



Navigating Mental Confinement And Intrusive Thoughts In *Turtles All The Way Down*

Adithya C.L

Research Scholar

Department of English

Noorul Islam Centre For Higher Education, Kumaracoil,
Kanyakumari District, Tamil Nadu, India -629180.

Abstract:

Turtles All the Way Down by John Green explores the inner world of Aza Holmes, a teenage girl who struggles with persistent anxiety and obsessive thoughts. The novel emphasizes Aza's internal experiences, portraying her psychological struggle as a form of mental confinement. Mental confinement refers to the repetitive and uncontrollable thoughts that dominate Aza's mind, creating fear, doubt, and emotional tension. Intrusive thoughts repeatedly enter her consciousness, shaping her actions and limiting her emotional freedom, while isolating her within her own mind. Through moments of self-reflection, Aza begins to question the validity of her fears and recognize patterns in her intrusive thinking. This questioning does not eliminate her anxiety but allows her to manage it more effectively and reduces the intensity of emotional distress. Emotional support from friends and loved ones further aids her in coping with these struggles, highlighting the importance of interpersonal relationships in navigating mental challenges. By focusing on awareness and emotional endurance rather than complete recovery, the novel presents a realistic portrayal of psychological struggle. This study demonstrates that Green's narrative fosters understanding and empathy, showing that mental confinement and intrusive thoughts are ongoing challenges that can be approached with reflection and support. Ultimately, the novel emphasizes resilience and relational care as key elements in enduring mental struggle.

Keywords:

Aza Holmes, Mental confinement, Intrusive thoughts, Anxiety, Resilience, Coping strategies.

Turtles All the Way Down by John Green explores the inner world of a teenage girl named Aza Holmes, who struggles with persistent anxiety and obsessive thoughts. Unlike traditional coming-of-age novels that focus on external conflicts, this novel concentrates on the mental and emotional experiences of the protagonist. Aza's life is shaped not by dramatic events alone, but by her constant inner battle with thoughts she cannot control. Through friendships, family relationships, and moments of self-reflection, the novel presents a realistic portrayal of psychological struggle. Green's narrative draws attention to the invisible nature of mental suffering and how it affects everyday life, making the novel an important text for studying inner conflict and emotional distress. The novel's authenticity is widely acknowledged, as Green has openly discussed how his own lifelong experience with OCD informed the narrative, allowing the text to resonate strongly with readers facing similar struggles (Green).

This study focuses on the ideas of mental confinement and intrusive thoughts as presented in the novel. Mental confinement refers to the condition in which the mind feels trapped within repetitive and uncontrollable thoughts, limiting emotional freedom and clarity. Intrusive thoughts, which repeatedly enter Aza's mind without her intention, create anxiety, fear, and self-doubt. These thoughts dominate her thinking and influence her actions, making it difficult for her to feel at peace. Rather than being physical restrictions, these experiences form a psychological confinement that isolates Aza within her own mind. By examining these elements, the article highlights how the novel represents mental struggle as an internal prison shaped by anxiety and obsessive thinking.

The study adopts a psychoanalytic approach to understand Aza's mental condition and emotional experiences. Psychoanalysis focuses on inner conflicts, unconscious fears, anxiety, and repetitive thought patterns that influence behaviour. Psychoanalytic theory, particularly as developed by Sigmund Freud, examines how inner mental conflicts create psychological distress (Klages). Freud was interested in understanding how anxiety, fear, and unconscious tension influence human behaviour, especially in conditions described as neurosis. From this perspective, mental suffering is not always caused by physical illness but by unresolved conflicts within the mind. This theoretical framework helps explain Aza Holmes's experience in *Turtles All the Way Down*, where her intrusive thoughts arise from internal anxiety rather than external causes. Psychoanalysis therefore provides an effective lens to study mental confinement and repetitive thought patterns in the novel.

Through this lens, Aza's intrusive thoughts can be seen as expressions of unresolved fear and emotional tension. Her constant self-monitoring and anxiety reveal the struggle between awareness and loss of control. Instead of offering medical explanations, the psychoanalytic reading helps interpret how the mind reacts to fear and uncertainty. This approach allows the article to explore the deeper psychological layers of the character without turning the literary analysis into a clinical study.

Although the novel presents intense psychological suffering, it also suggests the importance of awareness, support, and understanding. Aza does not completely overcome her condition, but she gradually becomes more aware of her thoughts and their impact on her life. Her relationships with friends and moments of reflection help her recognize that she is more than her anxiety. This article therefore does not treat mental confinement as a hopeless state, but as an experience that can be navigated through awareness and emotional connection. By analyzing mental confinement and intrusive thoughts in *Turtles All the Way Down*, the study aims to show how literature can create understanding, empathy, and hope for readers who face similar struggles.

