

Jay Asher's *Thirteen Reasons Why*: A Study in Gender and its Ramifications on Mental Health

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Abstract. There have always been ample discussions and numerous debates when referring to what society considers as less significant genders; and for a fairly longtime, their empowerment has been limited to words and quotes. The American novelist, Jay Asher, with his debut book *Thirteen Reasons Why*, which has also been adapted into a popular web series, aims to change that course and has succeeded considerably, owing to the establishment of a website (www.thirteenreasonswhy.com), which intends to raise awareness among the young adults about mental well-being and reach out to those faced with the crisis. The novel is built in an agonizing background exploring infinite emotions that arise due to a series of events, which lead a high – school girl to take her own life. The paper orients towards citing and analyzing the stories heard on the daily basis, which are often looked the other way by our civilization, and how they leave an impression on young minds, especially young women and the fraction of young society who undergo unspeakable unfortunate occurrences in the course of discovering their sexual identities. The creation is not merely a story but an eulogy to all the suicidal events that could have been avoided with a mere dialogue, thus making it a work of first order.

Keywords : Mental health; suicide; abuse; young adults; eulogy; misogyny.

There is something extremely singular about the novel in reference, that hooks its readers on it, from the very beginning to the very last word. The American author, Jay Asher who made his debut in the literary world, with *Baker's Dozen: The Autobiography of Hannah Baker*, now popular as *Thirteen Reasons Why*, sure seems to have mastered the art of writing adult fiction. His style of writing deeply mimics the process of bringing silk to life; it is known to all souls alike how every silk thread is entwined with certain tint of grim, yet the threads once woven into fabric are extremely difficult to resist. And so even when Asher dives deep into the dark collapsing world of Hannah Baker, one cannot resist himself but flutter through the pages to get more of her personality, her sufferings, her stories which are mostly silenced either by her own choice or owing to the circumstance, and one cannot help but identify oneself if not outloud, somewhere in the quiet, within.

Asher in introducing the narrative implements the usage of audio tapes which not only come out as an eccentric instrument, but at the same time aids in building the suspense element. The idea of audio tapes as stated by the author comes from his experience at a museum that provided a self-guided audio tour to the visitors, which in utmost certainty rendered an intriguing touch to the antiques. The author goes on to tell a tale touching wide horizons of occurrences that human

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race undergoes mostly through the years that shape them into the individuals they later become. Where most contemporary authors dare not speak about the inspirations, and label it as "for the readers to figure about" Asher announces to have drawn inspiration about the subject matter from the high school incidents encountered by his wife, his female colleagues and a close relative of his, who attempted suicide when she was the same age as the protagonist of the novel, and as luck would have it, survived.

The close survey and analysis of experiences of the women around him, is possibly the reason behind him being able to flawlessly introduce to all his readers belonging to different age spheres alike, the harsh realities of the contemporary society with the most subtle feminine outlook, and which have long been put behind the shelves. Half of his narrative creates a room for a sixteen year old to express her fears, her insecurities, the complications of her relationships with her peers, her weaknesses, her flaws, her anguish, moments before she chooses to end all her miseries. In those little moments, the author never ceases to amaze the readers and captures the tiniest bits of her feelings and her reasons with all its innocence intact, and in order to give it a wholesome perspective, slides in the most elusive manner, a second narrative almost simultaneously, which not only makes the entire piece idiosyncratic but also gives the readers a wider scope to get acquainted with the instant reactions of the other most significant character who equally succors the unfolding of the events. The two narratives whilst bridging the gaps between the different timelines, also help build up the setting thus giving a fair chance to the characters to build, analyze, and introspect their interpersonal relationships.

Asher, the author of the number one New York Times bestselling novel, also accredited for "The Future is Us", "What Light" and "Piper - (graphic novel Oct, 2017)" is one of those rare gems of the contemporary world, who is not afraid to take a leap in the dark and explore the most grim corners of our civilization and aims at establishing a discourse around most appurtenant themes some of which are mental health, bullying, abuse, suicide, peer pressure, gender inequality, existential crisis the significance of sex education (which has been elaborated further in the web-series adaptation of the novel) and those that are often hushed away.

