Bullying Depicted in the Novel *Big Girl* by Danielle Steel

Tri Devi Purnama Sari Mizan¹
Universitas Pamulang
Email: ¹ mutia.jung0710@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

This study aims to analyze how differences in the main character trigger acts of bullying as portrayed in Danielle Steel's novel Big Girl*, which centers on the character Victoria Dawson. The analysis applies Olweus's (1993) theory of bullying to support the discussion of the bullying issues presented in the novel. This research employs a qualitative descriptive method to examine the character's experiences and the underlying causes of bullying. The findings reveal that the main character, Victoria Dawson, becomes a victim of bullying due to her physical differences from her family members. She experiences emotional abuse and verbal humiliation from both her parents and people around her, particularly related to her body weight and appearance. These experiences lead to anxiety and low self-esteem, as her parents continually criticize her and pressure her to be thin. However, as the story progresses, Victoria develops courage and self-confidence, enabling her to resist bullying and affirm her self-worth.*

Keywords: bullying depiction, defining bullying, resistance to bullying

A. Introduction

Bullying is a complex and persistent social problem that continues to attract attention from educators, psychologists, and researchers across disciplines. It is generally defined as repeated aggressive behavior that intentionally causes physical or emotional harm to individuals who are unable to defend themselves. According to Olweus (1993), bullying is characterized by three essential components: aggressive intent, repetition over time, and an imbalance of power between the perpetrator and the victim. Although physical aggression is the most visible form, verbal, emotional, and psychological bullying can be equally, if not more, damaging. Victims of bullying frequently suffer from social isolation, low self-esteem, depression, and long-term psychological distress.

Bullying can occur in a variety of contexts, including schools, workplaces, and even within families. The triggers often include differences in appearance, social status, personality traits, or perceived weaknesses (Reavis et al., 2015). Its consequences are extensive, affecting not only the victim's emotional and psychological well-being but also their interpersonal relationships and long-term self-perception.

In addition to being a pressing real-world issue, bullying is frequently represented in literary works, where authors use fiction to critique social inequalities and psychological struggles. Literature provides an avenue to explore the emotional realities of victims, allowing readers to empathize with their experiences. One such literary portrayal is found in Danielle Steel's novel *Big Girl* (2010), which vividly illustrates the psychological impact of familial bullying. The story

centers on Victoria Dawson, a young woman who endures persistent emotional abuse from her parents, primarily because of her physical appearance. Her father repeatedly criticizes her weight and looks, while her mother displays favoritism toward Victoria's younger, conventionally attractive sister. Though non-physical, this continuous verbal and emotional bullying profoundly undermines Victoria's sense of self-worth and identity.

Analyzing *Big Girl* offers a valuable lens through which to examine emotional and psychological bullying within the family setting. Drawing upon Olweus's (1993) theory of bullying, this study explores how repeated acts of emotional aggression and power imbalance are represented in the novel. The research also considers how these fictional depictions reflect real-world psychological and social consequences, such as anxiety, shame, and diminished self-esteem.

Previous studies have underscored the deep psychological effects of bullying. For instance, Barcaccia et al. (2018) found that adolescent victims often experience heightened levels of psychological distress, including depression, anxiety, and difficulties managing anger. Similarly, Hinduja and Patchin (2010) reported that individuals involved in bullying, whether as victims or perpetrators, frequently experience humiliation, hopelessness, and loneliness, which can lead to severe mental health outcomes such as suicidal ideation. Reavis et al. (2015) further argue that the absence of social support and intervention exacerbates the negative effects of bullying, increasing the likelihood of long-term emotional instability.

Real-life cases also demonstrate the gravity of the issue. For example, a 2016 report by the Japan Observer Bulletin Survey (JOBS) documented the suicide of a junior high school student who had endured prolonged verbal abuse and social exclusion. Despite expressing feelings of neglect and alienation through school surveys, the lack of intervention from educators intensified the student's sense of hopelessness. Such cases reveal how unchecked bullying, whether at school, in the workplace, or within families, can lead to irreversible consequences.

This study focuses on how bullying is represented in Danielle Steel's *Big Girl* (2010) and examines the psychological impact experienced by the protagonist. The novel depicts the subtle yet damaging nature of emotional and verbal abuse within a family that prioritizes appearance and perfection. Victoria, the eldest daughter, faces constant criticism and comparisons from her parents, leading to chronic self-doubt and low self-esteem. Through her eventual personal growth and resilience, the novel also presents a journey of self-acceptance and empowerment in the face of persistent bullying.

