

Resolving Psychological Conflicts: A Kurt Lewinian Analysis of Nina Riva in Taylor Jenkins Reid's *Malibu Rising*

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Abstract

This study investigates how Nina Riva resolves her psychological conflicts in Taylor Jenkins Reid's Malibu Rising by employing Kurt Lewin's theory of Positive, Negative, and Induced Valence. The research aims to reveal how inner struggles and emotional tensions shape the protagonist's transformation and self-realization. Using a qualitative descriptive method, the analysis focuses on the novel's narrative structure, character interactions, and dialogues that illustrate the stages of Nina's psychological development. The findings indicate that Nina predominantly resolves her internal conflicts through Positive and Positive Induced Valences, allowing her to attain emotional balance and personal growth. Negative valence also appears as an initial catalyst that triggers her self-awareness before she redirects it into constructive action. The study highlights that inner conflict in literature not only reflects human psychological processes but also functions as a narrative strategy to portray resilience, autonomy, and identity formation. This research contributes to the broader discussion of literary psychology by demonstrating how Lewin's theoretical lens can deepen understanding of character motivation and emotional evolution in contemporary fiction.

Keywords: *Psychological Conflict, Character Development, Kurt Lewin's Theory, Malibu Rising, Literary Psychology.*

INTRODUCTION

Literature often serves as a mirror of human experience, reflecting the emotions, struggles, and values that define life itself. Among literary genres, the novel stands out for its ability to portray imagined characters and events that, while fictional, convey deep truths about human behavior and psychology. Through narrative engagement, readers are invited to empathize with characters' dilemmas, thereby gaining insight into their own emotional worlds.

Psychology and literature share a close relationship, as both seek to explore the complexities of the human mind and behavior. A literary work does not emerge from imagination alone but often represents the author's interpretation of lived experiences and psychological realities. As Althaf and Nur (2022) note, literary authors not only narrate events but also construct the

psychological dimensions of their characters, allowing readers to perceive the human soul within fictional form. This intersection between psychology and literature provides a meaningful avenue for examining inner conflict and character development.

Conflict is a universal aspect of human life and, consequently, a central theme in literature. Bar-Tal (2011) defines conflict as a situation in which two or more parties perceive their goals or interests as incompatible. In literary narratives, conflict becomes the driving force that propels characters toward transformation. Readers are naturally drawn to conflict because it mirrors real human challenges—disagreement, guilt, duty, or moral struggle—and because it offers a deeper understanding of human resilience and change. In literature, conflict typically appears in two forms: external conflict, which involves struggles with external forces such as society or other individuals, and internal or psychological conflict, which occurs within the mind and emotions of the character.

Psychological or inner conflict refers to the tension between opposing desires, beliefs, or values within an individual. Jones, as cited in Damayanti and Mujiono (2016), explains that such conflict arises when a person struggles with conscience, emotion, or indecision. These internal struggles not only shape a character's behavior but also reveal the process of self-discovery and personal growth (Anggraeni, Weda, & Iskandar, 2022). Thus, the portrayal of psychological conflict becomes a means of communicating a character's journey toward maturity and identity formation.

To examine the inner dimensions of literary characters, psychological approaches are often employed. Among them, psychoanalytic or psychological theories provide valuable frameworks for understanding how emotional tension and motivation influence character behavior (Izzah, 2024). One of the most relevant frameworks for studying conflict is Kurt Lewin's theory of psychological conflict, which classifies human motivation into three valence types: positive, negative, and induced valence. This theory enables researchers to analyze how individuals approach or avoid certain goals and how external influences shape emotional resolution.

Taylor Jenkins Reid's *Malibu Rising* (2021) presents a compelling narrative for such an analysis. The novel follows the Riva siblings—Nina, Jay, Hud, and Kit—during a single day at their annual end-of-summer party in 1980s Malibu. Central to the story is Nina Riva, the eldest sibling, who sacrifices her personal dreams to care for her family after being abandoned by their father and losing their mother. Her deep sense of responsibility and recurring self-sacrifice create intense psychological tension as she struggles between family duty and the pursuit of her own happiness.

