

BULLYING AND PEER PRESSURE IN JUDY BLUME'S YOUNG ADULT NOVEL BLUBBER

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Abstract

The present paper majorly focuses on exploring the complex reasons behind intimidation in Blume's YA novel Blubber. By examining the significant influence of peers on adolescents and adults, individuals can develop more realistic concepts of intimacy and conformity. The peer pressures among and between adults/parents are not as obvious as what can be discriminated more easily among adolescents. Peer relations provide a microcosm and testing ground for counteracting social stress.

Key Words: *Bullying, peer pressure, Young Adult, Peer relation*

In the galaxy of YAL, Judy Blume (b. 1938) has occupied a unique place and has made a significant contribution as child and YA writer. She was a wife and a mother before she tested her writing abilities. She grew up in the age of radio and movies- before the appearance of television. She always had an artistic mind and projected herself as a performer. She is a contemporary American young adult novel writer. Most of her novels are focused on sensitive teenage issues and often the subject matter of her novels attracts a lot of controversies.

Blume has been awarded over ninety literary awards. She won ALA Margaret A. Edwards Award for her contribution to young adult literature. She was included among the Living Legends in the Writer category by the Library of Congress in 2000 for her distinguished work for cultural heritage. He has received three lifetime achievement awards. Her novel Tiger Eyes (1981) was adapted into a major motion picture by her own son Lawrence Blume. Judy Blume's other notable works include It's Not the End of the World, Forever, Just As Long As We're Together and Then Again, Maybe I Won't. Recently she was diagnosed with breast cancer and undergoing a treatment.

According to Judy Blume, the plot of Blubber was inspired by a very similar real-life incident involving her daughter's (Randy) fifth-grade class, however, and Randy would come from a school with daily reports about her fellow students. As Blume recalls, "Randy was especially upset by the way one girl in her class, Cindy, had become the victim of the class leader. One day during lunch period, the leader of the class and her group locked Cindy in a supply closet and held a mock trial." (Ludwig and Abrams 55)

She was shocked by her daughter's story, particularly by the teacher's inability to control the situation, and she decided her next novel would be bullying in the classroom. The outcome was the novel Blubber, in which a group of students taunts other students, Linda, for being weighty. Blume describes a scene into the novel where Linda is locked into the closet and put on trial. The story is told through the perspective of Jill, who, like Randy, witnesses the events around her but feels powerless to stop them. Later on, Jill actually takes part in the teasing until she becomes a target for the bully.

Decades before school shootings at a place such as Columbine would provoke a national discussion about the influence of bullying, Blume had dealt with the subject bluntly. She had also struggled to make a distinct and strong judgment in the novel, instead of permitting her readers to derive to their own conclusion about bullying. When Blubber was published, critics aimed Blume for not setting a "moral tone." Blume felt that Jill did not really learn a lesson from her behaviour, but instead, she only found out that it hurts when she was bullied. Some appealed that her matter-of-fact description of the students' mean behaviour could be used as a manual for bullies.

Other, however, saw the value in the novel that described what can happen in a school situation without telling teenagers how to sense. They felt that it was precisely because Blume did not lecture her readers that they would react positively to the novel. Blubber has since been used in some teaching programmes to prepare young teachers for some of the dynamics of the classroom. It also read in order to initiate a discussion about bullying. Blume said,

When I began this book I was determined to write the truth about the school-bus culture in the language of that culture. Blubber is funny to a point, then wham! Some adults are bothered by the language and the cruelty, but the kids get it. They live it. (Judy Blume)

Thus, The characters in "Blubber" use swearword and the cruelty displayed in the novel can be a little harsh. Judy Blume states that she based this novel off of something that happened similar to this in her daughter's classroom. She narrates that none of it would have occurred if the teacher were more conscious of her students. She acknowledged that some parents did find her novel offensive because of harsh and the cursing bullying. While parents may be on the barrier about this novel, Judy Blume says she knows that the teens understand it.

YA novel Blubber is also written in first person point of view which is divided into 19 chapters and consisted in 127 pages. The narration is like to be on both the bullying side and the victim side. It is a Contemporary Realistic Fiction because while the story is not true, it is something that could happen in modern time. The narrator of the novel is Jill Brenner, a [Pennsylvania](#) fifth-grader in Mrs. Minish's class who joins her classmates in ostracizing and [bullying](#) Linda, an awkward and [overweight](#) girl. Linda gives an oral class report about [whales](#) and gives her nicknamed "[Blubber](#)" by her peers. Jill and Caroline were friends and classmates who spent their time in bullying Linda at school and on the bus. Linda tried to get even with them by telling Mr. Macinist the truth about Jill and Tracy throwing eggs into his mailbox. Jill and her friends thought of a trial to teach Linda a lesson. They pushed Linda into a supply closet and began the trial. Linda is the target of increasingly mean attacks that are both psychological and physical in nature. Jill never realises anything negative about her treatment of Linda until she crosses Wendy herself and finds the situation reversed. So, by the end, though the class atmosphere apparently seems tense, no one is being singled out. Jill finds that how the friendships in the class have changed entirely in the classroom but how Tracy is a friend, she can always count on having.

