

The Representation of Ethnic Identity in Young Adult Novel *The Tumultuous Plain*: “You are not a Baloch! Even if you are, you may not be one of us!”

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Introduction

Ethnicity and ethnic identity are two essential and present-day issues in the field of cultural studies. As ethnicity plays an important role in forming the identity of young adults, YA literature, and in particular, YA fiction, can take benefit from ethnic representations. Iran has a great diversity of ethnicities; however, Iranian children and YA literature have not been able to fully represent ethnic heritages such as Turkish, Balochi, Turkomanish, Kurdish and Arabic. There are occasional portrayals of characters from these ethnicities and their customs and traditions in Iranian YA literature, but it is not certain to what extent their independent voices have been represented. Are they representatives of their people and their ethnic identities or actually marginalized by the ideology of the dominant discourse? Iranian YA literature needs narratives which would reflect the voices of ethnicities to the extent that the ethnic variety of this vast country

deserves. Ethnicity has a great influence on forming adolescents' identities; therefore, it is crucially important to see how YA literature and in particular, YA novels, treat ethnic identity. On the other hand, it is proper to say that the formation of ethnic identity is influenced by the authors' attitudes toward the subject.

Discussion

This study investigates the local aspects and elements and the manner of representation of Balochi cultural features in the YA novel *Tumultuous Plain* by Ali Akbar-Kermani-Nejad, written in the genre of indigenous fantasy / science-fiction. *Tumultuous Plain* is a successful example of multi-cultural novels due to its attention to a minority group and its reliable portrayal of Balochi culture and ethnic identity. As the title of this novel suggests, the setting is a chaotic atmosphere burdened with identity issues and ethnic conflicts. The story is about the journey of a young Baloch boy called Kakaei who sets foot in the plain to prove the innocence of his father who is trapped in a mountain due to accusations of murder and betrayal of Baloch heads. The title of the novel reflects the inherent chaos of the narrative which involves drug smuggling, tension and collusion between Baloch heads as well as intra/extra-ethnic struggles. The dark picture on the cover intensifies this turbulence. Camel, desert tree and a skinny boy dressed in white Balochi clothes are signs of Baloch ethnic identity. In front of the boy, there is a ghost-like and faceless person in black clothes, who creates a binary opposition between blackness and whiteness and

implicates a sense of threat, unsafety and even mythical opposition in the picture. The “plain” in the title signifies Balochi identity which has a “tumultuous” relationship with the political, economic and cultural elements of the outside world.

Baloch people are a minority group who are marginalized by the dominant political and social discourses; therefore, they seek their survival in solidarity and in emphasizing on the preservation of their traditions and cultures. Despite their internal differences, Baloch people have a common sense of identity which is respectable not only for themselves but also for those who are attracted toward this ethnic group. This makes future generations undertake the task of preservation and continuation of Balochi culture.

The author’s attempt to demonstrate the norms of Balochi life in the desert and presenting the local color in his novel leads to his creation of a localized genre of fantasy / science-fiction which has obvious affinities with the genre of magic realism in Iranian YA literature. Indigenous speculative literature is a new way of showing ethnic cultures to Iranian young adults who are used to reading western fantasy and science-fiction almost exclusively. Reading such examples of Iranian speculative fiction can help Baloch audiences to build self-esteem and to form a positive sense of ethnic identity. Furthermore, reading these types of narratives might also change the way others perceive Baloch ethnicity.

The dominant discourse in Iran commonly provides negative depictions of Baloch ethnicity; therefore, the general public have a narrow

and limited understanding of their culture, traditions and beliefs. *Tumultuous Plain* focuses on Baloch ethnicity from various perspectives and presents an overall positive picture of this minority group. Representing both the negative and the positive aspects of Balochi culture leads to a realist picture of this marginalized minority; but on the whole, being a member of Balochi society is described as an honor rather than a limitation. Akbar-Kermani-nejad has tried to introduce the cultural and ethnic interrelations faithfully to his readers.

The novel reflects a wide range of ethnic traditions and customs. The adolescent protagonist, while believing in these traditions, starts a difficult and constructive journey through which he enters into a dialogue with his culture and undertakes the reformation of its limitations. By challenging the limitations, he succeeds in reviving the ethnic traditions in a new way while at the same time he reaches self-awareness in the context of Balochi culture. As a dynamic character, he makes effort to determine the boundaries of his identity, while he remains loyal to Balochi cultural framework and undoubtedly finds himself as a member of Balochi society.

Conclusion

Without succumbing to idealization, *Tumultuous Plain* emphasizes the cultural capacities of Baloch people with the help of myths, religious and folk beliefs, and showing their interaction with their environment. The significance of this novel stems from the fact that it raises the rarely heard voice of a minority group in Iranian YA fiction and combines the environment of the desert with the elements of ethnic identity which are

derived from the interaction between people and their environment. Nature and ecosystem have a great influence on the formation of identity, and fantasy elements such as conical tornados in the parallel universe and animal helpers have been created by the use of this desert ecosystem. Ethnic traditions, issues such as drug trafficking and the dominance of castes inside the ethnicity, along with the religious and mythological capacities of this ethnicity make the Balochi culture understandable and tangible for the reader. Some examples of the mythical representations in the novel are passing across the fire, the magic cup showing the whole world (jam-e-Jam), the earth-mother and the wise old man archetypes. The harmonic interaction of the multivalent genre of the novel which combines elements of local fantasy, science-fiction and magic realism, with both the ecosystem and fantasy elements of the novel, help the redefinition of the ethnic identity.

Keywords: Indigenous literature, ethnic identity, science-fiction and fantastic YA novel, Ali Akbar-Kermani-Nejad, *Tumultuous Plain*

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