The researcher aims to analyze how bullying is depicted and how the main character responds to such treatment. The portrayal of emotional bullying in *Big Girl* mirrors real-world psychological experiences of victims, making it a valuable text for understanding the long-term emotional consequences of non-physical forms of abuse. By analyzing this novel through the lens of Olweus's bullying theory, the study seeks to contribute to the broader discourse on psychological violence, power imbalance, and self-identity as reflected in contemporary literature.

B. Method

1. Approach of the Study

This study employed a qualitative research approach. This method was selected because the data collected from the research object are in the form of textual descriptions rather than numerical

data. The data were analyzed and interpreted through detailed explanations in narrative form. The qualitative method was used to describe and analyze the content of the novel comprehensively.

According to Creswell (2014), qualitative research is a method used to explore and understand the meaning that individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem. It emphasizes words, sentences, and interpretive descriptions rather than statistical analysis. In this study, a descriptive qualitative method was applied since there was no experimentation or numerical measurement involved. The data consisted of words and expressions found in Danielle Steel's novel *Big Girl* (2010), which were analyzed and interpreted based on the relevant theoretical framework. This approach enabled a deep and reflective examination of the novel's narrative, revealing how its story and message convey the issue of bullying.

2. Data Source

The primary data source for this research was the novel *Big Girl* (2010), written by Danielle Steel and published in English. The novel serves as the main object of analysis because it presents the psychological and emotional conflict of the main character, Victoria Dawson, who experiences bullying within her family environment. The study focuses specifically on how this conflict is constructed through the theme of bullying as depicted in the novel's plot, characterization, and narrative events.

3. Data Collection

Data collection in this study was conducted through a systematic process of identifying and compiling textual evidence related to the research topic. This process aimed to gather accurate information to answer the research questions effectively. The primary data were drawn directly from the text of *Big Girl* (2010).

The following steps were undertaken during the data collection process:

1. The researcher carefully read the novel several times to obtain a comprehensive understanding of the storyline, character dynamics, and central themes.
2. Instances of bullying experienced by the main character were identified and marked throughout the text.
3. Relevant passages, including dialogues, monologues, and narrative descriptions, were highlighted, noted, and categorized according to their relation to the acts or consequences of bullying.
4. The collected data were then organized into categories for detailed analysis.

This systematic approach ensured that the data accurately reflected the bullying incidents and their psychological implications within the novel.

4. Data Analysis

After the data were collected from Danielle Steel's *Big Girl* (2010), they were classified into two main analytical categories. The first category included incidents that depict acts of bullying directed at the main character, Victoria Dawson. The second category included scenes that illustrate Victoria's emotional and psychological responses to such bullying and her process of coping and self-development.

The analysis was conducted using Olweus's (1993) theory of bullying, as outlined in *Bullying at School: What We Know and What We Can Do*. This theory provided a framework for identifying patterns of repeated aggression, power imbalance, and psychological impact. The categorized data were then examined interpretively to reveal how the novel represents bullying behavior, its emotional consequences, and the character's response to it. Finally, the findings were presented in essay form, offering a structured and comprehensive interpretation of how *Big Girl* portrays bullying and its effects on the protagonist.

C. Findings and Analysis

This section presents the findings and analysis of how bullying is depicted in Danielle Steel's novel *Big Girl* (2010). The focus of the analysis is on how bullying is represented in the novel and how the main character, Victoria Dawson, struggles against it. The theoretical framework used in this analysis is based on Olweus (1993), which helps to explain the patterns, forms, and psychological effects of bullying as portrayed in the novel.

1. Bullying Depicted in the Novel Big Girl by Danielle Steel

In *Big Girl* (2010), Danielle Steel portrays bullying as a complex social behavior that deeply affects the characters' mental health and relationships. The novel illustrates bullying not only in physical forms but also through emotional manipulation and social exclusion. This representation aligns with Olweus's (1993) definition of bullying as repeated, intentional negative behavior involving an imbalance of power. Throughout the novel, characters experience verbal humiliation, rejection, and psychological intimidation, reflecting real-world dynamics of bullying.

Furthermore, this portrayal supports Olweus's (1993) argument that bullying often occurs within fixed social groups where victims have limited ability to choose or escape their aggressors. The emotional consequences—such as shame, low self-esteem, and isolation—are emphasized throughout Victoria's journey. These effects are consistent with Rigby's (2003) findings that victims of bullying suffer both immediate and long-term psychological harm.

