

Decoding Gender Complexities in Young Adult Literature

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Abstract

Young Adult Fiction (YAF) is about and for young adults between the ages of 12 to 18 years, and the focus is on an adolescent as the protagonist, rather than an adult or a child. There is a variety of genres in Young Adult Literature (YAL), like realistic fiction, fantasy and science fiction. YAF is still not perceived as serious literature in India; and works delving into LGBTQ studies, gender bias and sexual abuse are considered taboo themes. The purpose behind arguing for a serious conception and perception of Young Adult Literature in India is for the youth to have a better understanding of their immediate realities. This paper discusses the predicament of teenage girls and expresses their gruesome realities through Himanjali Sankar's *Talking of Muskaan* (2014) and Kavitha Mandana's *No 9 on the Shade Card* (2013).

Keywords: young adult literature, teenage girls, adolescent realities, gender stereotypes, identity

Introduction

Young adults are defined by the Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA) as those between the ages of 12 and 18. Young Adult Literature (YAL), that is literature dealing with and for young adults, is known by several names like "adolescent literature, juvenile literature, junior books, books for teens, and books for tweens" (Cole, 2009, p. 49). Cole states that YAL "describe texts that bridge the gap between children's literature and adult literature" (p. 49). According to Robert Carlson:

Young Adult Literature is literature wherein the protagonist is either a teenager or one who approaches problems from a teenage perspective.

Typically, they describe initiation into the adult world, or the surmounting of a contemporary problem forced upon the protagonist by the adult world. Though generally written for a teenage reader, such novels—like all fine literature address the entire spectrum of life. (Cited in Vanderstaay, 1992, p. 48)

Global market trends of the *Harry Potter* and *Twilight* series tend to dictate what authors should write, both internationally and in India. In order to attract the readers, there is a tendency to incorporate the romanticized view and create wishful thinking that was the characteristic virtue of the old adolescent literature. Publishers are rather keen on books that are optimistic rather than pessimistic, and imaginative rather than real. Adults are apprehensive about exposing their teenagers to read about topics that are controversial, taboo, sinful as they feel it may adversely impact their emotional and psychological development. The natural impulse of parents is to protect their teens, even if it means exercising control over their lives. Controlling what they read, fantasy or science fiction rather than harsh reality is one of the ways in which parents attempt to guard their adolescents.

Young Adult Literature in India

While adventure continues to be a popular category, young adult realism has emerged as a genre of Young Adult Literature and is now identified by specific traits like adolescent protagonists, narration from an adolescent's perspective, realistic contemporary settings and subject matter, which were formerly regarded taboo. Young adult realism delves into real problems faced by a young adult such as drug addiction, sex and alienation, suicide, divorce, single-parent family, child sexual abuse, gender bias, queer identity and nomadic lifestyle. An important aspect of the constitution of Young Adult Realism is that the reader plays a pivotal role in identifying himself or herself as a member of the young adult community. The focus on these themes raises the question if the adolescents should be or can be denied a depiction of conflicting realities and complexities, of not only their immediate surroundings but also the larger world that revolves around them.

Contemporary Indian YAL is still not perceived as serious literature and has been ignored by literary critics (Daniels, 2006, p. 78). Some prominent writers of YAL in India are Nivedita Subramaniam, Sowmya Rajendran, Ranjit Lal, Himanjali Sankar and Kavitha Mandana; and their works

address and grapple with complex and cruel realities. In this paper, I have focused on *Talking of Muskaan* (2014) by Himanjali Sankar and *No 9 on the Shade Card* (2013) by Kavitha Mandana and discussed their contribution towards establishing YAL as a mature genre of writing.

Queer Identity in Sankar's *Talking of Muskaan*

It is a marketing tool, extensively perpetuated by the beauty industry, and also a cultural norm that body hair is unacceptable in women. This expectation is internalized and women and girls are under immense peer pressure to abide by the hollow social norms. The pressure builds up during adolescence when peer approval becomes important to make one feel accepted and acknowledged. The peers dictate how one should behave, dress, and even which films to watch in order to be accepted as socially normal. It gives a feeling of belongingness to the group, so when one does not fit in, it seems like an end of the world. The concept of "otherisation" (Rose) leads to social disapproval. The society coerces one into behaving in a masculine or feminine way; it is either one or the other. The stereotyped binaries rob people of their individuality, as depicted in *Talking of Muskaan*.

