

Silent Battles: Exploring Bullying and Body Shaming in The War That Saved My Life by Kimberly Brubaker Bradley

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Abstract

This study analyzes the effects of bullying and body shaming as depicted in *The War That Saved My Life* by Kimberly Brubaker Bradley (2015). This study offers a critical analysis to clarify the signs of bullying Ada encountered in the novel. This study aims to elucidate the phenomenon of bullying through character, events, and environment. The study's results demonstrate that bullying manifests in non-verbal and verbal ways. The non-verbal expressions encompass prejudice, dissatisfaction with others' physiques, and mockery of various physical kinds, whilst the verbal variety pertains to using an unfavorable moniker to address someone. The repercussions of undergoing these therapies encompass uneasiness, anxiety, challenges in self-expression, and trust deficits.

Keywords: Bullying, body-shaming, *The War That Saved Me*, Kimberly Bradley, literature .

حروب صامته : التمر والسخرية من الجسد في 'الحرب التي أنقذت حياتي' لـ كيمبرلي

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الخلاصة :

تتناول هذه الدراسة آثار التمر والسخرية من الجسد كما وردت في رواية "الحرب التي أنقذت حياتي" للكاتبة كيمبرلي برويكر برادلي (٢٠١٥) تهدف إلى تقديم تحليل نقدي يساهم في توضيح مظاهر التمر التي تعرضت لها شخصية "آدا" في الرواية. تسعى الدراسة إلى استجلاء ظاهرة التمر من خلال الشخصيات، والأحداث، والبيئة المحيطة. تشير نتائج الدراسة إلى أن التمر يتجلى في صور لفظية وغير لفظية؛ إذ تشمل التعبيرات غير اللفظية التحيز، وعدم الرضا عن أجساد الآخرين، والسخرية من الصفات الجسدية المختلفة، بينما تتعلق الأشكال اللفظية باستخدام ألقاب مهينة عند مخاطبة الآخرين. تتمثل الآثار المترتبة على التعرض لهذه الممارسات في الشعور بالقلق، والتوتر، وصعوبة التعبير عن الذات، وفقدان الثقة بالآخرين.

الكلمات المفتاحية: التمر، السخرية من الجسد، الحرب التي أنقذت حياتي، كيمبرلي برادلي، الأدب

Statement of the study

Using linguistic psychology and the novel's narrative text as a lens, the study aims to shed light on social phenomena made opaquer by language. Additionally, it aims to show how disgusting bullying is in all its forms. The primary focus of this investigation is on the story's tendency to blur the line between rational thought and its depiction of actual events. Bullying based on the real-world integration of fantasies is the subject of the study.

Introduction

Bullying is a prevalent occurrence globally. Bullying can occur in various environments, including educational institutions, workplaces, public spaces, and private residences. In all its forms, it inflicts emotional wounds on its victims, frequently influencing their perception of the world and self-image. Literary works frequently explore the impact of trauma and the resilience required for recovery. Kimberly Brubaker Bradley's *The War That Saved My Life* presents a compelling depiction of adversity through the character of young Ada, who suffers severe emotional and physical abuse from her mother and has clubfoot. Ada is confined, ridiculed, and made to feel like a liability because of her disability, rather than receiving love and support. This abuse exemplifies the essential dynamics of bullying, especially concerning body shaming. In addition to elucidating the psychological damage inflicted by bullying inside a family, the novel presents a compelling tale of human development and rehabilitation. The novel is a devastating portrayal of resilience under savagery, as Ada begins to reclaim her identity and self-worth while her circumstances spiral beyond her control.

Context of the novel:

The War That Saved My Life (2015) by Kimberly Brubaker Bradley tells the tale of Ada and Jamie, two siblings living in London during World War II. Ada is a ten-year-old disabled girl, and Jamie is six years old. The book won the Dorothy Canfield Fisher Children's Book Award. Because of her club foot, Ada is unable to leave their rundown apartment and is subject to constant abuse at the hands of her mother. During the mass exodus of children from London as the threat of war with Germany approaches, Ada and Jamie make their way to the English countryside. Amid her sadness at losing her best friend, Susan Smith reluctantly agrees to take them. Ada, Jamie, and Susan's connection is defined by difficulties at first, but it develops into a strong friendship with time. The story shows how Ada's self-assurance, empathy, resilience, and self-worth grow.

