

Conformity And Loneliness in Ruth Ozeki's *A Tale For The Time Being*: An Analysis Of Social Influence And Psychological Impact

J. Alisha Josephine*

Abstract

The article, "Conformity and Loneliness in Ruth Ozeki's *A Tale for the Time Being*: An Analysis of Social Influence and Psychological Impact" explores the theme of conformity in Ruth Ozeki's novel *A Tale for the Time Being*, examining how social influence impacts the characters, particularly the protagonist, Naoko Yasutani (Nao). Conformity is analyzed as a form of social influence that compels individuals to change their beliefs or behaviors to align with group norms. This change can result from both real and imagined pressures, such as bullying, teasing, and societal expectations. Nao, who experiences severe depression and loneliness, exemplifies the negative consequences of such social pressures. The novel highlights Nao's struggles with identity, cultural displacement, and the lack of peer and familial support, all contributing to her sense of isolation. Additionally, the article delves into the psychological effects of conformity on Nao's family members, particularly her father, Haruki Yasutani #2, who grapples with suicidal thoughts. The influence of societal norms and economic pressures on middle-aged men in Japan, leading to a high rate of suicides, is also discussed. The narrative underscores the importance of guidance and support, as seen through the transformative role of Nao's great-grandmother, Jiko, a Zen Buddhist nun, who helps Nao and her father find meaning and strength in their lives. Ultimately, the article illustrates how Ozeki's novel portrays the interplay between social conformity and individual psychological distress, and how characters can overcome these challenges through personal growth and supportive relationships.

Keywords: Conformity, Social Influence, Loneliness, Depression, Psychological Impact

Introduction

In Ruth Ozeki's novel *A Tale for the Time Being*, the concept of conformity and its psychological repercussions are pivotal to the narrative. Conformity, a type of social influence that compels individuals to align their beliefs or behaviors with those of a group, is portrayed as a powerful force shaping the lives of the characters. This force is illustrated through the experiences of the protagonist, Naoko Yasutani (Nao), a teenager struggling with cultural displacement and the pressures of societal norms. The novel offers a poignant exploration of how conformity can lead to profound feelings of loneliness, depression, and identity crises.

Conformity is often driven by the need to be accepted by others or to avoid social rejection. This need can manifest in various forms, such as bullying, teasing, and peer pressure, all of which are evident in Nao's life. Nao's struggles are exacerbated by her move from the United States to Japan, a transition that brings about a severe cultural clash and a sense of alienation. In Japan, she is labeled as a "transfer student" and is subjected to bullying and exclusion by her peers. This lack of acceptance and the constant pressure to conform to Japanese societal norms intensify her feelings of isolation and hopelessness. Nao's family dynamics further complicate her situation. Her father, Haruki Yasutani #2, is depicted as a man overwhelmed by societal expectations and economic pressures. His inability to meet these expectations leads to a deep sense of failure and suicidal thoughts. Nao's mother also struggles with the societal norms of Japan, which dictate her role and behavior, adding to the family's overall sense of despair and dysfunction.

The novel also delves into the broader societal context of Japan, where conformity is deeply ingrained in the culture. Middle-aged men, in particular, face immense pressure to succeed financially, and the failure to do so often results in severe psychological distress and a high rate of suicides. Ozeki's portrayal of these societal pressures highlights the detrimental impact of rigid conformity on individuals' mental health. Amidst this bleak depiction of conformity and its consequences, Ozeki introduces a beacon of hope in the form of Nao's great-grandmother, Jiko. A Zen Buddhist nun, Jiko provides Nao and her father with a different perspective on life. Through her wisdom and guidance, they begin to find meaning and strength, demonstrating the potential for personal growth and resilience even in the face of overwhelming societal pressure.

*Corresponding Author: J. Alisha Josephine

Assistant Professor, Department of English, The Madura College, Affiliated to Madurai Kamaraj University, Madurai, Tamilnadu, India.

