



## THE PORTRAYAL OF RELATIONAL AGGRESSION AS SEEN IN *THIRTEEN REASONS WHY* THE NOVEL BY JAY ASHER

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### Abstract

This study analyzes relational aggression in Jay Asher's *\*Thirteen Reasons Why\** through Burke's sociological approach. Relational aggression, a form of indirect violence intended to harm social relationships, is explored in the novel as a central theme, particularly through the experiences of the protagonist, Hannah Baker. The research examines how bullying, social exclusion, rumor-spreading, and sexual harassment significantly impact Hannah's mental health, ultimately leading to her suicide. By highlighting these dynamics, the study emphasizes the need for awareness and intervention in adolescent mental health issues. It concludes that relational aggression is not only an interpersonal problem but also a societal issue that reflects deeper power dynamics within social structures.

**Keywords:** bullying, relational aggression, sexual harassment, suicide

### INTRODUCTION

English literature is a reflection or depiction of society, and usually literature records or captures events and experiences that occur in society in the form of reflections in the form of literary elements that are converted into literary elements. A language or tradition and human traditions are represented through literary works (Masyhur et al., 2023). Aggression that seeks to harm a person's standing in a group or social ties is known as relational aggression. According to Anderson and Bushman (2002), aggression is defined as behaviour or acts meant to cause bodily or psychological harm to another person. A person may exhibit aggression in a number of ways, from overt physical acts like striking or attacking to more covert verbal or emotional ones like social manipulation, threats, or insults. Here, there is also something called relational aggression in literature, which refers to the way the author depicts forms of aggression that do not involve physical violence but are intended to damage a person's social relationships, reputation, or emotional well-being. Relational aggression is used to develop characters, especially in showing power dynamics, interpersonal conflict, and inner struggles. Relational aggression is used to develop characters, especially in showing power dynamics, interpersonal conflict, and inner struggles. For example, a character who is the perpetrator of relational aggression might be described as manipulative, vengeful, or jealous (Patricia H. Hawley, 2007). Meanwhile, the victims of this aggression are often depicted as experiencing social isolation, depression, or decreased self-confidence, as seen in the character of Hannah Baker from *"Thirteen Reasons Why."* And in literature, there is also the novel *"Thirteen Reasons Why"* by Jay Asher, which depicts various forms of relational aggression experienced by Hannah Baker, such as social exclusion, rumours, and betrayal, which ultimately contributed to her decision to commit suicide.

In the 2007 book *13 Reasons Why*, Hannah Baker experiences relational aggression in the form of bullying, sexual harassment, and suicide. Hannah recorded thirteen voice memos detailing her reasons for ending her life. These included her first kiss, a strained friendship, stalking friends, her sexual orientation, pestering the president of the student council, stealing poems, and her fondness for Clay, Justin, Bryce Walker, and Mr. Porter, the school counsellor. Given that Hannah was afraid to disclose her rapist, the author concludes that her counsellor was unable to offer any solutions to her difficulties.

The book *Thirteen Reasons Why* delves into topics such as mental health, bullying, and the consequences of one's behaviour on other people. It offers a clearer grasp of how seemingly insignificant actions may have a big impact.

Along with encouraging reflection on one's actions and academic conversations around bullying, the book also promotes empathy, communication, and sensitivity.

The contribution of this research in the field of literature is that this research can increase the understanding of how modern literature deals with themes such as mental health, bullying, and suicide. This will enrich literary studies on how contemporary social issues are integrated into literary works and how they affect readers.

In the novel *Thirteen Reasons Why*, there are several significant Relevant Social Issues Depictions: *Thirteen Reasons Why* explores social issues such as bullying, depression, emotional abuse, and suicide. In my research, it is urgent to discuss because there are several things, such as the Increase in Mental Health Cases Among Teenagers. The issues raised in *Thirteen Reasons Why*, such as bullying, depression, and suicide, reflect the increasing mental health problems among teenagers. The urgency of this research is driven by the need to understand and address these issues quickly through the medium of literature, which has a major influence on young audiences.

## **METHOD**

This research applied library research and a qualitative descriptive method in the form of narration. The narration is reflected in language. From that, this could be the way of society describes the case of relational aggression that happened to the main character in the *Thirteen Reasons Why* by Jay through the text (Mahendra & Amelia, 2020). The result of this study is in the form of narration that is supported by data collected by the writer. This method is to describe the phenomena of relational aggression towards the main character inside *Thirteen Reasons Why* by Jay Asher. By utilising the descriptive qualitative method, the researcher can present data in the form of narrations and dialogues, allowing for a comprehensive portrayal of the topic (E. Ngestirosa Endang Woro Kasih & Fajar Dani Julian Tama, 2023). In qualitative descriptive methodology, the writer focused on the content of analysis, social actions that become the representative of social life that are reflected in the main character inside the novel, because the data analysed is not aimed at accepting or rejecting the hypothesis as the quantitative method. This method is different from quantitative methodology, which is the result and the object of research focuses on numbers (Rido, 2015).