Literature View

A significant volume of studies has been undertaken on bullying. Historically, bullying research originated in Scandinavia, yielding multiple seminal studies that subsequently inspired and facilitated studies in the United States. Little study has looked at picture books that deal with bullying via the lens of content analysis. Education and library science journals have published many studies (e.g., Flanagan et al., 2013; Quinn et al., 2003). Research has shown that picture books may be an effective tool in the fight against bullying by providing important information and teaching young readers how to recognize and respond to bullying situations.

Preschool books were the subject of a content analysis by Oppliger and Davis (2016). While both sexes made up almost equal numbers of bully victims, the data showed that men were twice as likely to be bullies. Bullying mostly took the form of name-calling and teasing, and bullies who were female were just as likely to assault their victims as bullies who were male physically. According to a content examination of 38 picture books released between 2004 and 2010, most portrayed male bullies pursuing victims of both sexes (Mouth at el. , 2011). The victims were physically smaller and shorter than the aggressor, which led to bullying as a result of height inequalities. Bullying occurred because people's personalities, social behaviors, and physical characteristics (beyond height) varied.

A different body of literature used gratified study to examine how bullying stories ended. By examining 33 picture books dealing with bullying themes, Daniel (2014), in *Content Analysis of Picture Books About Bullying*, has five main categories for how the books dealt with bullying events. The story could end with the bully getting what they deserved, with the victim standing up to the bully, with an authoritative figure stepping in to stop the bullying, with the bully apologizing and making amends, or with no resolution. Finally, *Fragmented Voices: Analyzing Trauma and Neglect in Kimberly Brubaker Bradley's The War That Saved My Life*, by Jonitha Joyson (2024), who applies theories of attachment and trauma, investigates how traumatic experiences and neglect by mothers affect children's attachment patterns and their ability to form healthy relationships.

Discussion: The Theoretical Study of Bullying

Due to its complex nature, Bullying may be defined in several ways, depending on the situation or the characterization, which leads Nansel et al. to define it as “a specific type

of aggression in which behavior towards others is intended to harm, repeatedly occurs over time, and involves an imbalance of power in which the person with power attacks the less powerful victim” (Nansel et al., 2001, p. 2095). It is additionally characterized as “a pattern of repeated physical or psychological intimidation” (Beane, 2011, p. 5), It is described by intentional, recurrent, hostile conduct directed towards an individual who struggles to protect himself.

In this research, bullying is defined operationally as a well-established phenomenon in psychological studies, constituting a type of maltreatment. Alternatively, it refers to the disparity in power among two or more individuals or between distinct groups. Bullying transcends specific situations or locations, manifesting in any environment where individuals interact, including schools, universities, workplaces, and homes. It may occur from superiors or colleagues, as well as from husbands towards their wives, parental figures towards their children, siblings towards one another, or from governments imposing oppressive restrictions and practices on their citizens. Thus, "it's any aggressive behavior or speech uttered by a bully [intimidator] against a victim either verbally or physically to feel powerful and superior" (Donegan, 2012, pp.33-34).

The phenomenon of aggressiveness has preoccupied humanity since the inception of recorded history, garnering the attention of priests, theorists, biologists, anthropologists, psychologists, sociologists, and politicians "We rarely find a philosopher or scientists in various fields who are not concerned with the issue of aggression"(Bamishigbin Jr et al , 2024, pp. 106-119). Aggression, according to these scholars, is innate and a product of a person's genetic makeup. They posit that aggression and violence stem from an instinctual framework that compels individuals to fulfill and protect their inherent needs for possession. Furthermore, this behavior may be associated with intrinsic deficiencies within the individual's biological makeup, which manifest as psychological, physical, and mental disorders, ultimately resulting in aggressive, anti-social conduct expressed through various forms of deviation.

The bullies may experience insecurity or diminished self-confidence and fail to fulfill their instinctual and behavioral needs; hence, they feel compelled to dominate and assert power over others. Hence, it's found that they "perceive sadness, personality disorders, impulsive anger, addiction to violent actions, misinterpretation of others, anxiety, and imitation as potential manifestations of bullying" (Shawar & Shiffman, 2017, pp. 119-124). Society has historically addressed body shaming, since individuals have inherently observed

one another. Currently, this phrase is associated with hazardous and online perilous activity. Notwithstanding the aforementioned, body shaming remains inadequately researched. A succinct historical analysis indicates that lifestyle and standards of human attractiveness are intrinsically linked to societal norms. Historically, within the cult of beauty, encompassing "body image" and "self-esteem." Negative evaluations of physical attractiveness are typically associated with violence, frequently manifesting alongside bullying or risky online conduct (Wasch et al., 2016). Assume that body shaming constitutes a form of bullying. This can be classified as "a form of risky conduct, defined by the interaction of multiple factors that heighten the likelihood of failure in the social and psychological domains "(Labáth, 2001, p. 11).