Email: alishajosephine23@gmail.com

Orcid ID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-2277-1247>

This article aims to analyze the multifaceted impact of conformity as presented in *A Tale for the Time Being*. By examining the experiences of Nao and her family, as well as the broader societal context, the article will explore how social influence can shape individuals' behaviors and beliefs, often leading to negative psychological outcomes. Additionally, it will discuss how the characters' journeys towards self-discovery and acceptance offer a counter-narrative to the oppressive nature of conformity, highlighting the importance of supportive relationships and personal resilience. Through this analysis, the article seeks to provide a comprehensive understanding of the intricate relationship between conformity, social influence, and psychological well-being as depicted in Ozeki's novel.

Conformity and Social Pressure

In *A Tale for the Time Being*, Ruth Ozeki vividly illustrates how conformity operates as a social mechanism that profoundly affects the characters' lives. Conformity, defined as the act of matching attitudes, beliefs, and behaviours to group norms, is a central theme in the novel. The pressure to conform can be overt, such as through direct bullying and coercion, or subtle, manifesting as the internalization of societal expectations. For Nao, the protagonist, conformity takes on a particularly insidious form. As a teenager who has recently moved from the United States to Japan, Nao finds herself caught between two cultures. Her American upbringing has instilled in her a sense of individuality that clashes with the collective mindset prevalent in Japanese society. This cultural dissonance makes her a target for bullying at school, where her classmates view her as an outsider. They tease and torment her, driving her deeper into a state of loneliness and depression. Nao's peers' relentless efforts to enforce conformity serve to marginalize her, exacerbating her sense of alienation.

The novel underscores that conformity is not merely about adhering to social norms but also involves the fear of rejection and the desire for acceptance. Nao's struggle is emblematic of this dynamic. Her attempts to fit in are met with resistance, leading her to question her self-worth and identity. The societal expectation to conform stifles her individuality and creativity, making her feel trapped in a cycle of despair. This pressure is so intense that Nao begins to contemplate suicide as a means of escape, highlighting the severe psychological toll that enforced conformity can exact on an individual. Beyond Nao's personal experiences, Ozeki expands the theme of conformity to encompass broader societal issues. In Japan, conformity is deeply rooted in cultural and social structures. The novel portrays the rigid expectations placed on middle-aged men to be successful breadwinners. Haruki Yasutani #2, Nao's father, embodies the struggles of many Japanese men who face immense pressure to provide for their families. When Haruki loses his job, he is engulfed by feelings of failure and shame.

The societal disdain for failure and the stigma associated with unemployment push him toward suicidal thoughts. This depiction is a stark reminder of how societal pressures to conform can lead to destructive outcomes, particularly when individuals feel they cannot meet these expectations. Ozeki also addresses the concept of "informational conformity," where individuals conform because they believe others have more knowledge or insight. This is evident in the character of Nao, who, in her desperation for acceptance and understanding, looks to her peers and societal norms for guidance. However, this often leads to further internal conflict as she grapples with the incongruity between her true self and the persona she feels compelled to adopt.

The psychological impact of conformity is not limited to Nao and her father. Nao's mother also grapples with societal expectations, which dictate her role as a wife and mother in Japan. Her frustration and sense of entrapment are palpable, as she navigates a society that values her primarily for her ability to manage the household and support her husband. This limited role exacerbates her dissatisfaction and contributes to the family's overall sense of dysfunction. Through these characters, Ozeki powerfully conveys the multifaceted nature of conformity and its far-reaching effects. The novel serves as a critique of societal norms that prioritize conformity over individuality, illustrating the profound impact such pressures can have on mental health and personal well-being. By depicting the struggles of Nao and her family, Ozeki invites readers to reflect on the pervasive influence of social norms and the importance of fostering environments that celebrate diversity and individual expression.