This study focuses on the psychological conflicts experienced by Nina Riva and how she resolves them throughout the narrative. Although previous researches have explored psychological conflicts in other literary works using various theories, no prior study has applied Kurt Lewin's conflict theory to *Malibu Rising*. Therefore, this study seeks to fill that gap by examining how Lewin's framework can illuminate the processes through which Nina transforms inner conflict into emotional growth. Therefore, this research aims to analyze how Nina Riva resolves her psychological conflicts in Taylor Jenkins Reid's *Malibu Rising* through the lens of Kurt Lewin's theory of Positive, Negative, and Induced Valence.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The Novel and Its Elements

A novel is a work of fiction that harmonizes imagination and intellect to represent human experiences through narrative form. Rather than merely entertaining, a novel often mirrors social and psychological realities, enabling readers to engage emotionally with the characters' struggles and transformations. According to Djamal and Nur (2023), novelists transform observations of human thought and emotion into stories that embody meaning, empathy, and moral insight. In this way, novels provide a powerful medium for exploring the motivations, values, and conflicts that shape human existence. Central to any novel is the character, who functions as the vessel through which the author conveys messages and values about life. As the narrative unfolds, these characters inevitably confront internal and external conflicts that contribute to their development and to the novel's thematic depth.

Conflict in Literature

Conflict is one of the most vital elements in literature because it propels the plot and reveals the psychological dimensions of characters. Ahadini (2021) argues that the conflicts people encounter in life often inspire writers to portray similar struggles in literary works. Trimmer (1989) identifies three main types of conflict: those between characters, between a character and the environment, and within the character's own mind. Similarly, Stanton (1965) categorizes conflict into external (arising from external forces such as society or other individuals) and internal (stemming from emotional or moral struggles). Internal or psychological conflict, in particular, provides an avenue for exploring the human condition, as it portrays the tension between duty and desire, morality and impulse, or fear and freedom. Through the resolution of conflict, characters achieve self-awareness and growth, a process that becomes central to literary meaning.

Character and Characterization

Characters are the lifeblood of a narrative, embodying human nature, thought, and emotion. Abrams, as cited in Nurgiyantoro (2010), defines a character as a person depicted in a narrative or dramatic work, understood by readers as possessing distinct moral and emotional qualities. Nurgiyantoro further clarifies that while "character" refers to the figure or actor within the story, "characterization" refers to how the author constructs and reveals personality through speech, behavior, and thought. Understanding characters and their psychological depth is essential in literary analysis because they serve as the medium through which internal conflicts are portrayed and resolved.

The Psychological Approach in Literature

The psychological approach in literary criticism examines how literary texts reflect mental processes, emotions, and human behavior. Psychology, as Lewin (1936) asserts, applies the same principles to understanding emotional experience as it does to behavior, encompassing all stages of human development and the interaction between personality and environment. Literature, conversely, functions as a creative reflection of those psychological realities. As Damayanti and Mujiono (2016) emphasize, psychological literature aims to uncover the internal struggles that

characters endure and to interpret their emotional responses to conflict. This approach allows researchers to explore not only how characters behave but also why they behave as they do, uncovering the motives, traumas, and transformations that drive them. Thus, a psychological approach bridges art and science, transforming fictional characters into mirrors of genuine human experience.

Kurt Lewin's Theory of Psychological Conflict and Valence

Kurt Lewin's (1936, 2013) theory of psychological conflict offers a systematic framework for understanding human motivation and emotional regulation. He proposed that human behavior is influenced by *valence*—a psychological force that draws or repels an individual toward or away from certain goals or experiences. Valences serve as motivational energies that seek equilibrium when individuals face tension or conflict.

Lewin (2013) identifies three main types of valences:

- a. Positive Valence (+): A motivational force that draws an individual toward desirable or rewarding goals. It generates enthusiasm, hope, and forward movement toward fulfilment.
- b. Negative Valence (-): A repelling force that motivates avoidance of undesirable situations, often triggered by fear, guilt, or anxiety.
- c. Induced Valence: A neutral or even undesirable object that acquires positive or negative value due to environmental or situational pressures.

In literary terms, Lewin's theory allows researchers to interpret how characters navigate internal struggles. Through *positive valence*, characters pursue self-actualization and emotional balance; through *negative valence*, they experience hesitation or guilt; and through *induced valence*, external circumstances reshape their perception of what is meaningful. This framework is particularly relevant for analyzing Taylor Jenkins Reid's *Malibu Rising* (2021), in which the protagonist, Nina Riva, continually negotiates between familial obligations and personal aspirations. Her journey exemplifies how psychological forces and external pressures interact to produce emotional growth and resolution.

