullying

The author then presents verbal bullying which can be found at home and school. Finch's father is the representation of fathers who like to put down, insult and threaten his son by using offensive words. Since childhood, Finch has grown up with labels, insults, and taunts from him as Rivkin shows that adults in house can be verbal bullies too by using offensive words with hurtful names, mocking, teasing, put downs, and taunts (10). He narrates desperately and hopelessly:

Worthless. Stupid. These are the words I grew up hearing. They are the words I try to outrun, because if I let them in, they might stay there and grow and fill me up and in, until the only thing left of me is worthless stupid worthless stupid worthless stupid freak (45).

The words "Worthless" and "Stupid" are adjectives that have offensive meanings. "Worthless" refers to someone without worth who has no real value and use, who is considered deserving insult and "Stupid" itself refers to someone who lacks thought or intelligence. His father thinks that Finch is good for nothing, does not have qualities, unimportant, and foolish, so considers him valueless. These offensive words make him feel insulted, offended, angry, hopeless and emotional.

Another his father abusive words is a threat: "Don't you come into my house and tell me what to do" (121) shown when he comes to his father's house for family dinner,



he gets a treat which makes him hate going back there. He also shows jealousy of his stepbrother because his father never expresses abusive words to his stepbrother. It means that his father loves him more than Finch himself as his father's real son.

The author shows us the father's cruelty by bullying words and his father labels and insults him using cruel comments to injure, defile, and distress him when he just comes home: "Damn right, he's a delinquent, a criminal, an emotional wreck, and a major disappointment- weirdo-fuckup" (198). "Delinquent" refers to a young person who behaves badly, usually by committing crime. The phrase "fuckup" is a rude and vulgar which refers to a person who has a tendency to make a mess of things. He likens his son to someone who regularly does illegal or immoral things and who does something badly. His father utters those insulting and cruel words to his son before listening to his excuse.

Verbal bullying can be found especially at school. The author creates characters Roamer, Amanda Monk, and other Finch's classmates to convey that issue. Roamer uses cruel comment and nickname to insult Finch. He tells Finch that he should kill himself and says other snide comments after Finch trying to jump from the bell school tower: "Why don't you go ahead and get it over, freak?" Gabe Romero yells from below. More laughter"(7). The word "freak" refers to someone or something that is strange or unusual and not like others of its type. It shows that Finch has different physical appearances and personalities from others, and he is prejudiced against Finch that he does an oddity, so he nicknames him "freak." Roamer utters that bad nickname in the school hall, in front of all his friends which is really publicly mocked, insulted, and humiliated him followed by his other friends' laughter which further burdens to his deep sadness.

Another Roamer's abusive words is mocking: "Maybe you should go back up there and try again" (64). He says the hurtful words after class to intentionally upset Finch by mocking unkind remarks to him in front of all his friends. His cruelty is clearly seen when he feels annoyed and unhappy seeing that Finch still can control himself fail to jump from the school bell tower. He convinces Finch that he is useless and worthless by repeatedly telling him to kill himself publicly.

The author creates Roamer as a real bully to convey its danger to people. He nicknames Finch with a cruel word: "Faggot" (137). The word "Faggot" means extremely disparaging and offensive word that refers to a gay man. He considers Finch as a contemptible and dislikable person who refers to a gay man. How cruel he is to Finch by repeatedly saying cruel words that make him worthless, injure, and distress.

Ironically, the taunting comments occur during Mr. Black's class who is a teacher. When Finch knocks his book onto the floor which makes Roamer and his classmates say "freak" to him: "This is followed by snickers and applause and a "freak" or two." Instead of feeling concerned for Finch, they use the incident as an enjoyment for freely labeling him a freak. Feeling bullied on another occasion, he drops an apple on the teacher's desk with another apology to Mr. Black and falls into his chair across the room. He gets another Roamer's cruel word: "who narrows his eyes in Finch's direction." "Freak," he says loudly. He mimes hanging himself." (82).

3.3 Cyberbullying

This novel is also intended to show people the new cyberbullying as an impact of technology. The author again chooses Finch as the victim of cyberbullying. The story is started by presenting Finch and Violet at the bell tower school which becomes a spectacle for all their school friends to start gossip on



internet. It is from this tragedy that Roamer and all his friends spread gossip in their school gossip rag online. The Bartlett Dirt as a school gossip rag that not only has its own website but seems to be taking over the entire internet. It is a journal deliberately created by school journalists to publish about every student at school who is strange or different. One of the students who is considered strange or different is Finch and becomes the victim of cyberbullying. The Bartlett Dirt has published an article entitled Senior Hero Saves Crazy Classmate from Bell Tower Jump after Finch and Violet's incident at the bell tower, where the whole school believes that Finch tries to commit suicide and Violet comes as a hero. It has published a list of the top ten suicidal students, naming Finch number one.

Because of this hurtful information has spread widely on social media, Jerri Sparks, the reporter from the local paper, wants to write a story on her about how does it feel to know she has saved someone's life, to which Violet says everyone is making a bigger deal of the situation than necessary. Jordan Gripenwaldt, the editor of the school paper, has covered the front page with resources and information about teen suicide and what to do if someone is thinking of killing yourself, but no one is paying attention to this. From this, we know that all students prefer gossip, rumors, and stigma to important information that might help someone like Jordan Gripenwaldt. As a result of cyberbullying, Finch becomes the subject of the cruel rumormongering from a group of girls gossip in the school hallway. Finch hears sorrowfully:

They talk over each other in these high voices that always end in question marks, so that it sounds like *I heard he had a gun? I heard she had to wrestle it out of his hands? My cousin Stacey, who goes to New Castle, says he totally hooked up with both of*

them?(19).

