

Unraveling the Splintered Self: A Study of Alaska Young in

John Green's *Looking for Alaska*

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Abstract

In the contemporary times, the most common crisis that increasingly needs attention is splintering of self. This generally occurs among the young adult who faces problems and challenges, like broken relationships, mental health, family dynamics, social pressures and inner conflicts such as self-doubt, identity crises, alienation and emotional struggles. John Green, an eminent writer of the modern Young Adult Fiction delves deeper into the minds of these young adults and address their inner struggles by his exceptional writings. This paper aims to unravel the splintered self of the main character named Alaska Young in the Green's novel *Looking for Alaska*. It intends to analyze the inner conflicts experienced by Alaska,

examining her character traits. The novel showcases her dark past or improper childhood and portrays Alaska as an eccentric, quirky, fun-loving, risk-taking, imaginative, attractive and prankster young adult. Although she is portrayed as a strong and independent girl character, her splintered self remains concealed, without expressing her self-destructive or self-damaged traits. Eventually she faces death in order to escape her labyrinth of suffering. Thus, this paper critically explores the sufferings and problems of the young adult girl character named Alaska Young and attempt to give a deeper insight of her mind which leads to her splintered self. It also tries to highlight how her behavioral patterns reflect broader elements of dissociation, detachment and identity through psychoanalytical aspect of the character.

Keywords: Dissociation, Detachment, Identity, Splintered Self, Young Adult

Introduction

Young Adult Fiction is one of the most thriving genres in the contemporary literature, resonating deeper thoughts of young adults. Friendship, love, broken relationships, search of identity, gender issues, parental relationship, inner conflict, trauma, dark pasts and improper childhood are the common subject matters among the genre of Young Adult Fiction. These themes not only reflect the real-life challenges of young adults but emphasize the need to address them in the current era. This is very evident in the works of John Green, who is an American based most prominent writer in the genre of Young Adult Fiction. In an interview with “Penguin Teen”, John Green stated that, “I think we need to listen to young people. I think we need to be inspired by their idealism and optimism and their belief that the world can be better”. From this statement it is apparent that, the characters of Young Adult Fiction often grapple with self-discovery, torn between the desire to conform to societal expectations and the need to embrace their true selves. Through his various novels like *The Fault in Our Stars*, *Paper Towns*, *Looking for Alaska*, *Turtles All the Way Down*, and *An Abundance of Katherines*, as well as collaborative books like *Will Grayson Will Grayson* and

Let it Snow: Three Holiday Romances, Green addresses these realistic issues and portrays the young adults as a complex individuals struggling in the turbulence of their coming of age phase.

Inner struggle or conflict is prevalent in the most parts of Young Adult genre as the common life subject, and it portrays young adult characters' real struggle as the main storyline through which their problems are thoroughly examined and explored. This inner conflict can result from depression, guilt, grief, anxiety and other issues which the young adults undergo today. However these issues or problems are not viewed or taken seriously due to factors such as their age, the nature of the issues, stereotypes, biases, power dynamics, and generation gaps. Despite this negligence, author's like John Green, delves deeper into the psyche of young adults and navigate their emotional journey and emphasizes on the need of mental health and well-being.

Despite its progressiveness, the genre of Young Adult Fiction often portrays the female characters merely as a stock figure or stereotype which is termed as "Manic Pixie Dream Girl", a term coined by film critic Nathan Robin. Such representations suppress their individuality and are often used as a catalyst to promote the male characters. However in the contemporary phase, authors like Green, consciously writes about the emotional aspects of the female characters highlighting the necessity and importance to examine the realistic issues faced by the young adult girls to help them overcome their splintered or fragmented self.

