

The Fragmented Interceptions of Law with Ethics and Body:

A Reading of Jodi Picoult's *Handle with Care* from a Psychoanalytic Perspective

Mrs. J. Linus Jude

Ph.D. Scholar, Ethiraj College for Women, Chennai.

Dr. J. Praveena

Assistant Professor of English, Ethiraj College for Women, Chennai.

ABSTRACT

Jodi Picoult's *Handle with Care* is a novel that questions, challenges, and contests with uneasy interrogation of law, ethics, and the vulnerable body. It is an interrogation of the wrongful birth lawsuit that involves a child suffering from Osteogenesis Imperfecta. This article submits a psychoanalytic reading of *Handle with Care*. This is done in order to examine how the legal relationships affect logical reasonings. This article perceives how legal reasoning fragments, or even ruptures the intimate ethical relationships, that eventually intensify the psychological trauma, rather than resolving moral conflict. The researcher employs the concepts of Sigmund Freud to explore themes of guilt, repression, and maternal ambivalence. This article argues that Charlotte's legal action is not merely a rational pursuit of justice or financial support, but significantly, an outward manifestation of the inner turmoil surrounding responsibility, fear and love. The

courtroom hence becomes a figurative space in which these emotional and ethical tensions are enacted.

This article thus examines the traumatised body as evidence constrained within the boundaries of the ethical corpus.

Keywords: Psychoanalytic reading, Ethical dilemma, Trauma, Ethical corpus, Interrogation.

Jodi Picoult, a renowned American- Jewish writer, was born on May 19th, 1966, in Gong Island, New York. This place might be conceived as a landscape that enriched her character and enriched her as a novelist. As the Hale Award Recipient in 2019, and even ranked in top ten of Princeton's twenty-five most influential living alumni, she is still recognised today as a highly acclaimed and bestselling American author known for her exclusive fictional works that resonate with complex ethical dilemma like the backdrop of a techno-scientific American white centrist system. She is an educated literary artist. She earned a Bachelor of Arts degree in English from the Princeton University and the Master's degree from the Vermont College of Fine Arts.

As of date, Picoult is the *New York Times* bestselling author of twenty-nine novels, including most recently, the record-breaking recent bestseller, *By any other Name* (2021). *Songs of the Humpback whale* (1992) is her debut novel, which is followed by *At The Still Point of the Turning World* (1993). *Change of Heart* (2008) is the novel which hit the number one bestseller of the year. *Nineteen minutes* (2007) is all about the aftermath of a school shooting in a small town. *Handle With Care* (2009) and *House Rules* (2010) reached number one on the *New York Times* bestseller's list. The year 2016 marks a significant impact on her literary career. She is one of the Senior members of the Advisory Board VIDA: Women in Literary Arts, an organisation oriented towards feminist principal and ideology. Eventually, some of her vibrant novels

namely, *Harvesting The Heart* (1993), *Picture Perfect* (1995), *Mercy* (1996), *The Pact* (1998), *Keeping Faith* (1999), *My Sister's Keeper* (2004), *Change of Heart* (2008), *Handle with Care* (2009), *House Rules* (2010), *Sing You Home* (2011), *The Book of Two Ways* (2020) and *Wish You Were Here* (2021) might be considered central to the experiences of Jewish women who are the products of the pioneering immigrants from the Jewish homeland. Some of her novels, namely, *Playing True* (2004), *The Tenth Circle* (2008) and *My Sister's Keeper* (2009) are but a few of her books adapted for film and T.V. adaptations.

The courtroom in Jodi Picoult's fiction is more than a *mise en scene*. It is obviously more than a setting as well. It is the frontstage of revelation. It is the main fixity around which the intricate, often horrifying things happen. It is the main place on stage which furnishes the horrendous conflict between the judgmental law and the human interaction with the same. Jodi Picoult, across her marathon writing, has been using the courtroom and the judiciary which are quite strategically consistent. She uses it with a purpose. She places the judiciary as the backdrop to foreground the ethical dissension. It is the ethical conversance by those humans, mothers especially, to dissect the profound ethical dissension. The selected novel, *Handle with Care*, explores, in clear terms the perpetual inadequacy of the law, designed, in fact, to deliver straight cut verdicts. This novel has been taken up for study as it hits at the gray areas of the failure of adjudication. This is obviously, Picoult's signature approach. She involves the contemporary issues, that is the ethical morality to encounter the procedural law consequently, she lays bare the binary logic of the courtrooms pronouncing the litigants as either guilty or not so.