Psychoanalysis focuses on inner conflicts that take place within the human mind. It studies how unresolved fears, desires, and anxieties shape thoughts and behaviour. Repeated thoughts are seen as signs of deeper psychological tension rather than random mental activity. In *Turtles All the Way Down*, the character's recurring thoughts reflect this inner conflict, showing how the mind struggles to find balance and control. Intrusive thoughts in the novel mainly arise from anxiety and fear. These thoughts appear suddenly and repeatedly, even when the character tries to ignore them. Fear of uncertainty and loss increases the intensity of these thoughts, making them difficult to escape. From a psychoanalytic view, such thoughts emerge when anxiety dominates the unconscious mind.

The novel presents mental struggle as an internal conflict rather than a physical illness. The mind constantly battles between rational understanding and overwhelming fear. This struggle shows how psychological tension operates silently within the individual. Psychoanalysis helps explain this condition as a conflict of the mind, not simply a medical problem. As the thoughts repeat, they create a sense of mental confinement. The character feels trapped within her own mind, unable to break free from obsessive thinking. This mental imprisonment highlights how intrusive thoughts control emotions and behaviour. Through this portrayal, the novel clearly demonstrates psychoanalytic ideas of inner conflict, anxiety, and psychological entrapment.

Aza Holmes experiences mental confinement as she feels trapped inside her own mind. Even when she wants to think normally or enjoy everyday moments, her thoughts pull her inward. This confinement is not physical but psychological, where her mind becomes a space she cannot easily escape. Her inner world limits her freedom, making her feel isolated even when she is surrounded by people who care about her. Aza's thoughts

repeat again and again, especially those related to fear, contamination, and uncertainty. These repetitive thoughts interrupt her daily life and prevent her from finding mental peace.

From a psychoanalytic perspective, such repetition reflects unresolved anxiety that keeps returning from the unconscious. The repetition strengthens her mental confinement and deepens her emotional struggle. Although Aza is aware that her thoughts are irrational, she cannot easily control them. Her mind constantly questions her actions and body, creating an endless cycle of doubt. This lack of control highlights the conflict between her rational understanding and her emotional fear. Psychoanalysis explains this as an inner struggle where anxiety overpowers conscious reasoning.

This continuous mental conflict creates fear, confusion, and emotional pain in Aza's life. She feels exhausted by her thoughts and frustrated by her inability to silence them. The emotional pain affects her relationships, self-image, and sense of stability. Overall, Aza's experience shows how mental confinement caused by intrusive thoughts leads to deep psychological distress, making it the central focus of the novel's psychoanalytic reading.

Aza Holmes is aware that something is not right within her mind. Unlike characters who are completely unaware of their struggles, Aza recognizes that her thoughts do not function in a normal or comfortable way. She understands that her fear of contamination and constant doubt are not ordinary worries. This awareness becomes the first step toward self-understanding. Although it does not immediately free her from distress, it allows her to name her struggle and acknowledge her inner conflict. As her awareness grows, Aza begins to question her own thoughts. She does not blindly accept every fear that enters her mind; instead, she asks why these thoughts occur and whether they truly represent reality. This questioning reflects an important psychoanalytic moment where the conscious mind attempts to challenge anxiety-driven impulses. Even though her intrusive thoughts often return, her ability to question them shows mental resistance rather than complete surrender.

Through this process, Aza slowly tries to understand herself. She reflects on her emotions, her fears, and her reactions to everyday situations. Rather than viewing herself only as someone with a problem, she begins to see her mind as complex and layered. This self-exploration helps her recognise that her struggles are part of her psychological experience, not a personal failure. Such understanding encourages compassion toward herself. This growing awareness helps Aza cope with her struggles gradually. Although her intrusive thoughts do not disappear, she learns to live alongside them with greater patience. She seeks support from friends and continues to engage with life despite her fears. Awareness allows her to respond to her thoughts with less panic and more reflection. Over time, this coping process reduces emotional intensity and creates small moments of relief.

This stage marks the beginning of positivity in the novel. The focus shifts from complete mental confinement to cautious acceptance and resilience. Aza's journey does not offer a simple cure, but it presents hope through understanding, awareness, and emotional endurance. The novel suggests that recovery does not always mean freedom from struggle but the ability to live meaningfully despite it. This positive turn highlights the importance of self-awareness as a powerful step toward psychological healing.

Aza Holmes does not face her mental struggles completely on her own. Throughout *Turtles All the Way Down*, the presence of supportive friends and understanding adults plays an important role in her emotional survival. Her friend Daisy stands beside her despite not fully understanding the complexity of Aza's intrusive thoughts. Daisy's support may sometimes appear imperfect, but it reflects genuine care and concern. Similarly, adult figures, including professionals and mentors, attempt to guide Aza toward understanding her mental condition rather than dismissing it. This support system highlights that mental struggles are not meant to be faced in isolation. From a psychoanalytic perspective, external support helps stabilize inner conflict by offering reassurance, structure, and emotional grounding.