METHOD

Research Design

This study employs a qualitative descriptive approach to analyze the psychological conflicts experienced by the main character, Nina Riva, in Taylor Jenkins Reid's *Malibu Rising*. The qualitative design was chosen because it enables an in-depth exploration of literary texts through interpretive reading and contextual understanding. According to Creswell and Creswell (2023), qualitative inquiry allows researchers to examine complex human experiences within natural settings and to interpret meanings derived from textual or verbal data. Similarly, Sofaer (1999) emphasizes that qualitative methods generate rich, contextualized descriptions that reveal how individuals experience and respond to specific phenomena. In literary research, this approach is particularly valuable for interpreting characters' thoughts, emotions, and motivations embedded in narrative form.

Source of Data

The primary data for this study is Taylor Jenkins Reid's *Malibu Rising* (2021), published by Ballantine Books. The novel, consisting of 369 pages, narrates the life of Nina Riva—the eldest of four siblings—who carries the emotional burden of family responsibility while confronting her personal desires and identity. The analysis focuses on selected textual segments that depict Nina's psychological conflicts and their resolution.

The secondary data include relevant scholarly sources such as books, journal articles, theses, and theoretical texts that support the analysis. These materials provide conceptual and theoretical foundations—especially concerning psychological conflict, character development, and Kurt Lewin's valence theory—to strengthen the interpretation of the primary data.

Data Collection

The data collection procedure involves close reading and textual analysis. The researcher first reads *Malibu Rising* thoroughly to comprehend its narrative structure, character development, and thematic content. During subsequent readings, particular attention is paid to scenes, dialogues, and narrative descriptions that reveal Nina Riva's inner struggles and coping mechanisms. These excerpts are identified, highlighted, and categorized based on the types of psychological conflict and the strategies used for resolution according to Kurt Lewin's theory of positive, negative, and induced valence. This systematic selection enables focused analysis while ensuring that all relevant textual evidence is included.

To enhance the credibility of the analysis, the researcher conducted multiple readings, cross-checked interpretations with theoretical constructs, and maintained consistency in coding and categorization throughout the process.

Data Analysis

The data analysis follows the framework proposed by Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña (2014), which includes three interrelated stages: data condensation, data display, and conclusion drawing/verification.

a. Data Condensation

Data condensation involves selecting, simplifying, and organizing textual evidence from the novel to focus on significant psychological events. In this study, the process highlights excerpts that demonstrate Nina Riva's internal struggles and the progression toward conflict resolution.

b. Data Display

The data are then arranged in a structured format—tables or thematic groupings—to visualize the relationships between conflict types and valence categories. This step assists in mapping how Nina's psychological state evolves across different narrative moments.

c. Conclusion Drawing and Verification

Finally, the researcher interprets patterns and meanings derived from the condensed and displayed data. This involves identifying causes, emotional triggers, and resolutions of Nina's psychological conflict in relation to Lewin's theoretical constructs. The conclusions are verified through repeated reference to the text to ensure interpretive accuracy and consistency.

FINDINGS

Nina's conflicts stem from her competing desires: her longing for independence versus her overwhelming sense of responsibility toward her family. Throughout the novel, she moves from suppression and guilt toward self-acceptance and liberation, illustrating Lewin's dynamic process of conflict resolution through the balancing of motivational forces.

Positive Valence: Moving Toward Emotional Fulfilment

According to Lewin (1936), *positive valence* refers to a psychological attraction toward an object or goal perceived as beneficial, creating motivation for approach-oriented behavior. In Nina's case, positive valence manifests in her conscious decisions to let go of burdens and to prioritize her emotional well-being after years of sacrifice.

Extract 1

"And so, she put down the restaurant. Just as her mother would have wanted her to. And when she let it go, she let it go for June, too. 'Yeah,' Nina said. 'You're right. We don't need to keep the restaurant.'" (Reid, 2021, p. 357)

Interpretation:

This moment encapsulates Nina's first major emotional release. The restaurant represents her inherited obligation—a symbol of her mother's struggle and her own sense of duty. For years, Nina believed maintaining the restaurant was an act of loyalty and love. However, the constant pressure to sustain it eroded her emotional health. When she finally chooses to sell it, she acknowledges that her mother would have wanted her to live freely rather than be confined by obligation. Through this realization, she redirects her emotional energy toward a *positive valence*—a movement toward psychological balance and personal peace. The act of "putting down" the restaurant becomes both literal and metaphorical: a letting go of inherited pain and self-imposed expectations.

This finding reflects what Bar-Tal (2011) calls *cognitive reappraisal*, where individuals reinterpret distressing circumstances as opportunities for growth. Nina's act of letting go mirrors this concept, as she transforms guilt into self-compassion.