Analysis

The narrative explores Ada's psychological and personal struggles through autodiegetic narration. Ada, the protagonist of this narrative, is a young girl afflicted by clubfoot; she characterizes her right foot as diminutive and contorted, featuring a rigid ankle and toes that are perpetually elevated, resulting in discomfort anytime she attempts to bear weight on it. She navigates the apartment, attending to her brother and preparing tea for her angry mother. The term "body shaming" was initially coined by journalist Philip Ellis (Farrell, 2011) , and often "denotes disparaging or derogatory remarks about an individual's physical appearance" (Duarte et al., 2017). In *The War That Saved My Life*, this theme is poignantly illustrated through the character of Ada, whose mother continuously subjects her to psychological torture rooted in body shaming. Ada's clubfoot becomes the focus of her mother's severe remarks and actions, which not only alienate her from society but also stigmatize her as shameful and unworthy. Her mother's behavior demonstrates a prime example of body shaming, using physical differences as justification for emotional neglect and humiliation. This intentional denigration of Ada's appearance highlights the cultural and familial cruelty embedded in "body shaming," causing Ada to feel inconsequential and ashamed of her physique. Despite the potential dangers posed by the war, her mother declined to send her to a safe location, asserting that no one would accept her: "Who would want you? Nobody, that is who. Nice people do not want to look at that foot" (Bradley,2015,p.14).

Parenthood should be based on love, protection, and support—not on control, humiliation, and emotional harm. Ada's mother exerts her parental authority to inflict emotional suffering, perpetually insulting Ada for her clubfoot and perceiving her as a burden and a source of shame. This behavior exceeds just physical neglect; it develops as a form of

social relational bullying. According to Al-Raqqad et al., Quiroz characterizes social relation bullying as “the intentional exclusion of an individual from social contacts, the rejection of their efforts to connect, or the dissemination of lies about them”(p.77). Ada's mother perpetuates this form of bullying by isolating Ada from the external world, denying her education, prohibiting her participation in outside activities, and persuading everyone, including Ada, that she is incompetent and unworthy of affection. In addition to inadequate parenting, Ada's sense of identity and self-esteem are adversely affected by persistent bullying stemming from ongoing verbal abuse and emotional neglect. A paternal title does not encompass harshness. Ada's narrative in *The War That Saved My Life* illustrates that a parent-child relationship is characterized by love and compassion rather than domination and guilt.

Ada's mother prioritizes financial advantages and privileges, disregarding her children's welfare. Motivated by maintenance expenses rather than safety concerns, she forcefully repatriates them amid bomb alerts. Her obsession with wealth is seen in her neglect to obtain medical care for Ada while she was a baby, which made her impairment more worse. By doing so, she devalues herself about her impairment and tries to place responsibility on Ada “You're a cripple. That's all you are. A cripple, and nothing but a cripple” (Bradley,2015,p.297). Her physical impairment serves as the primary catalyst because she endures both psychological and physical abuse. Studies demonstrate that children with disabilities are at a heightened risk of mistreatment compared to their non-disabled counterparts, “as they experience violence because of social stigma and discrimination” (Thomas-Skaf & Jenney , 2021,p.320). Her mother's portrayal of Ada as 'inherently evil' and 'deviating from the approved 'normal' bodily type' echoes the stigmatization of people with disabilities:

I was not helpless. However, the one time I did venture outdoors, Mam found out, and beat me until my shoulders bled. “You are no but a disgrace!” she screamed. “A monster with that ugly foot! You think I want the world to see my shame?” She threatened to board over my window if I went downstairs again. That was always her threat to me. (Bradley,2015,p. 4)

Ada is regarded as a source of shame by her mother. By constantly putting the word "disabled" in Ada's mouth, she verbally and emotionally abuses her daughter, lowering

her self-esteem. Constant bullying limits her identity by erasing her unique qualities and abilities. Ada lives in secrecy in her one-room apartment because she feels the need to hide her impairment from the world. The cultural obsession with non-disabled individuals is evident when her mother compares her to her brother, utilizing him as a benchmark to demean and further subdue Ada into silence and obscurity:

Mam smacked me. Hard. My head snapped back against the chair leg, and for a moment, I saw stars. “Don’t you be talkin’ to nobody!” Mam said. “I let you look out that window out a’ the kindness of my heart, but I will board it over if you go stickin’ your nose out, much less talkin’ to anyone!” “Jamie is out there,” I mumbled. “And why shouldn’t he be?” Mam said. “He ain’t a cripple. Not like you.”(Bradley, 2015,p. 1).