Talking of Muskaan (2014) by Himanjali Sankar is the story of the girl protagonist, Muskaan, who is seen from the perspective of her close friends Aaliya, Prateek, Subhojoy and Rashika. Prateek hails from a conservative and wealthy family and is the spoilt, popular teenager of the school; Subhojoy, a staunch believer in hard work hails from a marginalized family and is an introvert; Aaliya is Muskaan's former best friend, who later secludes her from her life on learning about her sexual orientation; and Rashika is Prateek's girlfriend. It is a coming-of-age story about a girl, who grows up in an upper-class family whose sexual orientation is apparent from an early age. Muskaan loves her best friend, Aaliya but her happiness is marred by social isolation and rejection. Her friends and her class fellows do not accept her "different" sexuality. As a lesbian, Muskaan faces a difficult time, and is unable to acknowledge her inclination towards girls, or her dislike towards dressing in feminine clothes in front of the world. The novel does not attach any moral tags to lesbianism, and instead presents it as a natural, God-given state, which is not supposed to be ridiculed but accepted.

Muskaan's friends, Shrijani and Rashika, are trendy and fashionable, and

when the friends decide to wax their legs and arms, Muskaan looks upset and resists getting waxed. Muskaan is reluctant to get her hair removed but her friends forced her to do so, in order to give her a feminine outlook and thus appear normal, "It's almost like a cult thing. Like one has to do this to belong, whether one wants to or not" (Sankar, p. 17). Due to her overt confrontational reactions, not doing girlish things such as wearing flamboyant dresses, waxing, and dating guys, Muskaan is bullied and is excluded from her peers. Romantic and sexual interest in the opposite sex are the rites of adolescent development. Sexual exploration is pivotal to identity development and means of self-discovery. *Talking of Muskaan* discusses the representation of queer sexuality, and Himanjali Sankar addresses the issue of homosexual identity as a teen issue where the queer teenager Muskaan is "othered" in her peer group and school.

The novel intertwines the opinions and experiences of Muskaan and her peers; and in comparing themselves with Muskaan, her friends consider themselves normal and brand her weird. Muskaan's friends are unable to accept her sexual orientation, she is bullied for not following the gender stereotypes, and is constantly reminded that she does not fit in. She is ostracized when she refuses to conform to societal expectations, and struggles for normal existence. She is expected to live in the shadows hiding her true identity and to instead wear a façade to conform to notions of the society that she lives in. Society, as presented through the peer group, chooses to live in its bubble of stereotypes and brands those who do not follow the rules as misfits. The individual's freedom is eroded in this societal setup, and any deviation is marked "freak" or a misfit (Sankar, p. 74). Aaliya admits that she and Muskaan kissed and it had "blown my mind and made the rest of the world disappear." (p. 66) but is glad when she kissed a boy, "I didn't want to be lesbian or bisexual. Everyone made fun of gays" (p. 66). Aaliya's resistance to talk to Muskaan stems from her inability to understand and accept her best friend's homosexual identity; her inability to confront her own sexuality; and she wants to hurt Muskaan and make her repent. Aaliya lashes out her suppressed thoughts to Muskaan, and says that she is a criminal and should thus be confined in a jail.

The pressure to conform to socially acceptable norms is immense on adolescents, and they fear being labelled weird or abnormal. The social and sexual identity is highlighted in the novel, and it underlines the conflict and pain of queer youth. They go through myriad emotions

as they learn to accept their sexual identity within a largely rigid and averse social setup. While heterosexuality is institutionalized as status quo normalizing it, homosexuality, on the other hand, is marginalized and considered as an anomaly. By repeatedly being exposed to hostile comments, there is no place for non-mainstream sexual identities in High School.

Muskaan is taunted as “homo” many times by her classmate Prateek, and she is subjected to ridicule and public humiliation on numerous occasions, and she withdraws into herself. Prateek’s father asserts that “homosexuality was not normal” (Sankar, p. 99). Prateek’s father refers to homosexuals as “rogue elements” and does not want Prateek to be friendly with Muskaan anymore. In fact, Prateek’s family supports him when he insults Muskaan, “In any case, homos have had it now.... The Supreme Court verdict today said homos were criminals” (p. 121). Parents here play a role in shaping the conformist views of their children. By questioning her sexual behaviour, Muskaan is constantly reminded that she is the other, the abnormal. There is lack of understanding and sensitivity not just from her friends, but parents of her friends who join in labelling and shaming her. The immense mental trauma, turmoil, and rejection that Muskaan faces as a homosexual lead to her attempting suicide. Lack of education and ignorance of the society towards homosexuality pushes Muskaan into this situation.