Psychological Impact of Loneliness and Isolation

The psychological impact of loneliness and isolation is a prominent theme in Ruth Ozeki's *A Tale for the Time Being*. The novel delves into the emotional and mental turmoil experienced by Nao and her family as they grapple with the repercussions of their social environment. Loneliness, exacerbated by societal pressures and cultural displacement, profoundly affects the characters' mental health, leading to depression, anxiety, and suicidal thoughts. Nao's journey through isolation begins with her transition from the United States to Japan, a move that intensifies her sense of alienation. At school, she is ostracized and bullied by her classmates, who see her as different and unworthy of inclusion. This relentless bullying, coupled with her cultural dislocation, leaves Nao feeling profoundly alone. She lacks a support system, as her peers reject her, and her family is unable to provide the emotional comfort she desperately needs. This absence of social support is a significant factor in her deepening depression.

The novel vividly portrays Nao's internal struggle with loneliness through her introspective narrative. She expresses feelings of hopelessness and despair, which are compounded by her inability to connect with others. Her longing for companionship and understanding is palpable, yet she is continually met with rejection and indifference. This persistent

isolation drives her to consider suicide, viewing it as the only escape from her unbearable reality. Nao's fixation on death underscores the severe psychological toll that loneliness can take on an individual, particularly an adolescent who is already navigating the complexities of identity and self-worth. Nao's father, Haruki Yasutani #2, also experiences profound isolation, albeit for different reasons. As a middle-aged man facing economic instability and societal expectations, he feels immense pressure to conform to the role of a successful provider. When he loses his job, his sense of self-worth plummets, and he becomes consumed by feelings of failure and shame. The societal stigma associated with unemployment and his inability to fulfill his expected role lead to severe depression and suicidal ideation. Haruki's isolation is further exacerbated by the lack of open communication within his family. He and Nao both suffer in silence, unable to share their burdens with each other or seek mutual support.

The psychological impact of loneliness extends to Nao's mother, who is trapped in a cycle of societal expectations and personal dissatisfaction. Her role as a housewife in Japan is dictated by cultural norms that prioritize her ability to manage the household and support her husband financially. This limited role leaves her feeling unfulfilled and disconnected from her own aspirations. Her emotional distance from her family contributes to the overall sense of isolation and dysfunction within the household. Ozeki's portrayal of loneliness is not limited to individual characters but also reflects broader societal issues. The novel highlights the detrimental effects of a society that prioritizes conformity over individual well-being, leading to widespread feelings of isolation and alienation. The characters' struggles underscore the importance of social connections and the devastating impact their absence can have on mental health. Despite the bleak depiction of loneliness and its psychological impact, *A Tale for the Time Being* also offers a glimmer of hope through the character of Jiko, Nao's great-grandmother. As a Zen Buddhist nun, Jiko provides a source of wisdom and guidance that helps Nao and her father begin to navigate their emotional turmoil. Jiko's teachings on mindfulness and acceptance offer an alternative perspective, emphasizing the importance of inner strength and resilience. Through her influence, Nao and her father start to find a sense of purpose and connection, illustrating the potential for healing even in the face of profound isolation.

The Role of Guidance and Support

In *A Tale for the Time Being*, Ruth Ozeki underscores the transformative power of guidance and support in overcoming the debilitating effects of conformity, loneliness, and isolation. The novel presents characters who, despite their struggles, find strength and resilience through meaningful relationships and mentorship, particularly from the character of Jiko, Nao's great-grandmother. Jiko, a Zen Buddhist nun, emerges as a pivotal figure in Nao's life, offering wisdom and support that contrast sharply with the oppressive societal norms Nao faces. Jiko's approach to life, rooted in mindfulness and acceptance, provides Nao with a new perspective that is crucial for her emotional and psychological recovery. Through Jiko, Nao learns to navigate her feelings of isolation and despair, gradually finding a sense of purpose and inner peace. Jiko's teachings encourage Nao to embrace her individuality and to find strength in her unique identity, rather than succumbing to the pressures of conformity.