1.1 Forms of Bullying

According to Olweus (1993), bullying occurs when an individual intentionally and repeatedly inflicts harm on another person, whether physically, verbally, or socially. The victim is often unable to defend themselves, creating a persistent power imbalance. In *Big Girl* (2010), the main character, Victoria Dawson, experiences primarily verbal and emotional bullying, especially from her parents. These attacks may appear subtle at first but become increasingly damaging over time, eroding her confidence and self-esteem: "Her parents' friends always referred to her as a 'big girl,' and she was never sure what part of her they were referring to—her long legs, big breasts, or ever-widening body." (Steel, 2010, p. 40)

This quotation demonstrates how Victoria's physical appearance becomes a constant target for ridicule within her family. The phrase "big girl" is used not as a neutral description but as a judgmental label, highlighting her difference and implying inferiority. Such repeated verbal bullying, as explained by Olweus (1993), causes lasting psychological harm by diminishing the victim's self-worth. The ambiguity of the criticism also increases Victoria's insecurity, leading her to internalize shame and confusion about her body image: "She had a summer job at an ice cream store and ate ice cream on all her breaks. Her mother was upset about it and said it was the wrong job for her." (Steel, 2010, p. 62)

In this instance, Victoria's mother criticizes her work choice based on assumptions about her body size, implying that she is unfit for the job because it involves food. This comment reduces Victoria's worth to her appearance, suggesting that her success or happiness depends solely on meeting superficial beauty standards. Olweus (1993) categorizes this as emotional bullying, where the aggressor's words are designed to shame and control. Such messages reinforce harmful gender expectations and promote the idea that a woman's value is defined by her physical form rather than her character or capability: "You look more like your great-grandmother every day," was all her father said, but it made the point. (Steel, 2010, p. 70)

This seemingly simple remark reveals a more subtle form of bullying through comparison and mockery. By likening Victoria to an older, possibly less attractive family member, her father implicitly criticizes her looks. According to Olweus's framework, this behavior exemplifies psychological bullying, where power is exerted through ridicule and emotional manipulation. For Victoria, such comments reinforce the idea that she will never meet her family's standards, no matter what she does. The repetition of these judgments traps her in a cycle of self-doubt and hopelessness, undermining her confidence and identity: "They took the fun out of everything for her, and always had, and any sense of accomplishment over what she had achieved." (Steel, 2010, p. 128)

This passage highlights the emotional consequences of constant belittlement. Victoria's parents not only criticize her appearance but also invalidate her achievements, eroding her motivation and self-esteem. According to Olweus (1993), this type of long-term emotional bullying can be as destructive as physical aggression, as it consistently devalues the victim's efforts and abilities. Over time, Victoria internalizes these negative perceptions, leading to feelings of inadequacy and depression.

In summary, *Big Girl* (2010) portrays bullying in subtle yet deeply psychological ways, particularly within the family context. The constant verbal and emotional abuse from Victoria's parents illustrates how bullying can persist in intimate environments, leaving long-lasting scars. Through this portrayal, Danielle Steel sheds light on the emotional dimensions of bullying—how it damages not only self-perception but also one's ability to trust, achieve, and feel loved.

1.2 Power Imbalance in Bullying

One of the fundamental characteristics of bullying, according to Olweus (1993), is the presence of a power imbalance between the bully and the victim. In Danielle Steel's *Big Girl* (2010), this imbalance is clearly illustrated through the relationship between Victoria Dawson and her parents, who hold significant authority and control over her life. As the main perpetrators of bullying, her parents use their power to belittle, criticize, and emotionally manipulate her, leaving her unable to defend herself or assert her independence.

"Why should you have to? I can line up some interviews for you next week." Her dad was dismissing her entire achievement in landing the job in New York. To him, it wasn't even a job." (Steel, 2010, p. 136)

This statement highlights how Victoria's accomplishments are undermined by her father. Rather than acknowledging her effort and independence, he devalues her success and implies that her decisions hold no importance. This dynamic reflects a clear power imbalance, as Victoria, being his daughter, cannot freely challenge his opinion. Her father's authority as both a parent and a decision-maker reinforces her powerless position. According to Olweus (1993), this type of dominance exemplifies bullying because the victim feels unable to resist or respond. Over time,

such behavior erodes Victoria's self-confidence and increases her dependency on parental validation, trapping her in a cycle of emotional subordination and diminished self-worth: "I was afraid you'd do something like that," her father said with a disapproving tone. He actually sounded disappointed in her, as though she'd been arrested for taking her clothes off in a supermarket and was in jail." (Steel, 2010, p. 126)