This comment captures her mother's assumptions as well as the societal prejudices and the idea that aberrant bodies need segregation, regulation, and confinement. Ada's mother uses words and conduct to keep control and underline Ada's perceived inadequacy, therefore perpetuating constant bullying via both oral and emotive means. She attempts to punish Ada by physical violence and severe methods of torture, including striking her and putting her in a tiny, very dark, wet, and odorous cupboard beneath the sink, infested with roaches, for the entire night. This continuous harassment and torture bring about deep emotional pain, anxiety, and a separation from reality. During one of these horrifying meetings, Ada notes:

When things got terrible, I could go away inside my head. I had always known how to do it. I could be anywhere, on my chair or in the cabinet, and I would not be able to see, hear, or even feel anything. I would just be gone.(Bradley,2015,p.13)

Even after Ada fled to London, memories of being humiliated and dehumanized in her own house—treated like a caged animal, bereft of awareness of the outside world, and subjected to mother abuse and neglect—haunt her. These events of prolonged emotional and physical bullying undermine her sense of security even in a new surroundings. Ada's inadvertent damage to Susan's sewing machine immediately causes numbness and shivers, therefore emphasizing the long-lasting psychological consequences of bullying. She conceals herself under the bed and finds cover in a little, claustrophobic area reminiscent of

the cupboard her mother used for punishment—an activity Jamie later remembers as routine bullying. Ada's continuous repeating of meaningless words at that time is illustrative of the great impact verbal bullying has had on her self-image, leading her to equate mistakes with awful consequences, and alone, Jamie explains the sickness to :

Mam puts her in the cabinet,” he said, “whenever she’s really bad.”

“But why put yourself there, Ada? You didn’t have to. So I can stay So

I can stay so I can stay so I can stay (Bradley ,2015,p.173)

Ada's failure to clarify her perspectives and concerns highlights the emotional ramifications caused by trauma, manifesting as intrusive and fearful thoughts. It challenges traditional methods of memory integration and narrative expression, thereby emphasizing the mysterious influence of trauma on consciousness. Her account is a compelling demonstration of how trauma can disrupt consciousness and language. The enduring emotional and physical abuse, particularly from her mother, who consistently administered severe punishment and belittled her, is the source of this trauma. Ada circumvents circumstances that evoke her earlier pain, often inadvertently experiencing episodes of terror and remorse. An intriguing event transpires during an airstrike when Ada, Susan, and Jamie are compelled to seek refuge in an Anderson bunker. Ada's traumatic history immobilizes her despite the imminent threat. The humidity, odor, and dimness within the shelter evoke vivid recollections of her past abuse—particularly the harsh treatment, including agonizing confinement in her mother's cupboard. She is aware that her life is at risk, however she is unable to enter the shelter since it evokes memories of the grim, foul environment that epitomized punishment, terror, and isolation at her mother's residence :

I couldn’t do it. I couldn’t go inside. Not into that damp shelter, that smelled exactly like the cabinet. Not into that darkness. Not into that pain. The siren wailed. Jamie shouted, “Ada, hurry...[...] The smell enveloped me. I could feel the cramped cabinet, the roaches. I could hear Mam laughing while I screamed” (Bradley,2015,p. 267).

The way Ada responded to Susan's gift is a perfect illustration of this phenomena. Instead of being grateful or thrilled, Ada feels anxious and frightened when Susan gives her a green velvet dress and compliments her looks. A tangle of confusing ideas emerges in Ada's inner monologue.

She was lying. She was lying, and I couldn't bear it. I heard Mam's voice shrieking in my head. You ugly piece of rubbish! Filth and trash! No one wants you, with that ugly foot!" My hands started to shake. Rubbish. Filth. Trash. I could wear Maggie's discards, or plain clothes from the shops, but not this, not this beautiful dress. I could listen to Susan say she never wanted children all day long. I couldn't bear to hear her call me beautiful. (Bradley, 2015,p. 213)

Ada's struggle to articulate her emotions, coupled with her need on Jamie for comfort, highlights the profound impact of trauma on emotional regulation and interpersonal relationships. Following significant harassment and bullying in London—both at home and socially—Ada develops a deep-seated mistrust of others and relies only on Jamie for support. Her profound fear about reentering the distressing environment manifests as violent outbursts. In her rage over the prospect of deportation, she smashes a dish of food and tries to give Jamie the remnants from the floor, despite his objections, which causes him to gag and choke. The suggestion that Susan might return them due to Jamie's behavior provokes a chaotic and intense response. Ada subsequently regains consciousness in disorientation and breathlessness, lacking recollection of the experience characteristic of a dissociative episode. This detachment from reality underscores her struggle to understand and regulate her emotions. The narrative demonstrates, via Ada's experiences, the lasting effects of trauma and bullying on children's emotional and cognitive growth, emphasizing the persistent challenges encountered by trauma survivors long after the immediate threat has diminished.