## **FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION**

This chapter will discuss the answers to the research problem formulation that represents relational aggression in Jay Asher's novel *Thirteen Reasons Why*. Several steps are taken by classifying data to find out relational aggression in the novel using Burke's sociological approach. In the initial stage before conducting the analysis, data was taken from Jay Asher's book *Thirteen Reasons Why* as the object of research. The researcher also used data that was relevant to the research, such as articles, journals, books, and previous research studies.

The data will be collected and used as reference material to support and complete the research. After that, the author classifies the data into several parts according to Relational Aggression in this novel. In the discussion below, the researcher explains Relational Aggression, especially in California, from Jay Asher's and society's perspectives. Relational Aggression has several aspects, namely bullying, sexual harassment, and suicide. All data is taken from the case of Hannah Baker as a California teenager in Jay Asher's novel *Thirteen Reasons Why*. Finally, the data will be presented as follows:

### ***Jay Asher's Perspective of Bullying***

The novel *Thirteen Reasons Why* by Jay Asher tells the story of the main female character, named Hannah Baker, who is a student at Liberty High School. Hannah Baker committed suicide because of the bullying she experienced throughout her life. The story then tells the Thirteen Reasons Why Hannah Baker committed suicide and who the 25 people were who bullied and hurt her. The novel *Thirteen Reasons Why* raises the social

theme in high schools that are prone to bullying at school. The novel also tells about emotional instability, as well as pressure from various angles that can have a depressing effect on someone who experiences mental injury due to bullying.

The researcher argues that from the bullying case that befell Hannah Baker, there was no social attention in Hannah Baker's environment towards the bullying. The researcher argues that the issue from the novel can be used as an object of analysis because it discusses bullying and is in line with the definition of bullying itself. According to research conducted by Nicki R. Crick and Jennifer K. Grotmeter (1995), bullying is defined as a form of aggression that aims to hurt or damage others. Crick and Grotmeter emphasise more on a form of aggression that is different from that usually discussed in bullying research, namely relational aggression Nicki R. Crick and Jennifer K. Grotmeter, 1995). This behaviour includes deliberate intention to hurt others with repetition and over a long time, causing an imbalance of power so that victims have difficulty defending themselves effectively (Cowie & Jennifer, 2008).

The quotation shows the first bullying felt by Hannah Baker. At that time, a senior student, named Justin Foley, spread false rumours about Hannah. Justin bragged and told people that he kissed Hannah. However, Hannah was a new and junior student. As a junior, Hannah suddenly became famous because of the false rumours. The effect of bullying caused by the rumour could be seen in the novel on page 23.

*I know what you're all thinking. Hannah Baker is a slut.  
(Asher, 2007, p. 23)*

The researcher assumed that it could be considered a type of bullying because it hurt Hannah's feelings. The stranger said something impolite, and it happened exactly after Hannah's scandal with Justin, which made the researcher agree that the quotation above showed the bullying case of Hannah. Through the quotation above, the researcher could see that Hannah was subjected name-calling, as she was called a "bitch" and "slut" by everyone in the town, even though it was not her schoolmate. The false rumour spread fast in the town. No one knew the truth, yet everyone scolded, reviled, and ridiculed Hannah for the false rumour.

Anyone who took the false rumour seriously in the story decided to leave Hannah Baker instead of seeking the truth. She started to lose touch with certain people, which demonstrates the conduct of bullying. Jay Asher offers a picture of how bullying occurs, especially in school, which is produced by false rumours. *Thirteen Reasons Why*, Jay Asher's critically acclaimed debut novel, is available on bookshelves worldwide. This book tells the compelling tale of a young girl who is driven to take her own life. Asher was inspired to write the novel by a close cousin who had tried to commit suicide. Asher used this young woman's mental state and thoughts to help him write *Thirteen Reasons Why* because she attempted suicide at roughly the same age as Hannah Baker, the book's main character (Ellam, 2014). According to Asher, *Thirteen Reasons Why* addresses themes about teenagers (Ellam, 2014). The narrative, therefore, has application to current events.