Although Aza often feels trapped within her own thoughts, the novel makes it clear that she is not entirely alone. Even when she withdraws emotionally, others continue to reach out to her. This presence reminds her that her struggles do not define her worth or isolate her completely from human connection. Her friends may not always know the right words, but their continued presence prevents total emotional isolation. Psychoanalysis emphasizes the importance of interpersonal relationships in shaping emotional resilience, and Aza's experience

reflects this idea. Knowing that someone remains beside her even during moments of silence offers a quiet form of comfort.

Relationships in the novel provide Aza with emotional strength rather than solutions. Her bond with Daisy, her interactions with Davis, and her engagement with adults offer emotional anchors during moments of intense anxiety. These relationships do not erase her intrusive thoughts, but they help her endure them. Emotional strength emerges not from curing the mind but from sustaining emotional connections. The novel shows that relationships help Aza remain connected to reality when her thoughts threaten to overwhelm her. From a psychoanalytic viewpoint, such relationships help balance internal turmoil by reinforcing emotional security and trust.

Support from others plays a crucial role in Aza's mental survival. While her intrusive thoughts persist, emotional support helps her continue daily life and maintain a sense of self. Encouragement, understanding, and patience from others reduce feelings of shame and self-blame. This support enables her to confront her fears without complete withdrawal from the world. Psychoanalytic theory recognizes that healing often begins through relational understanding rather than isolation, and Aza's journey reflects this process. Support becomes a means of endurance rather than immediate recovery.

Overall, *Turtles All the Way Down* presents hope without exaggeration. The novel does not promise a complete escape from mental confinement, nor does it offer unrealistic solutions. Instead, it presents hope through awareness, support, and emotional endurance. Aza's journey suggests that mental struggle does not disappear overnight, but understanding oneself and receiving support from others can make survival possible. Through Aza's experiences, the novel affirms that hope exists not in perfection, but in persistence, connection, and self-awareness. This empathetic impact has also been recognized by critics. In a review published in *The Guardian*, Matt Haig notes that *Turtles All the Way Down* resonates deeply with anxious readers because of its honest and compassionate portrayal of obsessive thought patterns and emotional struggle (Haig). Such critical reception reinforces the novel's role in promoting awareness and empathy rather than offering simplistic recovery narratives.

Mental struggle, as portrayed in *Turtles All the Way Down*, does not end suddenly or completely. Aza's intrusive thoughts and anxiety do not disappear at the conclusion of the novel, and this realism is one of the text's greatest strengths. The novel avoids presenting mental health recovery as a quick or linear process. Instead, it shows that mental suffering often continues in subtle forms, even when individuals learn to cope better. From a psychoanalytic perspective, inner conflicts and repeated thoughts are deeply rooted in the unconscious and therefore require time, patience, and understanding. Aza's experience reflects the reality that healing is not about eliminating struggle but about learning how to live with it. This honest portrayal prevents romanticisation and highlights the complexity of mental confinement.

Awareness plays a crucial role in helping Aza move forward. Although her intrusive thoughts persist, her growing awareness allows her to recognize that these thoughts are not her true self. By questioning her fears and acknowledging her condition, Aza begins to create a distance between herself and her anxiety. This self-awareness does not cure her, but it helps her manage her responses and reduce self-blame. Psychoanalytically, awareness brings unconscious fears closer to consciousness, making them less overpowering. The novel suggests that progress begins not with control, but with understanding. Awareness becomes a quiet strength that helps Aza continue living despite uncertainty.

The novel also promotes understanding by encouraging readers to look beyond surface behaviour and recognize inner struggles. Through Aza's perspective, *Turtles All the Way Down* helps readers understand how intrusive thoughts operate and how mental confinement affects everyday life. The text challenges common misconceptions about mental illness by presenting it as an internal struggle rather than a visible weakness. This understanding fosters compassion rather than judgment. By presenting mental struggle through lived experience, the novel educates readers without being didactic, allowing them to empathize with those facing similar challenges in real life.

Ultimately, literature like *Turtles All the Way Down* creates empathy and offers hope without false promises. The novel does not suggest complete recovery, but it affirms the value of support, awareness, and emotional endurance. Through Aza's journey, readers learn that hope exists in continuing, in being understood, and in not facing struggles alone. The text demonstrates how literature can act as a space for recognition and emotional connection, helping readers feel seen and less isolated. In this way, the novel reinforces the power of literature to deepen emotional understanding, encourage empathy, and gently remind readers that even within mental confinement, movement forward is possible.

Works Cited:

Green, John. *Turtles All the Way Down*. Dutton Books, 2017.

Haig, Matt. "Turtles All the Way Down by John Green Review – a New Modern Classic." *The Guardian*, 10 Oct. 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2017/oct/10/john-green-turtles-all-way-down-review>, Accessed 26 December 2025.

"John Green on How a Lifetime of OCD Inspired *Turtles All the Way Down*." *YouTube*, uploaded by NOCD, 2024, <https://youtu.be/zM0EJiVB7lw>, Accessed 27 December 2025.

Klages, Mary. *Literary Theory: A Guide for the Perplexed*. Bloomsbury, 2015.