The paper aims to analyze the heart wrenching portrayal of events that lead a teen into taking her own life and how things change for those around her, which they failed to notice until one day, when each one of them in different time lapses receive a box full of audio tapes from a dead girl, who was forced into believing that the only way to bring people to notice things was to stop existing. The paper intends to appraise the standpoint of the characters in different frames of time, and how sometimes, what seems like a hurricane can be merely avoided with a snap of finger.

The very title of the novel, *Thirteen Reasons Why* urges the readers to ponder, why despite the discourse on major aspects like promoting education among women and providing them with the pedestal that has been long due, the human community has been turning a blind eye on the small but significant facets, that lead to misconduct against women in everyday life. This can be better understood with the "Chaos Theory" which is a brainchild of mathematician and meteorologist Edward Lorenz. Lorenz states :

At one point I decided to repeat some of the computations in order to examine what was happening in greater detail. I stopped the computer, typed in a line of numbers that it had printed out a while earlier, and set it running again. I went down the hall for a cup of coffee and returned after about an hour, during which time the computer had simulated about two months of weather. The numbers being printed were nothing like the old ones. I immediately suspected a weak vacuum tube or some other computer trouble, which was not uncommon, but before calling for service I decided to see just where the mistake had occurred, knowing that this could speed up the servicing process. Instead of a sudden break, I found that the new values at first repeated the old ones, but soon afterward differed by one and then several units in the last decimal place, and then began to differ in the next to the last place and then in the place before that... The initial round-off errors were the culprits; they were steadily amplifying until they dominated the solution. (Lorenz, 134)

The novel is set amidst the premises of a small town and revolves around the autobiographical sequence of Hannah Baker and her peers. The story demonstrates an array of characters, of which thirteen deeply affect the life of the protagonist. The number thirteen is often considered ominous, and so has recurrently left readers to pursue to the idea of connection between the grim essence in the novel and the popular opinion, which has been denied by the author on several occasions. The story begins when Clay Jensen, a fellow classmate of Hannah Baker, receives a box of audio cassettes, wrapped in a shoe box, with no return address, which instigates an element of suspense for both readers and Clay, only to discover that those were from a girl who was no longer alive. Asher has brilliantly captured and depicted the lives of young adults, elaborating the infinite details and gestures in a modern set up, which helps the readers to associate themselves deeply with the events, an evident example of which can be sited in the very prologue, where Clay introduces the readers with his inner thoughts while sending the audio tapes to the next person on Hannah's list:

“Sir?” she repeats. “How soon do you want it to get there?” I rub two fingers, hard, over my left eyebrow. The throbbing has become intense. “It doesn’t matter,” I say. The clerk takes the package. The same shoebox that sat on my porch less than twenty-four hours ago; rewrapped in a brown paper bag, sealed with clear packing tape, exactly as I had received it. But now addressed with a new name.

(*Thirteen Reasons Why*, 2)

When Clay receives the cassettes, he is bewildered, curious and a series of thoughts and emotions flow down his gut. Even after he begins listening to the cassettes, he can’t bring his mind around the fact that he received a set of tapes, which are way out of time for the generation, with the voice of a dead girl, and absolutely no return address. What intensifies things even more for him is Hannah stating the fact that she was going to let out the story of her life, or to put in straight words, why her life ended. It is extremely enchanting to read through what Hannah voices down through the tapes, and the author has presented the narrative in such a manner that it almost feels like you’re hearing her, and with her voice, her anger, her anguish, her despair, all of it. The moment the tape is played, with it flows Hannah’s voice raging like a young river who does not intend to spare even the largest boulder that come her way. She was furious and devastated, wanted people to know how they affect people around them, and most importantly yearned to be heard, and so she says:

Hello, boys and girls. Hannah Baker here. Live and in stereo. No return engagements. No encore. And this time, absolutely no requests. I hope you’re ready, because I’m about to tell you the story of my life. More specifically, why my life ended. And if you’re listening to these tapes, you’re one of the reasons why. I’m not saying which tape brings you into the story. But fear not, if you received this lovely little box, your name will pop up . . . I promise... This was not a spur-of-the-moment decision. Do not take me for granted. . . again. (7-10)