A report by Benson in 2021 found that California, where *Thirteen Reasons Why* is set, has the largest bullying problem compared to other states (Benson, 2021). Bullying in California mostly occurs in schools. It was noted that 23.5% of high school students in California have been victims of bullying, making California the state with the highest number of bullying cases (Benson, 2021).

This information is consistent with Hannah Baker's experience, who was bullied while attending Liberty High School in California. Hannah lost her ties with several individuals in her life, such as her fiancé and friends, as a result of the bullying and untrue rumours she endured. As stated below, it can be found on pages 29–30 of the book.

*I can still see Justin huddled among his friends at school.  
I remember Hannah walking by, and the whole group stopped talking.*

*They averted their eyes. And when she passed, they started laughing.  
Watching Justin and his friends that day,  
I got the sense that there was more to her than I knew.  
Then, later, I heard about her getting felt up at rocket slide.  
And she was so new to school that the rumors  
overshadowed everything else I knew about her.  
Hannah was beyond me, I figured. Too experienced to even think about me.*

*(Asher, 2007, p. 29-30)*

The article observes Justin and his friends' behavior toward Hannah, noting how they stop talking and avert their eyes as she walks by, only to laugh once she passes. This subtle act of social exclusion reflects the group's discomfort and judgment, likely fueled by rumours about Hannah. The narrator recalls hearing gossip about her being "felt up" at a playground, and how these rumors have changed his perception, causing him to see her as "too experienced" and distant.

In summary, the article highlights the negative effects of social dynamics rooted in gossip and exclusion. It stresses the need for more empathy and understanding in relationships, especially in schools. By addressing these issues, we can create more supportive environments where people are appreciated for who they truly are instead of being judged by harmful rumors. Hannah's story serves as a reminder of the importance of positive peer relationships and the need for compassion in navigating social challenges.

*The first to drop out was Alex. We were friendly when we saw each other in the halls, but it never went by beyond that. At least, with me it didn't. Now down to the two of us, Jessica and me, the whole thing changed pretty fast. The talks become chitchat and not much more. Then, Jessica stopped going, and though I went to Monet's a few more times hoping one of them might wander in, eventually I stopped going, too.*

*(Asher, 2007, p. 63)*

Hannah Baker talks about her damaged friendships with her pals in the aforementioned remark. Alex was the first buddy to cut ties with Hannah. It is revealed throughout the book that Hannah and Alex had a close relationship. However, after word got out about Hannah and Justin, Alex abruptly withdrew. Hannah also lost Jessica in addition to this. Jessica was a close friend of Hannah's as well. They used to hang around and chat a lot, but after the rumour, everything was different. They used to hang out and chat all the time, but after the gossip, things were different.

In addition, Jay Asher's description of Hannah and Jessica's circumstances highlights another instance of social and psychological bullying. Before Jessica met Hannah, she detested and even made fun of her since Alex, her boyfriend, had told everyone that Hannah had the greatest ass. Everyone began to stare at Hannah strangely and make fun of her as a result. Hannah experienced psychological and social bullying as a result of Jessica and other individuals.

### ***Sexual Harassment in the Novel Thirteen Reasons Why***

Sexual harassment is the second topic that will be covered to examine how Jay Asher depicts relational aggression in *Thirteen Reasons Why*. A 2003 research defined sexual harassment as men acting in a non-reciprocal manner that forces women to subordinate their responsibilities as working women. Stated differently, sexual harassment occurs when a male engages in unethical behaviour towards a woman. Rape, forced dating, making sexual advances, and having sexual conversations with a woman without her consent are examples of sexual harassment behaviours (Wigati, 2003). Sexual harassment is another subject that the book *Thirteen Reasons Why* explores to illustrate adolescent life.

Hannah experienced sexual harassment in addition to psychological and social persecution after she was voted the woman with the best butt. Hannah was subjected to sexual harassment, as evidenced by the way Alex selected her as the woman with the finest butt and the way other guys began ogling her butt. Hannah experienced verbal and physical forms of sexual harassment as a result of the bullying, but there was also one instance of genuine sexual harassment. According to the story, Hannah happened to run into a man from her school when she went to the supermarket to make a purchase. She was agitated as the man abruptly grabbed her behind. The novel's pages 47, 48, and 52 illustrate this.