Bullying involves teasing, insulting, tormenting, intimidating, or being verbally or physical aggressive towards a victim. Bullying behaviour may also be indirect, taking the form of rumours, social exclusion, nasty notes, and other insidious means. Bullying is typically repetitive in nature, with bullies targeting victims repeatedly. This behaviour tends to be sustained over a long period of time-it frequently persist over a year or more. Bullying can be carried out by a single child or groups of children. This behaviour is more common among children with psychological disturbances and tends to be more frequently seen in boys than in girls. The behaviour often creates an atmosphere of fear and intimidation among those affected. The bully-victim interaction is characterized by an imbalance of power; that is, the victim is or feels incapable of defending him-or herself, and the bully is or is perceived to be more powerful than the victim. (Salkind 72)

Peers abusing is the main theme of the novel. A bully narrates the novel Blubber. Here, Blume has depicted both verbal and physical bullying behaviour due to body appearance. As Glensser, Hoover, and Hazlett state about teasing and bullying in the YA novels,

Most overweight characters in the adolescent and pre-adolescent novels receive realistic bullying from their peers. Often, peer abuse is the central problem in the novel, which the young characters must overcome. This matches findings that children's teasing is often about body appearance. (117)

When Linda Fischer gives a report on whales to Jill Brenner's fifth-grade class, her classmate Wendy begins calling Linda by the cruel nickname of Blubber. When she was giving a report on Blubber, Wendy passed the note to Caroline and gradually circulated in the class. The note said: "Blubber is a good name for her!" (Blume 10) Soon, everyone in the class is joining on the joke. Linda is picked on by Wendy, and her other classmates say nasty and unpleasant things to her. After school on the bus, the bullying starts. The ringleader Wendy makes everyone calling her [blubber](#). Wendy wrote on Robby Winters' paper airplane "I'm Blubber- Fly Me on the wing." Then she aimed the plane at Linda. Moreover, the group of girls started singing to the tune of " 'Beautiful Dreamer,' Blubbery blubber... blub, blub,blub,blub..." (13) Boys of sixth grade made balls from the landed plane and shot them at Linda, and they play keep-away with her coat. Jill describes that she can perceive Linda didn't resist and seemed like on the verge of crying. For weeks later, Linda is the target of increasingly mean attacks that are both psychological and physical in nature. The bullying persists when the girls in the classroom tell Linda she's overeating at lunch and then the next day Linda brings only saltine crackers and celery. They forced Linda to say that they made her speak 'My name will always be

Blubber' (55) to make her feel disgraced. After getting irritated by lookism mind-set of Wendy's clique she started dieting but then also class has continued to mock on her by repeating rhyme, "Oh, what a riot

Blubber's on diet

I wonder what's the matter

I think she's getting fatter

And fatter

And fatter" (69) Moreover, Wendy and Caroline were preparing a list where they have listed

"HOW TO HAVE FUN WITH BLUBBER

Hold your nose when Blubber walks by.

Trip her.

Push her.

Shove her

Make her say, I am Blubber, the smelly whale of class 206." (Blume 62-3)

So that psychologically forces her to speak, "I am [blubber](#), the smelly whale of class 206" (65) Wendy tortured her by saying, "You dummy, you idiot, you smelly whale..." (65) And hit her in the stomach that made her cry. As Jill insensitively shares with the reader how she and her friends bully Linda,

We made Linda say, I am Blubber, the smelly whale of class 206. We made her say it before she could use the toilet in the Girls' Room, before she could get a drink at the fountain, before she ate her lunch and before she got on the bus to go home. It was easy to get her to do it. I think she would have done anything we said. There are some people who just make you want to see how far you can go. (76)

The effect is seen on the victimised Linda that out of fear she has started telling herself 'I am Blubber, the smelly whale of class 206' before she got a drink at the fountain, went to toilet, got on and off bus, and during lunchtime before she started eating without anyone's force. This is the bullying effect on her. The bullying persists when the girls in the classroom express Linda that she overeats at lunch and then the next day Linda brings only saltine crackers and celery.