Materials and Methods

Dr. Janina Fisher, a Psychologist, in her book "Healing the Fragmented Selves of Trauma Survivors: Overcoming Internal Self Alienation" explains splintered self or the fragmented self as a dissociation or detachment of self, lacking identity, forgetting personal information and having number of distinct identities. Through these elements she talks about

Internal Self- Alienation and defines how an individual uses defense mechanisms like dissociation and detachment to protect him from overwhelming emotional pain or distress associated with traumatic experiences which is quoted in the text as, “Splitting or fragmenting in this way is an ingenious and adaptive survival strategy- but one with steep price. To ensure that the rejected “not me” child is kept out of the way (i.e., out of consciousness) requires that, long after the traumatic events are over, individuals must continue to rely on dissociation, denial, and/or self-hatred for enforcing the disconnection.” (Fisher 19). Also, Ramesh Prasad Panigrahi, in his paper entitled, “The Splintered Self Character and Vision in Sam Shepards Plays” mentions ‘Splintering’ occurs when an individual can’t cope with problems, when he alienates himself and when his actions and words are indifferent. Also he points out that splintering result in unresolved guilt and negative emotions which lead to taking defensive measures like playing a game, self-alienation and ultimately total separation from the reality. A person with splintered self struggles with feelings of disconnection, confuse their own identity and lacks continuity in his personal thoughts and emotions.

Fisher also mentions that people with splintering nature are often troubled by intrusive fear, self-hatred, hopelessness, helplessness, self-harming impulses and determination to die. These self-destructive thoughts put the life of the person with splintering self at risk, which is quoted in the text as, “they can tell us very little about what evokes these self-destructive impulses... “I do it to punish myself”, “I hate myself”, “I don’t deserve to live”, “I’m disgusting-I wish I were dead.”” (Fisher 20). These are their thoughts whenever they encounter a conflict or trauma and to overcome them, they use defense mechanisms like disassociation and detachment.

Additionally, Fisher discusses how memories of conflict or trauma are carried from childhood to adolescence and into adulthood. Although people with splintered self, appear

normal, their wounds are deeply rooted within them. This is illustrated in the text as, “that other part of the child bears the emotional and physical imprint of the past, scans for signs of danger, and braces for the next set of threats and abandonments.”(Fisher 20). These traumatic memories often trigger their past unpleasant events, which appear as images, emotions, and physical reaction, eventually leading to their self-doubt and splintering of the self.

By reflecting on the elements of Fisher, the paper examines John Green’s debut novel, *Looking for Alaska* (published in 2005), one of the brilliant novels that captures the exquisite painful journey of the titular character, Alaska Young. It aims to trace the splintered self of Alaska Young and her traumatic experiences in her life from a young adult perspective. The author presents the narrative from the viewpoint of the male protagonist, Miles ‘Pudge’ Halter. The novel’s narration is divided into two parts: ‘Before’ and ‘After’, representing the events before and after the death of Alaska from the standpoint of the narrator.

Discussion

The novel is set in Culver Creek, Alabama and Miles ‘Pudge’ Halter, the protagonist of the novel narrates the story. A complex young adult Alaska Young is a prankster who is fun-loving, attractive, moody and mysterious. Alaska’s attractiveness immediately draws everyone’s attention, especially Pudge’s. Her character’s unpredictability is very evident from Pudge’s narration. At one time, she is very protective about her friends while other times she behaves indifferently. For instance, when Week day Warriors, a group of rich students from Culver Creek bully Pudge, she reacts rudely and says, ““Give me a break,” she said. “Come on. You know what? There are people with real problems I’ve got real problems. Mommy ain’t here, so buck up, big guy.”” (Green 37). The next day in class, her friends find her behavior mean as she never notices them and ignores which is quoted by the narrator as, “but she didn’t look at me once the entire class, even though I could notice little but her. Maybe she could be mean...but the way she talked that first night about getting out of the

labyrinth – so smart” (Green 40). That same evening, she visits Pudge and converses with him in a friendly manner, admitting, ““Nothing you can do!” she said excitedly. “I’m Unpredictable”” (Green 44). These incidents highlight her nature of dissociation, detachment and distinct identities.

