



AN ANALYSIS OF TOXIC POSITIVITY IN JENNIFER NIVEN'S *ALL THE BRIGHT PLACES*

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Abstract. This study explores the representation and psychological impact of *toxic positivity* in *All the Bright Places* by Jennifer Niven. The research focuses on how the two main characters, Theodore Finch and Violet Markey, suffer emotional consequences from suppressing negative feelings in order to appear “okay” or “fine”. This study applies a qualitative method using narrative analysis to examine how toxic positivity is portrayed through character behavior, symbolism, and narrative structure. The theoretical foundation includes Sigmund Freud’s theory of emotional repression to examine avoidance and denial of grief, and Carl Rogers’ theory of the real and ideal self to analyze how social expectations create emotional masks. Symbolism and narrative point of view are also employed to interpret how internal conflicts are subtly communicated. The findings reveal that toxic positivity in the novel manifests in forms such as emotional suppression, guilt, performative happiness, and avoidance of trauma. Finch displays forced optimism while concealing his internal struggles, whereas Violet internalizes pressure to recover and conforms to social expectations. Ultimately, *All the Bright Places* encourages a deeper awareness of emotional honesty by showing how unspoken pain shapes each character’s path toward healing.

Keywords : *toxic positivity, emotional suppression, emotional repression, real and ideal self, symbolism, psychological conflict.*

INTRODUCTION

Positivity is widely regarded as essential for emotional well-being and psychological resilience. In everyday life, individuals are often encouraged to “stay positive” or “look on the bright side,” regardless of their true emotional states. While optimism can serve as a healthy coping mechanism, its excessive application that particularly when it invalidates or suppresses genuine emotional pain may result in emotional disconnection, guilt, and prolonged psychological distress. This phenomenon is known as **toxic positivity**, a cultural attitude that discourages the expression of negative emotions in favor of forced happiness. Scholars such as Wood et al. (2009:291) and Sevincer et al. (2014:186) have highlighted the psychological harm that arises when negative emotions are habitually minimized in favor of appearing emotionally strong.

Toxic positivity has become more prominent in modern society due to the rise of **social** media culture, motivational trends, and hustle mentality, all of which perpetuate a narrow definition of success and strength. On platforms like Instagram or TikTok, individuals are often exposed to curated images of success, joy, and resilience promoting an unrealistic standard of constant happiness. This often leads to comparison, emotional masking, and guilt over authentic feelings such as sadness, burnout, or anxiety. In the name of self-improvement or self-help, people may be urged to "smile through the pain" or "be grateful" in ways that ignore their complex emotional realities. Such cultural norms not only limit emotional expression but also reinforce the idea that vulnerability is a weakness rather than a valid human experience.

The **young** adult population, in particular, is increasingly exposed to these pressures, as they navigate formative experiences of identity, loss, and emotional development. In many cases, their struggles are overlooked or minimized, and they are expected to "bounce back" quickly without adequate emotional support. This sets the stage for literary representations that challenge such narratives and offer more honest depictions of psychological complexity.

This issue is vividly illustrated in Jennifer Niven's *All the Bright Places*, a young adult novel that explores the emotional experiences of two teenagers, Theodore Finch and Violet Markey. Violet is grieving the death of her sister and struggles to reconnect with life, while Finch lives with undiagnosed bipolar disorder and masks his instability behind humor and spontaneity. Their chance encounter on a school bell tower where both contemplate suicide initiates a connection that unfolds into a complex emotional journey. Through their growing bond, the novel depicts how both characters suppress pain and conform to social expectations to appear "okay," even as they internally suffer.

Finch's character reflects the consequences of forced optimism and emotional repression. Despite his erratic behavior and moments of emotional outburst, he often uses humor, grand gestures, and distractions to divert attention from his internal crisis. He avoids asking for help, fearing judgment or institutionalization, and instead tries to serve as a "light" for Violet. His actions, however, become increasingly unstable as the novel progresses, and the absence of meaningful support leads to his eventual decline.