In this passage, Victoria's father uses exaggerated disappointment and shame to control her behavior. Although Victoria has done nothing wrong, his reaction implies that her actions are disgraceful. This manipulation reflects another form of power imbalance, where authority is used to instill fear and guilt. As Olweus (1993) notes, bullying often involves psychological control—where the bully enforces obedience through emotional intimidation. Victoria's inability to defend herself or express her feelings without fear of further reprimand illustrates her submissive position within the family. Consequently, she internalizes guilt and learns to suppress her opinions, which deepens her emotional dependency and reinforces the cycle of domination: "Her art teacher in eighth grade called her Rubenesque, and she didn't dare ask him what it meant, and didn't want to know." (Steel, 2010, p. 41)

This example shows that the power imbalance extends beyond Victoria's family, appearing in her school environment as well. Her teacher, as an authority figure, comments on her body using the term "Rubenesque," a word she does not understand but instinctively perceives as derogatory. Victoria's fear of asking for clarification reveals her vulnerable position in the interaction. According to Olweus (1993), power imbalance enables bullying because the victim lacks the confidence or safety to confront the aggressor. This moment emphasizes how adults in positions of authority can unintentionally perpetuate emotional harm, leaving the victim isolated and disempowered. The absence of support from others further reinforces Victoria's sense of helplessness and alienation: "Victoria was well aware of it, which was why she had never in her entire life felt at ease with them, and she felt even less so now, because she was different from her parents in so many ways." (Steel, 2010, p. 70)

This quote captures the internalized impact of the power imbalance on Victoria's emotional state. Her constant awareness of being different from her parents generates anxiety and discomfort, making her feel incapable of meeting their expectations. This psychological imbalance mirrors Olweus's (1993) concept of bullying, where the victim's inability to defend themselves stems from fear and lack of control. In Victoria's case, the imbalance is deeply emotional—she suppresses her individuality to avoid rejection and criticism. As a result, her growth, confidence, and independence are stifled.

Overall, the power imbalance in *Big Girl* (2010) operates both externally and internally. Externally, Victoria's parents and authority figures exert control through criticism and manipulation; internally, Victoria internalizes their disapproval, perpetuating her feelings of inferiority. As long as this imbalance persists, she remains trapped in a cycle of emotional bullying, unable to assert herself or redefine her sense of self-worth.

3. Emotional Impact of Bullying

Bullying does not only cause physical harm but also leaves deep emotional scars on the victim. According to Olweus (1993), victims of bullying often suffer from a range of psychological problems such as low self-esteem, depression, anxiety, and insecurity. This emotional suffering is vividly portrayed through the experiences of Victoria Dawson in Danielle

Steel's *Big Girl* (2010): "Gracie was like their only child, and she felt like the family stray dog. She didn't even look like them, and she couldn't take it anymore." (Steel, 2010, p. 62)

This passage reveals the depth of Victoria's emotional pain within her own family environment. By comparing herself to a "family stray dog," Victoria expresses feelings of rejection, isolation, and worthlessness. The metaphor highlights her belief that she is unloved and does not belong, even within the supposed safety of her home. According to Olweus (1993), this sense of alienation and low self-esteem is a direct result of bullying, as victims internalize the repeated negative messages they receive. For Victoria, the emotional wounds inflicted by her parents' constant criticism and neglect reshape her self-perception, leading to chronic sadness and self-doubt: "She thought they loved her, they were her parents, and she had lived with them for eighteen years, but her father had made fun of her all her life, and her mother had been disappointed that she wasn't prettier, complained that she was too smart, and told her men didn't like smart women." (Steel, 2010, p. 73)

This passage reflects the confusion and emotional conflict experienced by victims of familial bullying. Victoria wants to believe that her parents love her, yet their behavior constantly invalidates that belief. Her father mocks her appearance, and her mother belittles both her intelligence and physical looks. These contradictory messages erode her sense of security and self-worth. Olweus (1993) explains that when bullying occurs in a close relationship, such as within a family, the psychological damage can be particularly severe because it comes from those who are expected to provide support and affection. Consequently, Victoria feels trapped between the desire for acceptance and the painful realization that she will never meet her parents' expectations: "They always made her feel unwanted and not really good enough for them." (Steel, 2010, p. 147)