Jodi Picoult's *Handle with Care* (2009) is an emotional novel that deals with family struggles and ethical dilemmas. The novel also deals with medical ethics and legal battles as seen in most of her novels. The story revolves around Charlotte and Sean O' Keefe whose daughter Willow is born with Osteogenesis imperfecta OI a severe breaking of the bone disease. Charlotte and Sean O' Keefe's lives completely take

a turn when their second daughter Willow is diagnosed with type 3 OI. She is born with seven broken bones where even the simplest of actions like moving her could break more of hers. Charlotte and Sean find it very difficult to financially support her treatments as she needs constant care due to frequent breakage of bones. Charlotte's best friend and Obstetrician Piper Reece is the one who oversees the deformity.

While the family is away on a trip which is unusual due to Willow's illness, Willow breaks one of her bones accidentally, which in turn creates a commotion which leads to a short conviction of Charlotte and Sean. This infuriates Sean who is determined to sue the department after his return home. After approaching a local lawyer, they learn that such an action is not possible but if they want to sue someone for money it could be Piper Reece, Charlotte's friend for wrongful birth. This implies that had she known earlier about Willow's condition she could have terminated the pregnancy. The decision Charlotte takes to sue her friend shatters their strong bond of friendship and it puts pressure on Sean for lying and it devastates Amelia, the elder daughter who suffers mentally which results in self-harm and bulimia.

Willow is an intelligent child and on learning that her mother might have terminated her pregnancy, if she was aware of her disability, feels unloved. Unable to handle his emotions Sean separates from his family. The trial goes on in the courtroom where each character goes through extreme emotional torment. Charlotte, Sean, Amelia, Piper Reece, her husband and daughter suffer through this equally in their own way. Finally, Charlotte wins the case but loses everything else. The victory is very short-lived as Willow drowns in a frozen pond nearby. Ultimately the money she gains from the victory of her trial for Willow, goes unused. The novel concludes with the letter from Charlotte to Willow expressing both her love and regret. The novel ends with a central idea making the reader ponder if the lawsuit was worth suing.

The novel puts forth severe moral questions like could it be right for Charlotte to show her friend who has been supportive to her in both thick and thin? Whether it is right for a mother to say that her life would have been better if the child hadn't been born. Whether her ignorance of the plight of Amelia suffering from bulimia is right or wrong? Whether the society accepts a person with severe disability and is their life worth living? The novel very well deals with the emotional toll and difference of opinion that happens when a law soul is filed.

The novel like many other Picoult's novel follows a very predictable structure such as the medical ethics, the legal case, multiple perspectives and a tragic ending. Charlotte is sympathized by Sean but is also considered cold and heartless by others. She is also considered selfish due to the extremity she goes in to win the case. Shaun doesn't play a prominent role throughout the novel. *Handle with care* is yet another novel which deals in depth with the emotions of characters and the outcome of their actions. Picoult successfully creates complex and realistic characters and binds the readers with her writings.

In this novel, Willow's body is marked by pain and precarity. It destabilizes enumerative assumptions about value autonomy and care within a legalistic worldview. The novel criticizes the modern legal systems reduction of the ethical dilemmas into claims and verdicts exposing how much processes generate emotional alienation and moral ambiguity. This novel also generates emotional distance yet at the same time reinforces the impossibility of the ethical closure. It also deals with a poignant reflection of Willow's fragile existence. It pushes forth, that care is mandatory to navigate the difficulties that come with it. The novel masterfully weaves a story that raises important issues about family, morality and the lengths parents will go to protect their children. Here the lawsuit creates a stark collision between the key pillars of medical ethics. It is all about the conflict between the autonomy of the human body and beneficence.