Violet, on the other hand, experiences socially accepted grief that is expected to end on a specific timeline. Friends and family want her to return to normal, to move on, and to be her "old self" again. While she attempts to reintegrate into life by participating in school and reconnecting with others, she suppresses her emotional pain in order to be perceived as recovering. Her reluctance to discuss her trauma or express sadness exemplifies how toxic positivity can prevent individuals from confronting their emotions fully and authentically.

Toxic positivity in *All the Bright Places* is portrayed through behavioral patterns, emotional suppression, and symbolic imagery. Violet is expected to recover quickly and return to normalcy, while Finch copes by concealing his mental health challenges behind an eccentric persona. The novel's alternating narrative voice and layered symbolism (such as water, silence, and color) reveal how both characters are shaped by the cultural demand to appear emotionally stable. These elements illustrate how toxic positivity is not simply a psychological habit, but also a socially constructed phenomenon reinforced by families, schools, and peer relationships.

This study is motivated by a concern for how literature reflects and critiques contemporary understandings of mental health. *All the Bright Places* functions not only as a coming-of-age narrative but also as a subtle critique of how emotional complexity is

silenced in the name of positivity. The novel underscores the emotional cost of enforced happiness and the need for safe spaces where pain can be expressed without fear of rejection.

Toxic positivity is rarely addressed in popular discourse, yet it is embedded in everyday language, institutional expectations, and media representation. By analyzing *All the Bright Places*, this research aims to contribute to the field of literary psychology by showing how fiction serves as a powerful medium to explore the emotional consequences of suppressing vulnerability. The study specifically analyzes how toxic positivity is represented in the novel's characterization, narrative structure, and thematic development, thereby highlighting literature's potential to foster emotional insight and challenge dominant narratives about resilience, recovery, and strength.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Several previous studies have explored psychological themes in *All the Bright Places*, particularly those related to trauma, grief, and adolescent mental illness. Azzaharah (2023) examined Violet's character from an existentialist point of view, focusing on her search for meaning after the loss of her sister. While the study provided rich insights into Violet's emotional evolution, it did not directly address the concept of toxic positivity or explore how emotional suppression functions within the narrative. Outside the novel-specific studies, Kojongian and Wibowo (2022) investigated the emotional dangers of excessive positivity in interpersonal settings, highlighting how socially imposed optimism can invalidate distress and foster feelings of alienation. Similarly, Feltner (2023) examined the influence of toxic positivity in online platforms, where curated happiness and motivational culture often suppress open expressions of mental vulnerability among young adults.

These works, while valuable, leave a clear academic gap concerning how toxic positivity is depicted as a cultural and psychological force within fiction, especially young adult literature. This study aims to fill that gap by analyzing the narrative elements of *All the Bright Places* that portray toxic positivity not as mere emotional overcompensation but as a broader reflection of societal discomfort with emotional pain.

Toxic positivity, as defined by Quintero and Long (2019), involves the overgeneralization of a positive outlook to the point where authentic emotional expression is minimized or dismissed. It is often delivered in the form of culturally accepted but dismissive phrases like "stay positive" or "look on the bright side," which, despite good intentions, discourage vulnerability and create emotional pressure to appear "okay." Sevincer et al. (2014) emphasize that this emotional minimization leads individuals to hide their distress, often worsening psychological suffering. Wood et al. (2009) further argue that emotional authenticity and acknowledgment of negative feelings are essential for mental well-being, and that suppressing them may result in delayed healing or deeper trauma.

To support the analysis of emotional repression in the novel, this study employs Sigmund Freud's theory of repression. According to Freud, repression is a defense mechanism that unconsciously pushes painful emotions or memories out of conscious awareness. While seemingly protective, this process can lead to long-term psychological instability. In *All the Bright Places*, both Finch and Violet demonstrate patterns of repression as they avoid directly confronting grief and pain, often under the pressure to maintain a composed façade. Finch's erratic behavior and Violet's premature return to social normalcy illustrate how external expectations of "positivity" become internalized, resulting in the suppression of unresolved emotions.