Those false informations clearly arose Finch's deep sadness. He becomes depressed because of all the insults and gossip from all his friends. All the gossip's girls from the cruel rumors on the site have affected him. He narrates:

Apparently, I'm tragic and dangerous. I am here and now and not just awake, but Awake, and everyone can just deal with it because I am the second freakin' coming, "I heard he did it over a girl" (19).

They use technology, that is hard to get rid of, to dehumanize and destroy him. They use social media sites to start rumors and to humiliate Finch which spread rapidly among peers. In just a few hours, everyone in the school reads or sees the embarrassing posted online. Almost everyone in his school has seen the embarrassing article posted online or read derogatory remarks about him. It makes he often feels lonely, worthless, and hopeless.

The author shows us Finch's unsafety and fear as the victim of cyberbullying through his decision not to show up at school for a week. Someone says he has been suspended, others say he overdosed and was carted off to rehab. The rumors spread the old-fashioned way in whispers and texts fortunately Principal Wertz finds out about the Bartlett Dirt and shuts it down. However, the principal becomes a representation of indifference who shuts down the article after Finch has become a mockery for all his school friends but in a cunning way, so that the school would not be blamed for allowing bullying to happen at school. This shows that schools can become places where rumors spread without knowing the truths.

3.4 Committing Suicide

This novel shows people that the fatal effect of physical, verbal and cyber bullying is committing suicide. In 2015, the Minister of



Social Affairs, Khofifah Indra Prawansa, revealed that as many as 40 percent of Indonesian children died by suicide due to not being able to withstand bullying (unicef.org).

His father's cruel and abusive treatments are the greatest cause of his depression through physically and verbally bullied, and neglectness since he was young. Besides, his mother fails to know his true sadness and his feeling down. The author shows Finch's anger and depression by creating setting where his room is previously described with deep red walls which makes us understand he is in a state of anger. Based on psychology experts, red can also indicate negative things, such as anger, danger, or lust (halodoc.com). Finch shows himself capable of stopping these conditions by repainting his room in bright blue like a swimming pool to help him find peace and quietness. In line with Jones' opinion in Ayu saying that blue generally has a calming effect and is believed to be able to overcome insomnia and anxiety. Light blue helps to calm the mind and increase concentration (30). This is his attempt to connect himself to see water as healing.

A string of thoughts runs through his head like a song he cannot get rid of, over and over in the same order. He grievously narrates:

I am broken. I am a fraud. I am impossible to love. And then it starts all over again: I am broken. I am a fraud. I am impossible to love.... Listen, I'm the freak. I'm the weirdo. I'm the troublemaker (213, 237).

Through his confession we know that he is so depressed and obsessed with all those cruel words. He grows up with all his father and his school-mates' cruel words for a long time and always stay in his mind.

His deep depression and withdrawal are clearly shown when he decides to move into his walk-in closet to live. We can imagine how small and stuffy it is that it is impossible for anyone to live in but Finch. His decision

to move there makes us understand that he wants to look small even invisible by anyone. He considers that small place makes him feel like a warm, safe, and cozy that cannot be found anywhere else.

One of interesting ways the author has in this novel is the use of references to show or analogize suicidal thoughts. References is one or that which is refer to as the author's way to be analogized. Look at Finch who is obsessed with Roy Raymond's suicide method, which he calls the famous jumper, Franz Reichelt, who he calls cocky and stupid, and Virginia Woolf, who makes multiple suicide attempts before her eventual success. The author makes it clear that one of the primary reasons he likes water so much is because he is well aware that it can kill him if he lets it. Indeed, the fact that he fixes on writer Virginia Woolf's suicide: she filled her pockets with rocks and then drowned in a river.

The author shows the school community's indifference to Finch as the victim of their bullying by pretending to show students a film about teenagers on drugs to cover their teachers' lies and cruelty: "Principal Wertz announces that some of the content is pretty graphic, but that it is important we see the realities of drug use" (270). This expression shows that the school is avoiding the statement circulating that at BHS school, bullying occurs, which results in Finch committing suicide. Therefore, they show the film with the intention of showing everyone that Finch is involved in drug abuse, which leads him to suicide. They use the film to cover up their sins which indirectly allow bullying to occur.

IV. Conclusion

The bullying behavior in this novel is summed up by the author's magnificent employment of the aspects of novel such as characters, point of view, setting and image, and references. Her willingness to tackle



important topic that is relevant to so many adolescents has raised the phenomenon of bullying in society. It is clearly shown through the types of bullying, i.e., verbal, physical, and cyber, that impact the victim to commit suicide.

Verbal bullying is represented by Finch's father, Roamer, Amanda Monk, and his other school-mates who continuously utter cruel words to him. Physical bullying is represented by characters the father and Roamer who always hit, punch, and push until he is injured and bleeding. Besides, the embarrassing article created by school communities, and rumors about him spread rapidly on the internet. His teachers, and principal do nothing to stop the bullying towards him which makes him feel isolated and depressed.

The author intends to convey that people can undergo bullying at home and school. A School is responsible for forming students to become individuals who are knowledgeable, capable, creative, and independent. Ironically, it becomes bullying factory. Moreover, a house that must be the most comfortable place to live, ironically, can turn into a place of misery. Through the title of this novel, *All the Bright Places*, the author shows the irony of places that must be sources of light turning into the darkest places ever. This study wants to deliver a message about the dangerous effect of bullying on people. It is found that the impact of bullying on people that represented by Finch who ends in committing suicide due to not being able to withstand. Moreover, supports and encouragements from family, teachers, and friends are crucial helps for victims of bullying. In conclusion, Jennifer Niven in her novel *All the Bright Places* vividly portrays phenomena bullying in our society which results in committing suicide.

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