

## **I am Scared of “the Other: Sparks of Cultural Citizenship in Iranian Young Adult Fiction**

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### **Introduction**

In the fast moving contemporary world characterized by cultural diversity and cultural fusion, it has become more and more evident that it is necessary to understand the "other", to practice tolerance, and to recognize human and non-human rights in both virtual and real worlds. In recent years in Iran, the education of citizenship through children's and young adult literature has come under the attention of official institutions such as the municipalities. Holding “My City Festival” in Isfahan, the publication of educational books for children and adolescents about citizenship in East Azerbaijan, and the publication of children's stories by Shiraz Municipality are some examples of these efforts. With the establishment of Shiraz University Center for Citizenship Education which held the first conference on Citizenship Education, attention has been paid to the theoretical discussions of citizenship and children's rights. In these events, however, due attention has not been paid to the rights of women, children, minorities, immigrants and child laborers, as well as to cultural differences and

diversity. There has also been a very limited concern with the environment.

The present and absent components in these events show the dominant approach to the concept of citizenship in the macro policies. Given the fact that the policies of publishing and supporting authors depend on the policies of censorship, children's and adolescent literature cannot be separated from this cultural and social context. Focusing on the adolescent world and situation, young adult fiction represents the status of adolescents from different social classes in terms of their rights. Young adult fiction can raise the adolescents' awareness of their rights and their citizenship responsibilities, inviting them into social activism and understanding "the other". "Cultural citizenship" as a concept is not addressed adequately in Iran. Regarding this gap, in this article, I examine the representations of cultural citizenship in Iranian young adult fiction.

### **Research Method, Literature Review and Purpose**

Ebrahimpour (2010) provides components of citizenship ethics in children's poetry in the 40s to the 80s (AH). Shamshiri and Shokrollahzadeh (2016) extract the components of citizenship rights from the Constitution and the Bill of Rights, and investigate their presence in the Fundamental Reform Document of Education (FRDE). Wolk (2009) refers to the burgeoning of young adult novel and discusses the contribution of this genre to the curriculum, especially in teaching social sciences and the concept of citizenship and governance. Holmes (2019) examines the global citizenship education through young adult literature in the context of social studies and curriculum.

Yarova (2021) investigates the implications of the stories in the genre of magical realism for global citizenship education.

Among English-language inquiries, there are a large number of researches that have addressed the necessity of cultural and global citizenship education. Some of them have specifically focused on citizenship education with young adult novels. In Iran, researchers have not addressed this necessity. Furthermore, young adult literature has no place in Iranian curriculum.

This research aims at discovering the components of cultural citizenship in Iranian young adult fiction. Environment, ethnicity/race and immigration as the marginalized "other" are the components through which I discuss the representation of cultural citizenship. Cooperation and agentic subjectivity are among the important components of cultural citizenship, which I will consider when discussing the components of cultural citizenship.

### **Discussion**

Humans have always tried to overcome nature and show off their superiority. In this era in which the environmental crises are threatening all creatures, it is the time to pay attention to the unity of the human beings and the environment and to create a symbiosis of the two, not to place humans versus environment. One of the effective tools in evoking the sensitivity and activism of young people toward the environment is young adult novel. Environmental crises and natural landscapes have sometimes been the themes of young adult fiction and sometimes the main plot. However, the adolescents' activism to preserve the

environment and their social responsibility for protecting nature have not been central issues in young adult fiction.

The second component discussed in the article is ethnicity. In Iranian young adult fiction, ethnic narratives are neglected. Young adult ethnic stories are more focused on primitive and past atmospheres. This might be the continuation of the tradition of indigenous writing and the dominance of romantic view in adult fiction. Of course, the significant role of tradition among ethnic groups cannot be ignored in the current situation; however, the conflict between tradition and modernity is more visible in the actions and mindsets of ethnic youth. Due to this attitude and the huge gap between the actual youth and the youth represented in these narratives, these stories are not received warmly by adolescents. Because of this, authors of young adult fiction assume that addressing ethnic groups has no place in modern literature. Consequently, the new generation of authors depict only the young adults living in metropolises, while the portrayal of young adults in ethnic groups in the borders is significant in lieu of the global culture.

Iranian young adult literature is silent about ethnic youths and does not deal with the interactions or confrontations of ethnic and global cultures. The voices of adolescents are not heard clearly in young adult fiction. Some novels reflect only the voices of male characters in ethnic contexts. Citizenship as a modern concept cannot be reflected in ethnic novels with a classical narrative because it is not possible to attain individuality and rights in rural environments and in the absence of infrastructures of modern civilization.

The citizenship rights of immigrants are among the most prominent issues of cultural citizenship. Although domestic

immigrants, including war victims, may not have equal rights with the citizens of other cities, they are Iranian citizens nonetheless; however, foreign immigrants do not have the same rights as Iranian citizens. In fact, even being born in Iran cannot guarantee obtaining Iranian nationality and citizenship. The status of foreign immigrants in Iranian young adult fiction is similar to their social status in the sense that they do not occupy a significant place in these stories. The few fictions which represent Afghan immigrants show the negative attitude of the host country towards them; an attitude that regards them as “the other”.

### **Conclusion**

Occasionally, social theories affect the atmosphere of literary creation and production, but most theories are indebted to activists. Creating multicultural literature is a socially responsible action against the undemocratic social environment. Young adult literature can compensate deficiencies in citizenship education by including voices of ethnic groups and immigrants and empathizing with the environment. Cultural citizenship does not have a place in our macro-politics; thereby, young adult literature, in interaction with its social environment, has paid less attention to cultural diversity. On the contrary, it has inclined toward homogeneity and convergence. It should be noted that in spite of all gaps, young adult literature has made great efforts to reinforce and strengthen marginalized voices.

Multicultural literature is the tool to face the challenges of citizenship in the age of information and communication. However, in Iran, a country which has great cultural diversity, with its nature under threat and the number of its immigrants is ever-increasing, the concepts

of cultural citizenship and global citizenship are neglected both in social world and the world of young adult fiction. Regarding new conceptualization of citizenship education, policymakers should use the potentiality of young adult novel in the curriculum. Along with formal education, young adult novel can reflect the challenges of citizenship with narrative tools and literary and aesthetic techniques in an intimate atmosphere and close to the adolescent's mindset and language. The components of cultural citizenship can be embedded not only in the content, but also in the narrative form and structure.

**Keywords:** Iranian young adult fiction, citizenship rights, cultural citizenship, global citizenship, multicultural youth literature

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