Extract 2

"All she had ever needed was her family. Her siblings. And maybe, now that they didn't need her, she could find some peace and quiet. Some sunshine. Some privacy." (Reid, 2021, p. 363)

Interpretation:

Here, Nina's self-realization marks the culmination of her internal evolution. After years of prioritizing her siblings' needs over her own, she recognizes that her identity cannot remain anchored solely in sacrifice. This transition represents Lewin's concept of *approach behavior*, in which an individual moves toward goals associated with satisfaction and emotional restoration. For Nina, the desire for peace, sunshine, and privacy embodies her shift from dependence and guilt to autonomy and self-actualization.

In psychoanalytic terms, this resolution can be viewed as the alignment between Nina's *ego* and *superego*—between her rational self and moral conscience. She accepts that nurturing herself does not negate love for her family; rather, it completes it. In doing so, Nina achieves a mature form of emotional equilibrium, demonstrating how positive valence drives healing through acceptance.

Positive Induced Valence: Transformation Through Environment

Positive induced valence, according to Lewin (1936), occurs when an individual's environment redefines an initially negative experience as meaningful or beneficial. In Nina's journey, many distressing circumstances—fear, guilt, and loss—eventually evolve into sources of resilience due to her empathy, adaptability, and love for others.

Extract 3

“It was easier, despite how hard it was, for Nina to drive them all herself. And soon it started to feel to Nina that it was not just easier but rather crucial that she prevent what felt like an inevitable calamity.” (Reid, 2021, p. 135)

Interpretation:

Although Nina fears driving, she confronts her anxiety to protect her siblings. Her fear is rechannelled into responsibility, and through this transformation, she finds strength in her fear itself. The induced valence here arises because external necessity—the need to protect her family—changes the emotional meaning of her action. A negative stimulus (fear) becomes positive through purpose. Lewin's theory emphasizes that motivation is shaped not only by internal desires but also by situational forces; Nina's case exemplifies this dynamic perfectly.

This decision also demonstrates her emotional intelligence, reflecting the psychological idea that adaptive coping often transforms anxiety into constructive behavior (Gross, 2015).

Extract 4

“So then take the house,” Nina said. “It's yours.” And the moment she relinquished that stupid cliffside monstrosity and the tennis star that came with it, Nina Riva felt one hundred times lighter.” (Reid, 2021, p. 273)

Interpretation:

Nina's release of both the house and Brandon symbolizes her emancipation from external validation. Initially, her identity is bound to her husband's fame and the public's admiration, creating a *negative valence* of dependence and fear of judgment. However, when she lets go, this negative situation transforms into empowerment—a classic example of *positive induced valence*. What once represented loss now becomes liberation. This echoes Lewin's notion that environmental changes can alter the direction and value of motivational forces.

Extract 5

“She didn’t always catch everything that happened in her own home... She was mostly concerned with whether her brothers and sister had a good time.” (Reid, 2021, p. 29)

Interpretation:

The annual party, though chaotic and emotionally draining, serves as a metaphor for Nina’s duality: her exhaustion coexists with joy. Even though the event overwhelms her, it also reinforces her identity as a protector and nurturer. The external joy of her siblings induces positive meaning in an otherwise stressful experience. Her endurance becomes not just sacrifice but an act of love. This is what Lewin calls *induced approach behavior*—when environmental satisfaction redirects a person’s emotional energy from avoidance to acceptance.

Extract 6

“Nina had lived through enough trauma to know there were worse problems. So, instead of getting upset about it, she chose to go to bed every night thankful for the money.” (Reid, 2021, pp. 173–174)

Interpretation:

Modelling, for Nina, initially carries *negative valence* because it suppresses her authentic passion for surfing. Yet, over time, it assumes *positive induced valence* because it ensures her family’s financial stability. Her gratitude reframes drudgery into meaning—a survival mechanism that transforms necessity into strength. Through this, Nina embodies Lewin’s idea that humans adaptively reassign emotional value to experiences, creating equilibrium between external demands and internal needs.

DISCUSSIONS

The findings reveal that Nina Riva resolves her psychological conflicts primarily through positive valence and positive induced valence. The overall analysis demonstrates that Nina’s journey is a dynamic negotiation between internal forces (guilt, fear, responsibility) and external pressures (family, social image, gender expectations). Using Kurt Lewin’s theory, it becomes evident that her resolutions are not abrupt choices but gradual transformations of emotional valence—each decision rebalancing her psychological system.