Hannah did not simply narrate the events of her life which led her into believing that she no longer had any chance at life, but she also ensured that each recipient had a map of the city with the locations she refers to, star-marked for them to visit and relive the experience, only this time in her shoes. Her motives for those on her list, is a clear reflection of her helplessness to make people in her surroundings, and who she relied onto see through her, while she was still alive. Hannah moved in the town, along with her parents seeking a fresh start only a couple of years since the unfortunate incident. She like any teen, craved acceptance, loyal friendships, and hoped to taste the essence of love, but instead,

she lost herself to betrayal, abuse, misconduct and misogyny. In her absolute innocence, and right after a few days in to the new high school, she found herself falling for one of her seniors, Justin Foley, who motivated by his misogynist peers, fails to see her as a being and considers more like a trophy, which ultimately leads to the initiation of the first of many rumours that followed. The usage of rhetoric element while letting out the story of her first kiss, evidently sketches her desperation for people to see the truth, and the agony that was deep-rooted in her heart. She elaborates:

..We just held our lips together . . . and kissed. And that's it. Wait. Stop. Don't rewind. There's no need to go back because you didn't miss a thing. Let me repeat myself. That . . . is . . . all . . . that . . . happened. Why, did you hear something else? ...Oh. So sorry. You wanted something sexier, didn't you? ...Well, what did you want to hear? Because I've heard so many stories that I don't know which one is the most popular. But I do know which is the least popular. The truth. Now, the truth is the one you won't forget. So thank you, Justin. Sincerely. My very first kiss was wonderful. ..But then you started bragging...And everyone knows you can't disprove a rumour. I know. I know what you're thinking. A kiss ? A rumour based on a kiss made you do this to yourself? No. A rumour based on a kiss ruined a memory that I hoped would be special...(29-31)

Hannah tried every bit to stay strong and not let her reputation precede her true identity, but a place like high-school, congested with young and immature minds, can become extremely hostile owing to the lack of proper guidance and support. The events that followed since the first rumour did not bring any sort of ease in Hannah's life. Alex Standall, who was also one of the three new students to be admitted in the Freshman Class along with Hannah and Jessica, initiated a joke in the form of a list, which not only objectified women as a specific body part but also catalyzed the abuses that followed after. Alex's one poorly thought out action, from a place of revenge, destroyed the friendship, Hannah, Alex and Jessica shared. Hannah dissects the entire incident while citing the same and says:

I tilted my head so I could read the upside-down title of the paper: FRESHMAN CLASS—WHO'S HOT / WHO'S NOT... Every single event documented here may never have happened had you, Alex, not written my name on that list. But what happens when someone says you have the best ass in the freshman class? Let me tell you,

Alex, because you'll never know. It gives people—some people—the goahead to treat you like you're nothing but that specific body part. Hey Wally, guess what?" His breath came from just over my shoulder...A cupped hand smacked my ass. And then, he said it, "Best Ass in the Freshman Class, Wally. Standing right here in your store!"...the jerk let go and put his hand on my shoulder. "I'm only playing, Hannah. Just relax." (44-48)

The rumours that started as a mere pun with idea of seeking revenge, popularity or feeding masculinity, spread like a forest fire in the entire school. One rumour led to the other, and in the midst of the crisis that Hannah was experiencing, she was often used as a bait, shield and anything under the sun to glorify the image of her contemporaries by overshadowing or ruining hers. The circumstances affected Hannah on several levels, and she gradually started giving in to the doubts and insecurities that were instigated in her. It is important to understand that the behavioural tendencies of Hannah's peers did not entirely come from a place of malice, but for what it's worth, the underlying reasons can never justify a demeaning action of a being. As the story advances further it becomes quite conspicuous, that the female characters who could have stuck together and empowered each other, fell at the hands of the misogynist, indocile, and shallow community. It can be further noted that Courtney Crimsen, who has an infamous harmless reputation uses Hannah as a bait with the sole motive to protect herself from public embarrassment pertaining to her sexuality. Jessica instead of standing by her friend, feeds her insecurities on account of unattended rumours. The web series adaptation of the novel brings to the light a conversation between Hannah and Courtney, which happens to be an aftermath of the high school dance :

Hannah: You think that you can just throw me under the bus. Yeah! "Everyone already thinks she's a slut, so why not just pile on?"