Carl Rogers' theory of the real versus ideal self further contextualizes how toxic positivity functions as a psychological burden. Rogers posits that mental distress arises when individuals perceive a large gap between their true selves and the selves they feel pressured to become. In the novel, Violet suppresses grief to fit the image of someone who has "moved on," while Finch struggles with identity by masking his instability through eccentricity and humor. Their inner conflict reflects the social tension between emotional authenticity and the idealized version of emotional resilience promoted by society.

Together, these theories provide a robust framework for understanding how toxic positivity is not only a cultural phenomenon but also a psychological process with visible literary implications. This study uses the lens of repression and self-concept to explore how *All the Bright Places* critiques emotional suppression in modern culture, particularly as it impacts young people facing trauma and identity formation.

METHOD

This research employs a qualitative descriptive method with a literary psychology approach. Qualitative research is suitable for interpreting textual and symbolic meanings within literary works, allowing the researcher to analyze complex emotional and psychological representations. According to Creswell (2013:22), qualitative design is particularly effective in exploring human experiences and subjective responses within specific social or cultural contexts.

The data source for this research is the novel *All the Bright Places* by Jennifer Niven, which presents rich psychological content through its characters, narrative structure, and thematic development. The primary data consist of selected passages, dialogues, and narrative descriptions that illustrate the presence and impact of toxic positivity, particularly in relation to the characters Theodore Finch and Violet Markey. These data were identified and classified through close reading, annotation, and thematic grouping based on relevant psychological indicators.

This study uses an extrinsic literary approach, focusing on the psychological dimensions of the characters through the application of psychoanalytic and humanistic theories. Sigmund Freud's concept of repression is used to examine how characters unconsciously suppress trauma and emotional pain. Carl Rogers' theory of the real versus ideal self supports the analysis of how social expectations contribute to emotional masking and psychological conflict. These frameworks are used to interpret character behavior, internal monologues, and symbolic motifs in the novel.

The researcher acts as the main instrument in the process of data collection and analysis. Data were collected by reading the novel thoroughly, highlighting segments that demonstrate emotional suppression, forced positivity, and internal conflict. These findings were then interpreted through psychological theory, supported by relevant secondary sources such as journal articles and psychological literature on toxic positivity. Data analysis follows a narrative and thematic approach, identifying how toxic positivity is embedded within the story's structure and character arcs. The researcher analyzed how the text reflects broader psychological issues, linking individual character behavior with cultural and emotional norms related to positivity and vulnerability.

This methodological approach enables a comprehensive understanding of how *All the Bright Places* portrays toxic positivity not just as an individual struggle, but as a reflection of broader societal discomfort with emotional honesty.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Violet Markey, as a survivor of her sister's tragic death, navigates her emotional turmoil through suppression. Her grief is not openly acknowledged but hidden under layers of silence and performative normalcy. Early in the narrative, Violet withdraws entirely from activities that remind her of her sister

"I don't ride in cars if I can help it. I don't write anymore. I don't do anything that reminds me of her. I stay off the computer. I keep away from our neighborhood and the places we used to go together. I don't talk about her. I avoid people and conversation and keep to myself. Most of the time I stay in my room or in my bed or, on good days, at my desk." (Niven, 2015: 33). This retreat reflects more than trauma avoidance; it is a coping strategy shaped by the pressure to "move on" or a hallmark of toxic positivity.

Violet is not given the space to express grief; instead, she is expected to suppress it in favor of appearing fine. Her interaction with Finch underscores this, as he tells her "It's not what you say, it's what you hold back. That's what hurts the most. That's what makes you Finch. That's what kills you." (Niven, 2015:109) The act of withholding pain, in this case, is both a survival tactic and a symptom of a broader cultural narrative that invalidates sadness.