When Alaska smokes and drinks, her friends question her behavior. This is shown when the narrator recalls, “Why do you smoke so damn fast” I asked... she smiled with all the delight of a kid on Christmas morning and said “Y’all smoke to enjoy it. I smoke to die.” (Green 57). She often shares her thoughts with her friends about her own death which is quoted as “I may die young,” she said, “but at least I’ll die smart” (Green 66). This showcases her detachment of self and shattered identity. Her purposeful talk about her own death expresses her inner grief and turmoil, which her friends don’t understand. This portrayal also highlights the traces of her splintered self.

Alaska Young shows sign of hopelessness in her conversations. She frequently talks about death and her dream, but her conversations are mysterious and unpredictable, as she instantly switches from one topic to another leaving her friends with confusion. At one point she talks about her ambition of teaching kids which is quoted by Pudge as, ““Like after college, know what I want to do? Teach disabled kids. I’m a good teacher, right? Shit, if I can teach you precalc, I can teach it to anybody. Like maybe kids with autism.”” (Green 68). Suddenly she switches the conversation by mentioning the labyrinth and escapism, which is reflected by the narrator as, ““You spend your whole life stuck in the labyrinth, thinking about how you’ll escape it one day,... You just use the future to escape the present.” (Green 68-69). When Pudge tells her about her unpredictable nature, she replies as quoted in the text, ““You never get me. That’s the whole point”” (69).

Even though she often dissociates or detaches herself from her friends Miles Halter, Chip ‘The Colonel’ Martin, Takumi Hikohito and Lara Buterskaya, Alaska still loves them

and cares for them in every way. As their confidant, she guides them personally and helps them with their studies. She even takes responsibility for the faults or wrongs committed by her friends. For instance, when they all smoke and get caught by the Dean, Alaska along with her friend The Colonel accepts the blame and covers up for their other friends, which Pudge quotes as, “Why have Alaska confess when she’d already been in trouble so many times?” (Green 73). She also accepts the punishment of cleaning the dishes in the Cafeteria for ten work hours given by the Jury of the school.

Alaska often pranks everyone; in particular, she plans to take revenge against the Weekday Warriors along with her friends. For instance, when the Weekday Warriors flood her room and cause damage to her books and bully her friends Pudge and The Colonel, she takes revenge during a holiday by mixing dye into their hair conditioner and sends fake reports to Weekday Warriors’ house. In another prank, she, along with her friends, wets the floor and creates a puddle to confuse everyone. Their most extreme prank involves setting off firecrackers to create chaos in the campus but narrowly escape from the Dean. These incidents reveal her rebellious and unconvincing nature. When her friends learn about her death caused by a car accident, they think it is her prank and trick, but they later realize it is true. As a memorial prank, her friends pay tribute to her by hiring a stripper for the Speaker Day in remembrance of her which they call it “The Alaska Young Memorial Prank”. Alaska’s unstable relationships with her loved ones create emotional wavering and also reveal how this leads to her alienation and detachment from the outside world. This adds up to her unpredictable personality.

Other incidents that prove Alaska’s rebellious nature include her frequent clashes with authority. She breaks the rules of the Culver Creek School by smoking and drinking excessively and providing her friends with cigarettes and drinks. By possessing a fake liquor card, she buys large amounts of liquor for herself and her friends from “Coosa Liquors: We

Cater to Your Spiritual Needs”. Even when she escapes from the campus through illegal means and gets caught, Alaska manages to get away from the problem using some tactics. She seeks out these thrilling adventures to overcome her loneliness and fear.

Alaska remembers only the glimpses of relationship with her parents. She recalls the past incident when her mom wanted Alaska to be named Harmony Springs Young, whereas her dad wanted to name her Mary Frances Young. However on her seventh birthday, Alaska given the chance to choose her own name, first, she chose, ‘Chad’, which refers to a country in Africa that her father rejected as it was a boy’s name. She chose the name ‘Alaska’ which she interprets as, “It’s from an Aleut word, Alyeska. It means, ‘That which the sea breaks against and I love that.’” (Green 67). This choice reflects her desire to distance herself from home and symbolizes her detachment, grief, and estrangement.