Nina’s Emotional Trajectory

At the novel’s beginning, Nina exists in a state of *conflict tension*—what Lewin describes as simultaneous attraction and repulsion toward opposing goals. She wants freedom (positive goal) but feels trapped by obligation (negative goal). Through the narrative, she learns to reframe her perspective: responsibility becomes love, and independence becomes self-respect. By the end, her motivational system stabilizes, representing *psychological equilibrium*.

This evolution also mirrors Erikson’s (1968) stage of *generativity versus stagnation*—where adult identity is defined by care for others but must evolve toward self-nurturing. Nina’s development resolves this tension: she remains caring yet learns self-worth, reflecting mature individuation.

Theoretical Integration

The findings validate Lewin's (1936) principle that motivation operates as a dynamic field influenced by both internal and environmental factors. Nina's actions show that emotional balance is achieved not by escaping conflict but by transforming its meaning. Her "positive induced" responses highlight how human beings find purpose even within constraint, a concept also echoed by Viktor Frankl's (1984) *logotherapy*, which posits that meaning can be found in suffering through conscious choice.

Comparative Reflection

This study complements prior works that applied psychological frameworks to literary analysis. Putra (2022) identified the restoration of emotional equilibrium in marital conflicts through Lewin's approach, while Yollanda (2023) and Ahadini (2021) found similar patterns of redefined selfhood in female protagonists. However, unlike these studies, the present research centers on *familial responsibility as a form of female selfhood*, revealing that women's inner conflicts often stem from socialized caregiving roles.

Thus, *Malibu Rising* reimagines conflict not merely as psychological distress but as a process of empowerment. Nina's evolution challenges patriarchal notions of feminine duty, demonstrating how women can transform inherited pain into autonomy.

Broader Implications

Beyond the literary scope, Nina's journey resonates with real psychological patterns of self-transcendence and emotional regulation. Her capacity to transform guilt into gratitude and fear into courage exemplifies adaptive resilience—a key component in positive psychology (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). The narrative therefore not only enriches character psychology but also illustrates the universal process of turning inner conflict into emotional strength.

Nina's story exemplifies how inner conflict can serve as a medium for growth when navigated through conscious self-reflection. By applying Lewin's framework, it becomes clear that her decisions—though born of pain—lead her toward self-realization. The transformation of negative experiences into positive valences demonstrates that emotional conflict, when reinterpreted, fosters resilience and personal liberation. Ultimately, *Malibu Rising* portrays not only the psychology of conflict but also the redemptive power of choosing oneself.

CONCLUSIONS

This study reveals that Nina Riva's emotional journey in *Malibu Rising* (Reid, 2021) illustrates how individuals can become trapped within cycles of responsibility, guilt, and self-sacrifice while neglecting their own desires. For much of her life, Nina's identity is defined by devotion to her siblings and the internalized belief that her worth depends on protecting and providing for others. Although rooted in love, this devotion evolves into a psychological burden that prevents her from pursuing self-fulfillment.

Through the application of Kurt Lewin's (1936) theory of psychological conflict, the analysis identifies two primary mechanisms through which Nina resolves her inner turmoil: positive valence and positive induced valence. Positive valence represents her conscious

movement toward emotionally fulfilling goals—such as releasing family burdens, embracing self-care, and reclaiming autonomy. Positive induced valence reflects her ability to reinterpret negative circumstances, transforming external pressures into catalysts for growth and resilience.

By engaging in these processes, Nina undergoes profound psychological transformation. She learns to distinguish between duty and self-destruction, and ultimately recognizes that prioritizing personal well-being is not selfishness but a necessary act of self-preservation. This transformation—from repression to emotional liberation—marks her attainment of psychological equilibrium. Lewin's theory proves effective in illustrating how motivational forces can shift from avoidance to approach, enabling individuals to reinterpret tension as a pathway toward balance and growth.

Moreover, Nina's journey transcends individual experience to represent a universal human struggle: the tension between caring for others and caring for oneself. Her story resonates with readers who navigate the same emotional paradox, demonstrating that confronting inner conflict—though painful—can yield empowerment and authenticity. True healing begins when individuals summon the courage to redefine their identities beyond societal or familial expectations.

This study thus contributes to literary psychology by showing that internal conflict, when approached with awareness, becomes a transformative force for self-realization. It highlights the enduring relevance of Lewin's framework in analyzing complex emotional and motivational dynamics within fictional narratives, particularly those involving women negotiating autonomy and familial obligation.

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