*"Hey Wally, guess what?" His breath came from just over my shoulder. My backpack was resting on the counter while I zipped it shut. Wally's eyes were focused down, just beyond the edge of the counter, near my waist, and I knew what was coming. A cupped hand smacked my ass. And then, he said it. "Best Ass in the freshman Class, Wally. Standing right in your store!" (Asher, 2007, pp. 47-48)*

The aforementioned quotation indicates that sexual harassment is not regarded as harassment because the victim of the behaviour did so in a lighthearted and carefree manner. Hannah Baker's classmates appeared to view her negative demeanour as a way of saying "hi!" to their pals, as evidenced by the comment above. Sexual harassment is a widespread occurrence that can be committed by anyone, married or single. Because sexual activity is frequent, especially among teenagers, some people interpret sexual harassment as not being harassment (Taylor, 2022).

*Alex, am I saying your list gave him permission to grab my ass? No. I'm saying it gave him an excuse. And an excuse was all this guy needed. And when this guy saw me upset, did he apologize? 38 No. Instead, he got aggressive. There are some sick and twisted people out there, Alex –and maybe I'm one of them- but the point is when you hold people up for ridicule, you have to take responsibility when other people act on it. (Asher, 2007, p. 52-53)*

According to the remark above, when Hannah and the guy met at the store, the guy was a recent graduate of her school. Then, when they got close, the guy gave Hannah a quick slap on the butt with his hand. As he was saying this, the guy mentioned that Hannah had won the freshman class poll for best butt. According to the researcher, the quote provides unambiguous proof of Hannah Baker's harassment's cause. It was due to the voting, which was conducted without notice or consent and is likewise seen as sexual harassment. Hannah then experienced even more severe sexual harassment as a result of that. This type of harassment is physical and is also known as verbal relational aggression. It involves someone touching Hannah's private areas without her permission. The fact that the man thought he had permission to sexually assault Hannah illustrates how dominant men are in society. Additionally, Hannah said that the list and voting were the source of the harassment, since they inexplicably granted the person the authority to harass Hannah further.

Sexual harassment can happen when the victim doesn't provide their consent. However, sexual harassment occurs when society fails to recognize whether sexual activity is consenting or not (Lindsey, 2020). As a result, the type of relational aggression that arises in teenagers around sexual harassment is evident in the novel's students, specifically in Hannah's bullying by her buddy Marcus Cooley. The novel's pages 141 and 142 detail Hannah's issue with Marcus.

*I stopped laughing. I nearly stopped breathing. But I kept my forehead against your shoulder, Marcus. There was your hand, on my knee. From out of nowhere. The same way I was grabbed in the liquor store. "What are you doing?" I whispered. "Do you want me to move it? You asked. I didn't answer. (Asher, 2007, p. 141)*

It is clear from the story above that Hannah's buddy once more harassed her sexually. Despite being severely scarred by the harassment she had previously encountered, Hannah is described in the novel as trying to trust someone in order to give them a chance. Hannah accepted Marcus Cooley's invitation to date because he was deemed deserving of her at the time. Marcus, on the other hand, exploited Hannah and sexually attacked her. The comment that follows goes into further detail about the sexual harassment that took place.

*And I couldn't look away, as your fingertips caressed my knee...and started moving up Your shoulder rotated and I lifted my head, but now your arm was behind my back and pulling me close. And your other hand was touching my leg. My upper thigh. (Asher, 2007, p. 142)*

The researcher can infer from the aforementioned comment that Hannah grew afraid when she spotted a male. Because of the best ass's voice, she felt traumatised, fearing that she might experience the same thing that happened to her in the booze store. Hannah was hanging out with her friends when Marcus, a buddy from school, unexpectedly approached her, as the aforementioned remark illustrates. Suddenly, and for no apparent reason, Marcus put his hand on Hannah's knee. Furthermore, it went on till Marcus' arm was ultimately behind Hannah's back, and his other hand made contact with her upper thigh. From this, it is clear that Hannah was the victim of sexual harassment (a form of aggression), which occurs when men act arbitrarily toward women.

### ***Suicide Occurs Among Teenagers***

Suicide is the next issue involving youth. According to Piaget's view, Western youths will experience a period of argumentation and rebellion prior to developing logical thinking skills as adults. Emile Durkheim also published *Le Suicide* in 1897, which included his examination of the social phenomena of suicide. He attempted to utilise sociology to examine the phenomenon of suicide by contrasting the two. There is a relationship between two groups' suicide rates in society. Social factors influence why people commit suicide and why some groups have higher suicide rates than others, according to Durkheim. He assumed that someone could be influenced by outside factors to create psychological issues that could result in suicide or self-destruction. He tried to demonstrate in this study how sociology may be used to explain how individuals engage with society.