Inability to cope with reality, self-reproach, collapse of ego, low self-esteem, resulting in melancholy and depression frequently drives one to suicide. The desire for approval often lies in conflict with the need to be oneself. The pressure of living upto the approval of peers, parents and society builds up and when Muskaan perceives those expectations to be beyond her identity and capacity, she attempts suicide. The behaviour expected from her stifles her individuality and goes against her core identity. Muskaan says, “I don’t know why I feel so disinterested in everything” (Sankar, p. 77). Self-acceptance plays a crucial role in building one’s self-esteem and keeping it intact, thus gaining strength to persevere. Muskaan is too young and lacks awareness about lesbianism, somewhere she is yet to completely accept her sexuality as normal and not deviant, and on top of that she is ridiculed by everyone.

Peer pressure is real and enormous for teenagers; fear of harassment and hostility can often lead to denial or repression of one’s sexuality. Ideally parents and elders should foster an open communication about their

young teens' sexuality so that they are not anxiety-ridden, or else it can be a life of non-acceptance and imprisonment. The responsibility should be shared by parents and teachers to help the young queer teens to come out, have genuine acceptance and experience a sense of freedom. Erasing misconceptions and negative stereotypes, as well as dispelling hatred and fear towards homosexuals, building strong support systems, seeking accurate information and fostering open communication would help develop an acceptance of queer sexualities in society.

Gender Socialization in Mandana's *No 9 on the Shade Card*

Simone de Beauvoir's oft quoted phrase, "One is not born, but rather becomes, woman" emphasizes society rather than biology in gender roles. No one denies the visible differences between a man and a woman though the psychological markings are more subtle than we realize. When one gender is raised as superior to the other, it perpetuates gender disparity in society. Being reinforced unconsciously hundreds of times every day, from the toys children play with, to the clothes adolescents wear, to the chores they (are expected to) do, gendered roles leave an indelible mark on impressionable youth. As Lindsey remarks:

As these infants grow, other cultural artefacts will ensure that this distinction remains intact. In the teen and young adult years...girls buy cosmetics and clothes and boys buy sports equipment and technical gadgets. The incredible power of gender socialization is largely responsible for such behaviour. (Lindsey, 2016, p. 65)

No 9 on the Shade Card (2013) raises pertinent gender issues prevalent in our society and defines how socialization affects the autonomy of a teenager. Gender socialization involves "developing beliefs about gender roles, the expectations associated with each sex group, and, also, gender identity, an understanding of what it means to be a male or female" (Cited in Bank, 2007, p. 79). The main agents of gender socialization are parents, peers, siblings, school, society, and religion. *No 9 on the Shade Card* presents a girl protagonist who refuses to conform to the expected gender appropriate norms. She is depicted as progressive, non-conformist who goes against the established norms and forges an identity for herself, not the one emulated after the society's obsolete and regressive conventions.

In the gender norms, the outdoor environments are still often viewed as a male domain. And the protagonist realizes this, “My interest in sports is the crux of the problem” (Mandana, p. 49), and in this case she is discouraged from pursuing her passion. In *Big Hero Size Zero*, Anusha Hariharan and Somya Rajendran explain that “right from childhood boys are encouraged to play sports while girls are told to stay indoors, to play softer games and protect their complexions from the sun” (Hariharan & Rajendran, p. 25). In India, a girl’s complexion is synonymous with beauty, and fair skin is considered more beautiful and desirable. The narrator, fond of the outdoors, is scolded for spending too much time in the sun that tans her. Also, she is constantly being pushed into wearing feminine colours. At her cousin Rani Akka’s wedding, she feels she was the “certified moron in an elaborate pink outfit that Aiji bought without even asking me if I liked the colour” (Mandana, p. 40). The young narrator’s choice or feelings are not considered and her grandmother gets her an appropriate and acceptable feminine pink dress. Lindsey in *Gender Roles* observes, “From the moment a girl infant is wrapped in a pink blanket and a boy infant is wrapped in a blue blanket, gender role development begins. Pink and blue begin this lifelong process” (Lindsey, 2016, p. 65).