Legal systems depend upon clarity, they require responsibility to be assignable, causation to be traceable and harm to be measurable. In this novel the wrongful birth claim requires that Willow's life be framed as a compensable injury. Charlotte's testimony that she should have terminated the pregnancy had she known of Willow's diagnosis is legally necessary, yet its ethical implications are destabilizing. The statement performs a hypothetical negation of her daughter's existence. To secure Willow's future, Charlotte must imagine and publicly articulate a world in which Willow would not have been born. As the novel makes chillingly clear in the Prologue, "here was the first time I lied, and said that I wished you'd never been born" (Picoult 11). The courtroom therefore does not simply host ethical conflict but generates a new one. Law produces what it seeks to regulate - fracture. As Fineman puts forth:

"Vulnerability is universal and constant, inherent in the human condition. The vulnerable subject is the embodiment of the realization that vulnerability is—and should be understood to be—universal and constant, inherent in the human condition" (Fineman 8).

Here, a Foucauldian framework is instructive, modern institutions render bodies intelligible, through classification and documentation. In this novel Willow's pain is translated into evidence. Charlotte's attachment to Willow cannot be reduced to principle nor can her despair be aligned with logic of choice. Law requires coherence. Ethical life rarely provides it. According to Rose:

"We have become 'biological citizens,' our identities and choices increasingly shaped by our understanding of ourselves as beings whose very vitality is open to intervention, optimization, and control" (Rose 26).

Willow's osteogenesis imperfecta makes her body radically fragile. Bones fracture with even minimal force and her daily life is structured around risk management. As Picoult puts it, Willow is born with seven

broken bones. The parents are warned that even a hug could fracture her ribs and that lifting her the wrong way might snap her arm just like a twig. Gravity itself is an enemy to her. Though Willow has this problem she is intellectually gifted and is acutely aware of her family's tensions. In this novel her body becomes the point at which competing discourses converge. Medicine approaches it diagnostically, law approaches it evidentially and Charlotte approaches it maternally. Willow's existence complicates the binary between suffering and value of the body. Her pain is real and so is her joy. Precarity here is not merely medical. It is existential.

Freud's writing on ambivalence eliminates Charlotte's psychic landscape. Love and hostility, he insists, often coexists with an intimate bond. In this novel Charlotte's life is a mixture of financial strain, physical exhaustion, and emotional depletion. In moments of despair, she wishes for a space but not from Willow as a person but from the relentless demands of her condition. Such thoughts, even fleeting, become intolerable. They are repressed. The lawsuit acts as a displacement here. By directing her anger towards Piper, Charlotte converts diffuse and internal guilt into external accusation. Picoult portrays this as follows: "There are nights when I lie awake and imagine what it would be like to sleep without listening for the crack of bone. To wake up without fear. And then I hate myself for even thinking it, because loving Willow should be enough to make the rest disappear." (Picoult 168)

Her repression does not resolve ambivalence. When Charlotte testifies that she would have chosen termination, the statement reverberates beyond strategy. It exposes the sleek line between unconditional love and imagined relief. The courtroom demands certainty while the psyche resists it. The legal process unlike psychoanalysis, does not dwell within contradiction. It moves towards verdict and the verdict here cannot reconcile Charlotte with our own ambivalence.

Willow's repeated fractures in the novel recalls previous pain and every recovery anticipate the next break. Trauma accumulates. The lawsuit mirrors this repetition. The court sessions make the family to revisit the moment of diagnosis grievance, to narrate the suffering in admissible terms. Rather than functioning as catharsis, the process institutionalizes repetition. The compensation at the end, even if awarded cannot restore ruptured friendships, Amelia's resentment, Sean's frustration or Piper's betrayal, all of these do not resolve with judgment. Picoult has handled the gap between procedural finality and emotional aftermath in a meticulous way. The law concludes whereas trauma lingers. Amelia's trauma is expressed as, "No one sees me. When Willow breaks, everyone runs. When I break, I make sure it's quiet. I've learned how to hurt in places that don't show." (Picoult 292).

Handle with Care does not condemn the law nor does it idealize it. Instead, it reveals its structural limits. The legal systems are designed to allocate responsibility and provide remedy. They are not equipped to navigate ambivalence guilt and the emotional density of familial life. Charlotte's lawsuit which seems to be rational is just a pragmatic strategy for survival and a displaced expression of psychic conflict. The courtroom which organizes suffering into narrative form fails to understand emotions. In the end the novel offers no moral verdict. The readers are left with an uncertainty where love co-exists with exhaustion and where justice cannot fully account for care.

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