This simple yet powerful line encapsulates the emotional abuse Victoria endures. Her parents' persistent disapproval convinces her that she is unworthy of love and acceptance, not just from them but from anyone. According to Olweus (1993), such internalized feelings of worthlessness are among the most damaging effects of bullying, as they can lead to social withdrawal, depression, and long-term emotional instability. Victoria's belief that she is unwanted becomes a defining part of her identity, influencing how she perceives herself and interacts with others: "Sometimes it sounds like we didn't have the same parents. We didn't actually, because they treated us very differently, so her life experience and her childhood were completely different from mine." (Steel, 2010, p. 118)

This quotation highlights the emotional imbalance caused by favoritism within the family. While Victoria's sister, Gracie, receives love and praise, Victoria is subjected to neglect and criticism. The unequal treatment reinforces her feelings of being an outsider. Olweus (1993) notes that social exclusion is one of the key indicators of bullying, and in this case, it manifests within Victoria's family dynamic. Growing up as the less favored child damages her emotional development and sense of belonging, making it difficult for her to trust others or believe in her own worth: "She no longer knew who she really was beneath all the pain and criticism." (Steel, 2010, p. 120)

This line represents the most profound consequence of prolonged emotional bullying—loss of identity. Years of constant criticism and belittlement have stripped Victoria of her confidence and self-understanding. As Olweus (1993) explains, long-term exposure to bullying can lead to serious psychological conditions such as anxiety, depression, and identity confusion. Victoria's inability to recognize her true self reflects the cumulative impact of repeated emotional abuse, which has dismantled her sense of stability and self-assurance.

The emotional impact of bullying on Victoria in *Big Girl* (2010) is extensive and deeply rooted. It affects every aspect of her life—her emotions, relationships, confidence, and identity. The novel illustrates how continuous verbal and emotional abuse, especially within a family, can result in severe psychological damage that persists into adulthood. This aligns closely with Olweus's (1993) theory, which emphasizes that bullying, particularly when unaddressed, can cause long-lasting harm that is difficult to overcome. Victoria's struggle serves as a poignant depiction of the destructive effects of emotional bullying and the enduring scars it leaves on the human psyche.

D. Conclusion

Based on the analysis, this study concludes that Danielle Steel's *Big Girl* (2010) portrays significant issues related to bullying, particularly emotional and psychological forms experienced by the main character, Victoria Dawson. The narrative presents these issues through detailed descriptions and character dialogues that allow readers to grasp the protagonist's internal conflicts and emotional struggles. These elements not only enrich the plot but also strengthen the novel's thematic depth.

The bullying Victoria experiences manifests in various forms such as isolation, humiliation, embarrassment, and condescension. These recurring acts of emotional abuse are primarily inflicted by her parents, who continually judge her based on her physical appearance. Unlike her parents and sister, who share what they perceive as "ideal" traits, Victoria is treated as an outsider in her own family. As a result, she endures ongoing emotional pressure that affects her confidence, sense of belonging, and self-worth.

The novel effectively illustrates how bullying, particularly when it originates from within the family, can have profound and lasting effects on an individual's mental and emotional development. Through the character of Victoria Dawson, *Big Girl* (2010) highlights the destructive impact of judgment and rejection while also emphasizing the importance of empathy, acceptance, and self-acceptance. This makes the story both relatable and meaningful for readers who may have faced similar emotional struggles.

Based on the conclusion above, the writer suggests that readers become more aware of the subtle and often overlooked forms of bullying that can occur not only in schools or workplaces but also within families and close relationships, as depicted in *Big Girl* (2010) by Danielle Steel. Bullying is not always physical; it can appear through harsh words, emotional manipulation, or constant comparison, all of which can cause deep and lasting psychological harm. Literature such as this novel serves as a mirror that helps readers understand the emotional consequences of such experiences and encourages empathy and compassion in real-life interactions.

Furthermore, the writer hopes that this study can be a valuable reference for future readers and students of Pamulang University, particularly those conducting literary research on social or psychological issues. It is recommended that future researchers explore other literary works that address similar themes of identity, self-worth, and emotional resilience. By employing various analytical perspectives—such as feminist criticism, psychoanalysis, or sociocultural approaches—researchers can gain deeper insights into how literature reflects the complexities of human experience and the impact of emotional and psychological struggles on individual development.

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