One of the most significant lessons Jiko imparts to Nao is the practice of meditation. This practice helps Nao to calm her mind and gain control over her thoughts, which had been dominated by feelings of worthlessness and suicidal ideation. Meditation allows Nao to reflect on her experiences and emotions, fostering a sense of self-awareness and resilience. Through this practice, Nao begins to develop the mental fortitude necessary to confront and overcome the challenges she faces. Jiko's influence extends beyond Nao to her father, Haruki Yasutani #2. Haruki's struggles with unemployment and societal expectations lead him to a state of deep depression. However, through Nao's newfound strength and the wisdom she gains from Jiko, Haruki also starts to see a glimmer of hope. Jiko's teachings, filtered through Nao, help Haruki to reconsider his perspective on life and to seek out new ways to cope with his circumstances. This shift in perspective is crucial for Haruki, as it helps him to move away from the brink of suicide and to start rebuilding his sense of self-worth.

The novel also highlights the importance of peer support, particularly in the context of Nao's relationship with her friend Kayla in Sunnyvale. Although their friendship is strained by the physical distance and Nao's reluctance to share her painful experiences, it remains a vital connection that provides Nao with a sense of belonging and support. This relationship underscores the importance of having a supportive peer network, especially for adolescents who are navigating complex social and emotional landscapes.

Peer-group membership assumes more importance during adolescence than at any other period of life. A peer group can provide a refuge and a source of support for youngsters in conflict with their families. Moreover, being part of a clearly identified group can help answer the burning, "who am I?" For these and other reasons, adolescents spend a great deal of time with other adolescents. One study, which used beepers to contact adolescents at random times found that they spend more time talking with peers than doing academic work, being with their families or being alone (Morgan 475).

Ozeki illustrates that the absence of guidance and support can have devastating effects, as seen in the initial conditions of Nao's family. The lack of open communication and emotional support within the family contributes to their individual and collective struggles. However, as the characters begin to seek out and embrace support, they start to experience positive changes in their lives. This transformation is a testament to the power of supportive relationships and the profound impact they can have on individuals' mental health and well-being. So it just haunted them and they

feel lonely but my dad and I are having a fight and so I'm kind of preoccupied. It's not really a huge fight, but we're not talking to each other, which actually means that I'm not talking to him. I don't want him to upset him by telling him, "Hey, Dad, in case you had'nt noticed, we're having a fight, okay?" He's got a lot on his mind and I don't want to make him even more depressed (41).

A Tale for the Time Being emphasizes the crucial role of guidance and support in overcoming the negative effects of societal pressures and personal struggles. Through the character of Jiko and the relationships that Nao and her family develop, Ozeki demonstrates that it is possible to find strength and resilience in the face of adversity. The novel serves as a powerful reminder of the importance of fostering supportive environments and the potential for personal growth and healing that such environments can provide. In Ruth Ozeki's *A Tale for the Time Being*, the exploration of conformity and its psychological effects reveals several critical findings about the impact of societal pressures on individual well-being. The novel illustrates that conformity, driven by a desire for acceptance and fear of rejection, can lead to severe emotional and mental distress, particularly when individuals are unable to align with societal expectations.

The protagonist, Nao, experiences a profound identity crisis exacerbated by her struggle to conform to Japanese societal norms after moving from the United States. Her inability to fit in leads to intense bullying, which further alienates her and deepens her depression. This highlights how enforced conformity can disrupt an individual's sense of self and belonging, leading to significant psychological distress. Nao's cultural displacement intensifies her feelings of isolation. The clash between her American upbringing and Japanese societal expectations creates a sense of not belonging in either culture. This cultural dissonance contributes to her loneliness and suicidal thoughts, illustrating the compounded impact of cultural and societal pressures on mental health.