Violet's therapy sessions further reveal this emotional disconnect "How are you, Violet?" "I'm fine, and you?" I sit on my hands. "I'm fine. Let's talk about you. I want to know how you're feeling." "I'm good." Just because she hasn't brought it up does not mean she doesn't know ... This is one of the main reasons why I'm here and why I've stopped telling my mom anything. "I'm sleeping fine" (Niven, 2015: 19) Her responses are automatic, scripted not out of comfort but out of necessity.

Violet has internalized the idea that emotional honesty is unwelcome. Her classroom experience reinforces this, I thought if there was something else I could do— maybe research and write a short report." Her voice is low, but she sounds a little pissed. "I'm not ready to ..." He interrupts her. "Miss Markey, I'm going ... to do you the biggest ... favor of your life. ... I'm going to say ... no." "No?" "No. It is a new year... It is time to get ... back on the camel." A few people laugh at this. Violet looks at me and I can see that, yes, she is pissed, and it's then I remember the accident. Violet and her sister, sometime last spring. Violet lived, the sister died. This is why she doesn't want attention" (Niven, 2015: 26–27)

Rather than empathy, Violet receives ridicule and motivational clichés, illustrating what Smith (2019:41) defines as forced normalcy, a cultural demand for swift recovery, often disguised as encouragement.

Even at home, Violet's pain is invalidated.

"I made the mistake of mentioning the whole sleepover thing to my parents, which is why I'm going 'Amanda is making an effort, and you should too, Violet. You can't use your sister's death as an excuse forever. You've got to get back to living.' I'm not ready doesn't work on my mom and dad anymore" (Niven, 2015 : 35) This interaction aligns with Novita and Utami's (2021) research, which found that toxic positivity often replaces genuine empathy with performance-driven rhetoric.

Violet's recovery arc is marked by symbolic transformation. The notebook she shared with her sister becomes a symbol of silenced voice. "I don't write anymore. I don't do anything that reminds me of her." (Niven, 2015:33) The car, as another symbol, reflects Violet's trauma, which she later reclaims through Finch's support. Driving becomes an

act of agency and narrative control. Similarly, wandering through obscure locations becomes metaphorical healing: "There's something sacred about standing where no one else has stood for a while, something healing." (Niven, 2015:123)

The Post-it notes Finch leaves behind serve as symbolic memorials "You are all the colors in one, at full brightness." (Niven, 2015:205)

These gestures externalize Violet's repressed emotions, allowing her to reconnect with her inner world. Her emotional shift is also clear during confrontation with her parents: 'Violet, we're very disappointed.' ...

'I wasn't acting out... I didn't even want to work on this project, but it's kind of the only thing I have going on.' ... I send myself to my room." (Niven, 2015:120)

In time, she channels her grief into digital memorialization via the Ultraviolet Remarkey website, a symbol of transformed mourning into expression. Natural imagery, like snow and changing seasons, further illustrates her internal evolution. "Everything is cold and still, like nothing can move. And maybe that's okay. Maybe this stillness is what I need." (Niven, 2015:192) Symbolism in Violet's story functions not as decoration but as emotional scaffolding, marking the transition from silence to voice.

In contrast, Theodore Finch's psychological landscape is one of performative contradiction. Outwardly flamboyant, internally fragmented, Finch uses humor and spectacle to conceal his distress:

"Is today a good day to die? This is something I ask myself in the morning when I wake up. In third period when I'm trying to keep my eyes open while Mr. Schroeder drones on and on. At the supper table as I'm passing the green beans. At night when I'm lying awake because my brain won't shut off due to all there is to think about. Is today the day? And if not today—when?" "Ladies and gentlemen," I shout, "I would like to welcome you to my death!" (Niven, 2015:11) These moments of dark comedy reflect what Santosa (2018:25) and Meyer (2010:441) describe as performative coping mechanisms—a psychological buffer against existential dread.