Courtney: People were starting to talk. I just.... I had...I had to do something.

Hannah: Yeah, well, you didn't have to do that.

Courtney: I'm sorry.

Hannah: I want to be your friend, Courtney. I have been a friend to you and this thing that you're scared for people to know about you doesn't matter to me. Okay! It doesn't fucking matter. And I'm sorry if you're scared but I'm not your shield, okay? You don't get to hide behind me. You don't get to fuck with my life because you don't like who you are. (Season 1, Episode 5)

Post the occurrence of a chain of unfortunate episodes, that befalls Hannah, she finally loses every scrap of hope and starts finding comfort in death. She imagines and weighs in all her options but she is so far gone that she fails to find enough reasons to live. She even goes on to think about how would she execute what she had planned for herself. There is one final star-crossed blow that strikes her, and it shatters her inside out :

I was not attracted to you, Bryce. Ever. In fact, you disgusted me. And I'm going to kick your ass. I swear it. You were touching me... but I was using you. I needed you, so I could let go of me, completely. For everyone listening, let me be clear. I did not say no or push his hand away. All I did was turn my head, clench my teeth, and fight back tears. And he saw that. He even told me to relax. When you were done, Bryce, I got out of the hot tub and walked two houses away. The night was over. I was done. (266)

Hannah after assessing her entire life, especially her time in the high school, and before coming to the final conclusion of ending her life decides, to give herself one more chance, one last chance. She decides to seek counsel from an adult, Mr. Porter, who was an English Teacher whilst also being the student counselor. She opens up to him entirely about the abuse that she went through and was offered two partly rational, yet insensitive choices. The conversation between the two flows as:

- Did anything happen with this boy—and you can be totally honest with me, Hannah—did anything happen that might be considered illegal? You mean rape? No. I don't think so
- Why don't you know?
- Because there were circumstances.
- Are you thinking of pressing charges? No. I'm ... no. -Then what are your options? I don't know. - What can we do to solve this problem, Hannah? Together. Nothing. It's over. -Something needs to be done, Hannah. Something needs to change for you. I know. But what are my options? I need you to tell me. -Well, if you won't press charges, if you're not sure if you even can press charges, then you have two options. What? What are they?
- One, you can confront him. We can call him in here to discuss what happened at this party. I can call you both out of ... You said there were two options.
- Or two, and I'm not trying to be blunt here, Hannah, but you can move on. You mean, do nothing? (278)

The fate that befalls Hannah Baker, and the constant existential crisis that the generations today are faced with is extremely morbid, and is majorly in view of lack of accountability and victim-blaming. The last and possibly the most crucial conversation between Baker and Mr. Porter, which becomes a major decisive factor

in what follows after, reflects vividly the course of society on heart wrenching subjects. Innumerable evidences of victim-blaming can be cited throughout the narrative flow and Ms. Schoellkopf rightly states :

Victim-blaming occurs when the victim of a crime or abuse is held partly or entirely responsible for the actions committed against them. In other words, the victims are held accountable for the maltreatment they have been subjected to. Perpetrators of crimes for which they blame the victim commonly enjoy a privileged social status opposite the victim, and their blame typically involves use of stereotypical negative words. The phenomenon of victim blaming is thus common in hate crimes, discrimination, rape and bullying. The main motivation for people to victim-blame is to justify abuse or social injustice.

(digitalcommons.uri.edu/glbtc/33)

In all fairness, it is apt to consummate Baker as the voice of every woman subjected to misogyny, every gender who are forbidden the right to voice and expression, every victim who is victim-blamed, every individual whose identity is jeopardized, and countless others who are unheard and denied justice, thus leaving the readers with ample unattended questions that demand immediate attention and answers.

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