She reflects these elements when she questions about labyrinth of suffering and searches a way to escape from her grief and pain. She asks Pudge to find a way out of it which is quoted by him as, “Let’s make a deal: you figure out what the labyrinth is and how to get out of it, and I’ll get you laid.”(Green 29). However during their picnic night at the Barn, Alaska initiates a game named “Best Day and Worst Day”, in which she opens up about her good days and her memories of visiting zoo with her mother. Also, shares her painful memories with her friends about her mother’s death which happened at her age of eight. Alaska considers this incident as the central moment of her life and describes it as a worst day which is reflected in the text as:

“then she screamed, and I ran out, and she had fallen over. She was lying on the floor, holding her head and jerking. And I freaked out. I should have called 911, but I just started screaming and crying until finally she stopped jerking...but by then she was plenty dead. Aneurysm. Worst day. I win. You drink.” (Green145).

In the above lines of the text, Alaska describes the sight of her mother's death. As a child, she didn't understand her mother's Aneurysm and didn't call for helpline 911 to save her mother, which led to her death leaving Alaska with a deep sense of guilt. This tragedy strains Alaska's relationship with her father, who blames and hurts her for her mother's death, which desist her from her father.

In another incident, she was caught by Mr.Starnes, the Dean of Culver Creek School for violating the rules of the school by sneaking off from the campus in the night and for having a wine in her car. When the Dean gave her a choice to choose between getting expelled or disclosing the students who broke the rules, she told the truth about her roommate Marya and her boyfriend Paul's intimate behavior. Alaska's decision to expel her friends from the school for their misconduct saved her from being forced to leave the school. This action of blurting out the truth reflects Alaska's fear of loneliness, as she has been already alienated from her father. Pudge says her labyrinth of suffering as, "she blurted out Marya's name because it was the first that came to mind, because in that moment she didn't want to get expelled and couldn't think past that moment. She was scared, sure. But more importantly, maybe she'd been scared of being paralysed by fear again." (Green 147). This incident signifies one of the root causes for her splintered self.

During the Christmas holidays, she doesn't visit home because she feels the effect of loneliness and alienation. At the same time, her father never visits her making Alaska often feel abandoned since her mother's death. She stays back in the campus often accompanied by her friends. Even after Alaska's death her aunt comes to collect her things, but not her father. This reflects the strained relationship between father- daughter, their emotional distance and unresolved feelings. This conflict is expressed through the narrator as follows:

"Were you scared of going home or something?"

She pulled away from me and gave me a Look of Doom that would have made the Eagle proud... and said, "There's no home."...

Still staring at me, she said, "I try not to be scared, you know. But I still ruin everything. I still fuck up." (Green 117).

Additionally, the author highlights Alaska's unstable relationship with Jake, a student from Vanderbilt, as well as her casual intimacy with her friend Justin from Old Vine Station. In several instances, she shows attraction toward Pudge but immediately pushes him away. Even the day before her death, she kisses him. This instability underscores her emotional imbalance, conflicted state of mind and loneliness.

In another event, being heavily drunk, Alaska approaches her friends Pudge and The Colonel, asking their help for leaving the campus. They also help her in escaping but the next day they learn about her death after she slams her car into a police van from their Dean. A few days after her funeral, they find a note written in her book with the words "Straight and fast" which is described in the novel as:

The whole passage was underlined in bleeding, water soaked black ink. But there was another ink, this one a crisp blue, post-flood, and an arrow led from 'How will I ever get out of this labyrinth!' to a margin note written in her loop-heavy cursive: Straight & Fast. (Green 186).

The above quote describes Alaska's conflicted thoughts of escaping the labyrinth of suffering, which she highlights in her book. Her friends inquire about her accident from the police and learn her accident is similar to her writing, which the narrator quotes in the novel as, "my lights was on and I turned the siren on, but the lights just kept comin' straight... she just barrellled inta me. I seen plenty, but I ain't never seen that. She didn't tarn. She didn't brake. She jest hit it. I wa'n't more than ten feet from the cruiser when she hit it. I thought I'd

die, but here ah am.”(Green 194). This illustration highlights how Alaska Young’s traumatic memory led her to choose a tragic end.