In *No 9 on the Shade Card*, the grandmother reiterates the gender roles by exercising massive control over her grandchildren which suffocates their life. The grandmother, Aiji keeps a checklist of her granddaughter’s conduct, and one of the items on it is her complexion. The narrator is aware of the society’s love of fair skin and she being far from it. She tries to joke about it, “I am about No 9 on that shade card—you know, that silly strip that those super-fair movie stars hold against their faces in the fairness cream ads...the time you come to No 9, the sun can’t do a thing to your skin...you’re immune to a tan” (Mandana, pp. 2-3).

Aiji is obsessed with fair skin and thus opposes the idea of the protagonist playing outside and getting tanned in the sun. Moreover the narrator’s relatives also give unsolicited advice on what she should wear or whisper how beautiful she would look had she been somewhat fairer. Her father too who rarely speaks to her says, “if you’re not in the sun all day, your skin might actually lighten up” (Mandana, p. 55). The jibes, ridicules and scorns are deterrents to growth of the adolescent. It also tinkers with the young adult’s self-esteem, leaving one vulnerable to a sense of lower self-worth. The grandmother is worried on a single

account, "This is the age when girls must take care of themselves...who will marry them otherwise?" (p. 4). Propagating the viewpoint of society, Aiji has been preparing the narrator for marriage since her teen years, if not before. Since fair skin is the deciding factor in the marriage market, the protagonist is discouraged to excel in what she is good at, i.e. sports. Thus, colourism becomes instrumental in widening the existing rift of gender divide.

The narrator however is not a submissive soul. Voicing her distress at colour favouritism, she opines, "take one dark-skinned son (my Pa) and marry him off to a fair and lovely bride (my Ma). Allow to simmer for nine months" (Mandana, p. 12). The grandmother is unable to accept the laws of genetics and criticizes Ma for having "cooked up" two entirely wrong sorts of children, dark girl, "if only her skin was a *little* lighter, she would've been quite pretty" (p. 8) and fair boy, "pale as a bride in a fairness cream ad" (p. 9). The adolescent may not completely comprehend the ways of the world, but she does not fail to notice them. The narrator, through her naive cookery analogy, articulates her observations quite well. When fairness is considered the social equivalent of being beautiful and thus coveted, colourism gets a strong foothold as to become a defining norm in society. The colour biases have been prevalent for ages and Aiji claims that she too has been a victim, "I just wanted to protect her from the kind of remarks I had to face at her age—words that hurt so badly that they stayed with me all these years" (p. 80).

The derogatory comments about her complexion still haunt Aiji, and it is ironic how a victim gets turned into a perpetrator of the same. The narrator asserts that "broken bones mend and bruises heal, but words stick with you for years, growing bigger, and more bitter with every passing day" (p. 27). The protagonist decides not to follow the ill-reasoned orthodox doctrines of what girls are expected to do, and how they are supposed to behave. She doesn't yield to the social conventions for girls like maintaining a long braid, and not going out in the sun to play to protect her beauty. She chooses to wander around and play outside, rather than being confined within the four walls of her house. When her long hair, symbol of femininity, becomes an inconvenience to running, she cuts them short. But she does not shed all the conventional feminine virtues in order to affirm her identity, and is shown cooking. So, she follows some and breaks other conventions, projecting a balanced

concept of self, she ventures out in the world to pursue what she wants (her love of sports) and in the process, she forges a strong personality of her own which defies to fall in line with the expected gender-appropriate roles—be it at home or out in society.

It may be safe to deduce that to slacken the grip of gender polarity and to pave the way towards the autonomy of an individual, one needs to consciously address everyone as an individual, before him or her being male or female; and accept and respect their individual choices. Slowly but surely, gender disparity may start to develop a few cracks when a new ideology of respecting an individual before gender finds its root. Dealing with the domain of gender inequality is even more important in the venerable young adults, and addressing these issues will lead to healthy development of adolescents.

Conclusion

Representation of social and gender problems in fiction is not enough, there is need to debate and discuss them in society at large as these are concerns of readers of Young Adult Literature. It is not enough to represent complex diverse issues, it is not simply enough to give young adults happy endings, which would render them an illusionary escape. There are no simple answers to these complex issues. It is important to question ourselves if we can bring the change in our ideologies, perceptions, and attitude towards the issues highlighted. There is an urgent need for the supplementation of the literary canon to give prominence to adult adults and their problems. Therefore, it is indispensable to inculcate the Young Adult Literature in mainstream culture and create a rich place for the genre on the bookshelves. Through engagement with delicate and sensitive issues in YAL, one can gain understanding of the real world and its problems, and the young reader along with the young protagonist can grow emotionally and psychologically.

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