The story of the book indicates that Hannah Baker had several issues with her family and acquaintances. For the reasons she revealed on the tape she made before ending her own life. This is demonstrated by the lack of societal norms, values, and trust. These elements are critical to society's sound social development. Hannah's indicator of changes in personality. Hannah has been referred to as the "long-haired girl" since her first day of school, according to the book. After being sexually attacked by Marcus Cooley, she abruptly chopped off the majority of her hair. The novel's page 163 illustrates this.

*I cut my hair the very day Marcus Cooley and I met at Rosie's. Wow! That's weird. All those warning signs they tell us to watch out for, they're true. I went straight from Rosie's to get my hair cut. I needed a change, just like they said, so I changed my appearance. The only thing I still had control over. Amazing. (Asher, 2007, p. 163)*

Quotations describing Hannah's symptoms of actual suicide. The accident she had with Marcus Cooley, who at the time sexually assaulted her, destroyed her. She subsequently cut her hair short as a result of the trauma she had endured. This is regarded by researchers as Hannah's suicidal behaviour. She wanted to get rid of herself, so she tried to modify who she was. She used to be known as a long-haired girl at school, but she shaved her hair short to shed her identity following the sexual abuse she endured.

Statistics show that Hannah's haircut was a suicide warning indicator. To demonstrate to the world that she had a purpose, she abruptly transformed the way she looked. She cropped her hair to demonstrate that she was capable of more than what she typically accomplished. She can take everything she has, including her own life, as symbolised by cutting her hair. But, as the book and the aforementioned remark demonstrate, society, which calls on people to change, does not appear to understand that Hannah chopped off her hair because she acts suicidally and uses it as a kind of self-control.

Through the aforementioned quotation, researchers observe how society is less cognizant of and concerned about Hannah. Hannah exhibits symptoms of distress, although despite this, she continues to get negative remarks and even sexual harassment. Based on this statement, it can be concluded that Hannah engaged in aggression when she attempted suicide. A survey that indicated that young teenagers committed 21 more suicides in 2020 alone—a number that keeps rising annually—was the result of the public's lack of awareness of the problem (Lund, Tomsich, Schleimer, & Pear, 2023). Accordingly, scholars think that what Jay Asher explains in *Thirteen Reasons Why* is accurate.

Hannah also displayed further suicidal behaviour indicators. When Hannah relinquished possession at the last moment, she displayed a second suicide warning sign. It is stated in the novel that she handed her school bike to one of her classmates, Tony. Giving her something she's already used has its significance. Hannah acknowledged that she was no longer in need of it. The novel's page 232 illustrates this.

*"She came over my house," Tony says. "Hannah. And that was my chance." "For what?" "Clay, the signs were all there." He says. "She wanted me to have it." He says. "she was done with it. When I asked for a reason, she just shrugged. She didn't have one. But it was a sign. And I missed it." I summarize a bullet point from the handout at school. "Giving away possessions." (Asher, 2007, p. 233-234)*

The researcher can see Hannah's suicide plan from the aforementioned quote. It occurred as a result of Hannah unexpectedly giving her buddy her bike, which she always used. Tony, the guy Hannah donated the bike to, recognised that Hannah's actions were a symptom of her suicidal behaviour after she committed suicide. Tony claimed in the quote that he was unaware of the notice when Hannah handed him her bike, despite the fact that she only owned one.

The necessary selfish suicide includes Hannah's suicide. Durkheim argues that this is explained by the fact that both of the main characters choose to terminate their lives by killing themselves. In actuality, a lack of relationships and social support had a greater impact on Hannah Baker's death. This led to his social isolation. He murdered himself to end his meaningless life since he felt like he didn't belong to anyone. He therefore committed suicide in an attempt to put an end to his issues and depression.

## **CONCLUSION**

The conclusion of this study analysing Jay Asher's "Thirteen Reasons Why" illustrates how relational aggression, carried out through non-physical behaviours such as gossip, exclusion, and slander, plays an important role in the social life of adolescents. Hannah Baker, the main character in this novel, becomes a victim of various forms of relational aggression that ultimately influence her tragic decision to commit suicide. This study emphasises that acts of relational aggression are often caused by an imbalance of power and wrong social dynamics, which worsen the victim's mental condition. This novel also shows that relational aggression can occur in various forms, such as exclusion, spreading rumours, and verbal bullying, all of which lead to serious psychological impacts on the victim. Through this analysis, it can be concluded that the proper handling of relational aggression in the school environment is very important to prevent negative impacts on adolescent mental health. This novel also shows that relational aggression can occur in various forms, such as exclusion, spreading rumours, and verbal bullying, all of which lead to serious psychological impacts on the victim. Through this analysis, it can be concluded that the proper handling of relational aggression in the school environment is very important to prevent negative impacts on adolescent mental health.

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