Later, Takumi, one of her friends, discovers the coincidence of Alaska’s death with her mother’s death anniversary. Her three friends also come to understand her feeling of guilt for forgetting her mother’s anniversary, which led to her tragic death in a car crash as she rushed to pay homage to her mother’s grave. This incident reflects Alaska’s difficulty to remember personal information, which is one of the elements of splintered self, which affects the life of Alaska Young. Though Alaska’s friends are unable to determine the true cause behind her death whether it is an accident or a suicide, Miles, the male narrator, uncovers Alaska’s plan to escape the labyrinth of suffering as quoted in the text as, “Straight and fast” (Green 186). According to him, Alaska’s plan to escape the labyrinth is an easier way than trying to overcome it, as she ran into a cop car which had its lights on which is evident from Pudge’s narrative as, ““*So drunk? So drunk?* The cop car would have its lights on. Pudge, she ran into a cop car that had lights on, “ he said hurriedly. “Straight and fast. Straight and fast. Out of the labyrinth.”” (Green 187). It is evident how her state of turbulence and self-destructive action lead to her own end.

Alaska’s inclination to party excessively by drinking and smoking, escaping campus to go on a road trip or to buy drinks, breaking school rules and playing pranks such as making the floor wet, burning crackers and sending fake reports reflects her escapism from the reality. All of these behaviors illustrate Alaska’s coping mechanisms for hiding her anxieties, struggles, guilt, conflicts and splintered self. However, she shatters emotionally in certain situations, such as revealing truth about her mother’s death or forming close relationships with her friends. This highlights Alaska’s ultimate struggle to escape the emotional turbulence within her and the personal imbalance in her nature.

Conclusion

From the above events and illustrations, it is evident that although Alaska's complexities are explored, it still primarily serves more as a narrative device to support the male protagonist, Miles Halter, to understand his own life, rather than being developed as a primary character in her own right. Thus, despite being introduced as an enthusiastic and unique individual, Alaska is ultimately defeated by her splintered self in the end. The term "splintered self" is apt to describe Alaska because she is a deeply affected person who has her struggles disguised by a facade of confidence and self-reliance.

To conclude, the paper explores the predicament of Alaska Young, illustrating how her splintered self is a product of her emotional and psychological imbalanced nature, which grapples with self-alienation, grief, dissociation, and inner conflicts. She embodies the struggles of one's external and internal selves. It also collectively portrays a young adult whose tragic end is a poignant reflection of her unresolved internal conflicts. The recurring image of the labyrinth also represents Alaska's complex inner world, symbolizing her battle to find meaning in the chaos around her. Alaska's story serves as a powerful exploration of the effects of trauma and the challenges of reconciling disparate aspects of one's identity.

Moreover, Alaska acts as a reminder about man kind's struggle to overcome the inner conflicts and emotional struggle. Her life prompts to recognize the importance of empathy and the responsibility to support the needful. Also, she continues to remind the necessity of self-understanding and search for meaning in life despite odds. She teaches everyone to face their emotional imbalance and turmoil with courage and strength. Additionally, her journey highlights the significance of seeking medical help, engaging in therapy and maintaining communication with loved ones. Eventually, her tragic story illustrates that the journey toward healing is achievable only through self-acceptance, human connection, and the bravery to face one's own inner struggles.

Furthermore, Alaska Young's story reinforces an important message that mental health should be regarded as important as physical health. Also, emphasizes that seeking help is not a sign of showing weakness but a strength that enables to rebuild the splintered or fragmented self. By offering help, creating awareness, fostering empathy and building relationship among individuals and communities can lead to a compassionate world. In addition, Alaska Young's character is seen as an inspiration for hope, healing, willpower to overcome inner conflict and reconstruct the self.

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