Finch rationalizes his suicidal thoughts through shifting justifications:

"Because we all have to die someday. I just want to be prepared." This isn't the reason, of course, but it will be enough for him. The truth is, there reasons, most of which change daily, like the thirteen fourth graders killed earlier this week when some SOB opened fire in their school gym, or the girl two years behind me who just died of cancer, or the man I saw outside the Mall Cinema kicking his dog, or my father." (Niven, 2015: 15) But these reasons are surface-level; the real tension lies in his fractured identity. At school, Finch is dubbed "The Freak," a label he simultaneously accepts and resents "They call me Freak. Sometimes I want to scream at them, but instead I smile, because if I don't, they might see me." (Niven, 2015:17)

Jung's concept of the persona and Carl Rogers' theory of incongruence help explain this dissonance between Finch's self-concept and lived reality. His bedroom serves as a sanctuary of collapse: "I haven't left my room in days. I sleep, I don't sleep. I watch the ceiling. I count the cracks." (Niven, 2015:99)

In his identity shifts—"80s Finch," "British Finch," "Sleep-Deprived Finch"—Finch enacts Erikson's identity crisis, not as normal development but as a search for coherence amid disintegration. His emotional labor, masked behind microexpressions, occasionally slips: "I laugh because I know if I don't, I'll start crying, and if I start, I might not stop." (Niven, 2015:157)

The home environment contributes significantly to Finch's deterioration. His mother's detachment is subtle yet harmful... "Still, I feel sorry for him because she loves him... and

because of something she said to me the day he left: ‘I never expected to be single at forty.’” (Niven, 2015:31) This emotional displacement places an invisible burden on Finch. When he returns after disappearing, his mother greets him with polite detachment: “Isn’t it nice to have your brother back, Decca?” (Niven, 2015:32)

The memory of the cardinal serves as symbolic encapsulation of emotional repression: “That cardinal was dead either way... because that’s what happens when you’re a Finch. The marriage dies. The love dies. The people fade away.” (Niven, 2015:118)

Finch’s father, an abusive figure, leaves lasting trauma: “He hit me, sometimes with his hands, sometimes with words.” (Niven, 2015:62) This absence of secure attachment—described by Bowlby’s theory leads to emotional withdrawal. His family’s optimism is laced with coercion “I tried to tell her, but the words stayed stuck. And when I finally spoke, she just nodded and said, ‘You’re strong.’” (Niven, 2015:184)

Barbara Held’s “tyranny of the positive attitude” critiques this kind of denial masked as support. Finch’s sense of invisibility is fully realized when he reflects “No one asked where I’d been. No one noticed I was gone.” (Niven, 2015:216) Connell’s theory of hegemonic masculinity explains how Finch is trapped in a culture where male vulnerability is a taboo. In literature, Finch’s household functions as “negative space,” defined more by absence than presence. In this void, Finch internalizes silence as survival.

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that *All the Bright Places* by Jennifer Niven illustrates toxic positivity as a powerful but invisible emotional force that shapes the lives of its main characters, Theodore Finch and Violet Markey. Through Violet, the novel shows how social expectations to appear “strong” after loss can lead to emotional suppression, delaying healing and fostering guilt. Finch, on the other hand, copes with internal chaos by masking his pain through humor and distraction, revealing how cultural pressure to maintain stability can deepen isolation.

The emotional effects of toxic positivity in the novel are significant. Violet’s recovery only begins when she acknowledges her grief and allows herself to feel without shame. In contrast, Finch receives little support from his environment and ultimately succumbs to emotional exhaustion and invisibility. These character trajectories emphasize that toxic positivity is more than forced optimism—it is a cultural norm that discourages emotional honesty and silences vulnerability.

Through narrative structure, symbolism, and character development, *All the Bright Places* presents toxic positivity not just as a personal burden, but as a social construct reinforced by families, schools, and peers. Literary elements such as silence, water, and the color blue act as emotional vocabularies, helping readers access what the characters struggle to express directly. The novel encourages empathy and challenges mainstream ideals of recovery and resilience by showing that true healing begins when emotional complexity is allowed to surface.

In the end, this research reaffirms the value of literature as a tool to explore psychological realities. Niven’s work invites readers to reflect on how modern culture often prioritizes emotional performance over truth, and why validating pain is essential to meaningful connection and recovery.

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