The novel also reveals how societal expectations impact family dynamics. Haruki Yasutani, Nao's father, faces immense pressure to be the family provider, and his inability to fulfill this role leads to deep shame and suicidal ideation. The lack of open communication and emotional support within the family exacerbates their individual struggles, highlighting the importance of supportive family environments in mitigating the effects of societal pressures. The transformative power of guidance and support is a crucial finding in the novel. Jiko's mentorship provides Nao and her father with the tools to navigate their emotional turmoil. Her teachings on mindfulness and acceptance help them find inner strength and resilience. This underscores the potential for personal growth and healing through supportive relationships and mentorship.

Ozeki's novel critiques societal norms that prioritize conformity over individuality, illustrating how these norms can lead to widespread feelings of isolation and mental distress. The characters' journeys toward self-discovery and acceptance offer a counter-narrative, emphasizing the importance of fostering environments that celebrate diversity and individual expression. Overall, *A Tale for the Time Being* highlights the profound impact of societal pressures on individual well-being and the critical role of guidance and support in overcoming these challenges.

Conclusion

Ruth Ozeki's *A Tale for the Time Being* provides a nuanced exploration of the interplay between conformity, societal pressures, and individual psychological well-being. Through the experiences of Nao and her family, the novel vividly illustrates the detrimental effects of enforced conformity and cultural displacement, revealing how these forces can lead to profound feelings of loneliness, depression, and identity crises. Nao's journey is emblematic of the struggle to maintain individuality in the face of overwhelming societal expectations. Her experiences highlight the severe psychological toll that conformity can take, particularly when accompanied by cultural dissonance and a lack of social support. The bullying and ostracization she faces at school, coupled with her family's inability to provide emotional comfort, drive her into a state of deep despair. This depiction underscores the importance of fostering inclusive and supportive environments that allow individuals to express their true selves without fear of rejection.

The novel also sheds light on the broader societal issues in Japan, where conformity is deeply ingrained in cultural norms. The pressure on middle-aged men, exemplified by Haruki Yasutani #2, to succeed financially and conform to the role of a provider leads to significant mental health challenges, including depression and suicidal thoughts. Ozeki's critique of these societal norms calls attention to the need for a more compassionate and understanding approach to individual well-being. Amidst the bleak portrayal of the effects of conformity, Ozeki offers a beacon of hope through the character of Jiko. Her guidance and teachings on mindfulness and acceptance provide Nao and her father with the tools to navigate their emotional turmoil and find a sense of inner peace. This highlights the transformative power of supportive relationships and mentorship in fostering resilience and personal growth.

In conclusion, *A Tale for the Time Being* emphasizes the critical importance of support, guidance, and acceptance in mitigating the negative effects of societal pressures. Ozeki's novel serves as a powerful reminder of the need to create environments that celebrate individuality and provide the necessary support for individuals to thrive. By doing so, we can help alleviate the psychological burdens imposed by conformity and societal expectations, fostering a more inclusive and compassionate society.

Reference:

Primary Source

Ozeki, Ruth. *A Tale for the Time Being*. USA: Penguin Group, 2013. Print.

Secondary Source

Morgan, Clifford T., et al. "Development During Adolescence, Adulthood, and Old Age." *Introduction to Psychology*. New York: McGraw-Hill Inc., 1993. 475-478. Print.

Electronic Sources

"Buddhist Perspectives to Suicide." Media. Kmpsk.Org. N.p., May 2009. Web. 12 March 2017.

Delaney, William. "Characteristics of American Literature." Enotes.com. N.p., Oct. 2010. Web. 6 March 2017.

Malgaj, Luka. "Main Characteristics of American Literature." ArticlesFactory.com. N.p., Aug. 2009. Web. 6 March 2017.

McLeod, Melvin. "Are You Spiritual but Not Religious? 10 Reasons Why Buddhism Will Enrich Your Path." LionsRoar.com. N.p., Jan. 2017. Web. 20 March 2017.

McLeod, Saul. "What Is Conformity?" SimplyPsychology.org. N.p., 2007. Web. 12 March 2017.

McLeod, Saul. "Obedience to Authority." SimplyPsychology.com. N.p., 2007. Web. 12 March 2017.