Physically also she was tormented by classmates. As Halloween approaches, Linda wishes to be something original. Jill soon decides that she wants to be a Flenser- a person who strips [blubber](#) off of whales. In the girl's bathroom Wendy, Caroline, and Jill proceed to bully Linda by stripping off her clothes and making her cry. This how Jill narrates the house toilet papered scene,

'Strip her, flenser!' Wendy called. 'Now! Then we'll throw her cape out of the window and she'll have to walk down the hall in her blubby birthday suit.'... 'Okay,' I said, pulling off Linda's cape. She had on a regular skirt and shirt under it. 'Strip her some more! Wendy said, yanking up Linda's skirt. 'Hey... Blubber wears flowered underpants.'... 'She wears an undershirt!' Caroline said. Linda started to cry. (Blume 32-3)

That is how Queen Wendy made her obey whatever she ordered. She even forced her to kiss her foot. Most of the teens laugh at Linda, call her names, spit at her, and trip her. They even physically hold her down to mess with her clothes and later, to force her to eat something unappealing. Linda lets it happen, doing very little to resist or fight back. Nevertheless, they constantly forced her to kiss a boy, and even show off her underwear. In the end, they lock her in a closet and announce that she's on trial. Of course, Wendy is the judge and this investigation is anything but fair. She bullied her by declaring the resistance of Linda that, "Just shut up and listen to me, Blubber,' Wendy said. 'You're on trial for being a stool pigeon, a rat, a fink, and a tattletale. How do you plead... guilty or not guilty?" (108) Jill thinks that she'll never be in Linda's place, but she learns that popularity is fleeting and that her place in the classroom hierarchy only lasts as long as she is willing to go along with the crowd.

As far as Jill is concerned, her thoughts and actions are not going well with each other. It is to be exemplified with some incidents as if she says that she would never smash a carved pumpkin or steal loot from little teens; yet, she throws eggs at Mr. Machinist and puts toilet paper and silly string on Linda's house. These actions don't match her other thoughts. Why does she do it? She rationalizes that "they deserve it." (41) -In the book, Jill has to sit in the corner because she was smiling in class. She thinks, "Damn that Blubber! It's all her fault. She's the one who made me smile with her disgusting smell." (Blume 46) Here, Jill is blaming Blubber when it was her own actions that caused her to be punished She is embarrassed and feels bad that she is sitting in the corner so she blames Blubber for making herself feel better and justifying her behaviour towards Blubber. This is called "generating alternative strategies."

Peer pressure is also a negative part of bullying which is also highlighted here in the novel. Basically, peer pressure is defined as

Peer pressure (or social pressure) is the direct influence on people by peers, or the effect on an individual who gets encouraged to follow their peers by changing their [attitudes](#), [values](#) or [behaviours](#) to [conform](#) to those of the influencing group or individual. This type of pressure differs from general social pressure because it causes an individual to change in response to a feeling of being pressured or influenced from a peer or peer group. (Peer Pressure)

Wendy, the most popular and bossy girl at school, and so begins a daily ritual of abuse. While Jill isn't the leader of the pack, she joins right in, seemingly without any hesitation. When Wendy first inscribes a note using the name Blubber, Jill smiles, not because she thinks it's funny but since Wendy is watching her. After that, she participates wholeheartedly. Jill shares with the reader that "It's important to be Wendy's friend, I thought. I only hope that what she says is true." (Blume 71) As a member of Wendy's clique, Jill participates in the bullying without remorse, though Wendy and Caroline are usually the instigators.

Teens often give in to peer pressure because they want to fit in. They want to be liked and they worry that they may be left out or made fun of if they don't go along with the group. In the case of Caroline, Jill, Donna Davidson, Robby Winters, and Irwin happened the same. Caroline who is Wendy's best friend, and is her sidekick in bullying Linda. She always does what Wendy says and appears to be a little bit afraid of her. Tracy, Jill, and Caroline are supporters of bullying Linda in the bathroom and classroom at lunch. All the boys are Passive observers, and sometimes they laugh. Rochelle doesn't usually pay attention to the rest of the girls but sometimes looks like she's enjoying the show.

Blume has aptly discussed the issue of self and teen community where the narrator Jill describes herself visualizing from the eyes of her clique and later on develop the sense of self while defending herself against the bully. Linda is represented as timid and with low self-esteem. She is unable to resist the bully because she suffers and victimized by the teen community. Blume has highlighted the negative influence of teen community on self. As a result of it, one can find that Wendy's aggressive quality influences everyone in the class. who has high self-esteem and can overpower others. This is how teens represent their personal characteristics. Linda represented as more venerable than Jill. Whereas Wendy has high self-esteem. Due to low self-esteem, Linda faces identity-crisis when people recognize her as Blubber though she is not the fattiest girls in the class. as far as Jill is concerned, she was also given a name like Baby Brenner (B.B.) which made her anxious about her own self but later on, she stands for the own self-identity rather to be recognized by subjective identity. Finally, she resolves her identity crisis and achieve an identity that is prerequisite for the emotional sharing of the next stage of the life cycle where she conclude with her friendship with Tracy and Rochelle.

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