Ada's complex bond with her mother greatly influences how she interacts with others around her. She is wary of everybody who shows her compassion and concern. Upon assuming the caretaker role, Ada expects Susan to replicate her mother's conduct, with expectations of punishment and limitation for transgressions. In contrast to her expectations, Susan exhibits genuine compassion, which confounds and worries Ada. She echoes, "I wanted Mam to be like Susan. I didn't trust Susan not to be like Mam, Susan isn't ashamed. Mam's face turned red, I'm never paying to fix your foot .It would have been easy to fix, when I was a baby." (Bradley, 2015, p.184). Since Susan may be a mirror image of her mother, Ada believes she must force Susan to care for them even if she doesn't want to. Susan adds to Ada's confusion by challenging her perception of a primary caregiver as possessive, harsh, and ashamed. Ada wishes Susan to provide her the same solace her mother did, but

she sees Susan as transient, fixed in her belief that her foot and her mother's hatred are unchangeable realities. The transient aspect of Susan's presence irritates her, and she also feels uneasy when she is physically close to or interacts with Susan.

Ada's tumultuous relationship with her mother inflicted significant psychological trauma, rendering her reluctant to embrace love and forge connections. Years of emotional abuse and physical humiliation have led her to view love as manipulation and compassion as retribution. Ada expects either indifference, retribution, or confinement when Susan assumes her caregiving role, as she experienced with her mother: "I wanted Mam to be like Susan" (Bradley, 2015, p. 184). However, Susan's genuine compassion gradually diminishes Ada's defenses incrementally. When Ada receives kindness, tenderness, and patience for the first time, she is both astonished and awakened to a long-suppressed yearning for love. Ada must reevaluate her perception of a caretaker, as Susan's persistent attentiveness challenges her belief in her unworthiness of love.

Ada's altered emotional landscape indicates the commencement of her recovery journey. She continues to experience thoughts of inadequacy and fear of desertion; yet, she begins to trust Susan and recognizes the potential for a life devoid of guilt and loneliness. Ada's evolution is evident in her growing willingness to cultivate relationships, articulate emotions, and embrace comfort—elements she previously shunned or evaded. Susan's affection delineates her identity and serves as a muted dissent against the myriad tragedies endured by Ada. Ada, having been a victim of her mother's bullying, begins to break free from her mental confinement and engage with her environment. While Susan's suffering may not dissipate overnight, Ada's journey towards emotional liberation, self-acceptance, and resilience is rooted in her unwavering presence.

Conclusion

In conclusion, *The War That Saved My Life* by Bradley offers a comprehensive analysis of the psychological and emotional repercussions of bullying, particularly through the persistent body shaming Ada endures from her mother. The novel illustrates how Ada's physical disability, her clubfoot, serves as a tool for her mother to manipulate, assess, and isolate her, in addition to being a source of physical limitation. This form of bullying, grounded in appearance-based criticism, reflects the broader cultural issue of body shaming, which aims to demean individuals for characteristics they typically cannot alter. Ada's

mother's severe remarks, neglect, and confinement of her daughter illustrate how the internalization of body shaming by victims can influence their self-image and limit their potential.

The novel's depiction of human development and healing renders it especially powerful. Notably, via Susan Smith, who emerges as a genuine source of support and compassion, Ada ultimately experiences kindness, respect, and care when she is evacuated to the countryside during World War II. This transition from a context of violence to one of compassion underscores the transformative power of empathy and positive reinforcement. Ada begins to challenge the detrimental notions imposed upon her over time and develops self-acceptance beyond her appearance. Her journey illustrates that although body shaming and bullying can inflict profound harm, they do not dictate an individual's worth or future.

Through Ada's tale, Bradley critiques the cruelty of body shaming and emotional abuse while underscoring the necessity of creating safe, supportive environments for healing. The book emphasizes that all individuals possess dignity and merit acceptance, irrespective of their background or appearance. It encourages readers to reflect on societal perceptions of variety and the empowerment derived from recognizing inner strength and humanity beyond superficial looks. *The War That Saved My Life* therefore transforms into a narrative of not only survival but also empowerment and optimism in the face of brutality.

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