



Extended Abstract

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Functions of Epistle Writing in Young Adult Literature: A study of *Light a Candle for Me*

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Introduction

Adolescence is a period full of emotional and physical conflicts due to the onset of a young adult's interaction with all kinds of power structures, including family, school, religion, race, gender and social class. These interactions usually manifest in the form of painful experiences. In recent decades, these tensions have increased with the emergence of the cyberspace and its impact on the way young adults interact with power structures and social institutions. The tremendous impact of this space on young adults and on the way they interact with the family and power structures has led to extensive social changes in the western society, which is part of the mission of young adult literature. In fact, young adult literature, as a means that reflects the concerns, tensions, and problems of young adults, should inevitably deal with cyberspace and the ways it affects the lives of young adults. Therefore, young adult literature in Iran is also affected by the global community and the inevitable changes that have occurred, reflecting the role of the cyber space in the formation of the identity and young adults' interactions. In this regard, various works have been written, among which one can refer to the novel *Light a Candle for Me* (2017) written by Maryam Mohammad Khani.

Methodology and Review of Literature

The current research is a qualitative study deploying an analytical-descriptive method. In this research, Mohammad Khani's novel, *Light a Candle for Me*, belonging to the field of the young adult literature, is investigated in order to deal with the effect of the use of letter writing and cyber space on the young adult's understanding of the individual "self" and power institutions. For this purpose, the author compares two types of 'external' and 'virtual' reality throughout the narrative to examine the young adult's activism in the real space outside and in the virtual space and to identify any behavioral and perceptual differences. It is assumed that the cultural and social effects of the cyber space are represented through the ways in which the young adult interacts with the "self" and the prevailing gender and surveillance structures. Employing the views of Campbell and Flanagan and focusing on topics such as "cross-border citizenship", "technorealist" structure, and "subjectivity", this study seeks to answer the question of how to use the technique of e-mail writing to redefine the interaction of teenagers with power structures.

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Discussion and Findings

Among the types of prose, none has been subjected to as much critical definition and classification as “letter”. The slow pace of the narrative, the lack of many events in the plot, along with the loneliness and isolation of the writer of the letters are the characteristics of the epistolary novel. It is in this isolation that the repetitive process of emotional self-exploration accelerates and the psychological nature of epistolary works is highlighted. These features have made epistolary novels into the favorite style of writers of young adult literature since young adults, as a minority on the margins, are often ignored by the power structures and their voices are heard less.

In fact, epistolary works give the young adult an opportunity not only to get acquainted with the social power structures but also to interact with the different layers of existing power. In other words, in these works, the young adult sets on a journey into the land of the ‘self’ by writing letters. The popularity of this type of literature has doubled with the emergence of cyber space and the replacement of classical correspondence with electronic correspondence (e-mail). This can be related to the fluid nature of this space. This fluidity, due to the “intermediate” feature of the letter, creates a new type of modern letter-writing literature, which is similar to technorealism in literature. The special importance of modern epistolary works is the ideological transformation in ways virtual reality is conceptualized. In other words, the emergence of the cyberspace leads to the formation of a dual conflict between “material reality” and “virtual reality” (and, accordingly, real identity/virtual identity). The basic point is the complementary relationship between these two types of “reality”; that is, a young adult’s identity is not limited to his identity in the real world. His identity is, in fact, the result of his actions in both real and virtual spaces. Therefore, topics such as intimacy, sexual hierarchies and identity are subject to change under the influence of the interactive nature of cyberspace.

Mohammad Khani's novel is a response to the widespread effects of the cyberspace on the identity of the young adults with the spread of digital technologies. By combining the style of the 18th century epistolary novels and the digital technology of today, Mohammad Khani has created a new type of epistolary novel called the postmodern epistolary novel, in which a large part of the story, written in the form of electronic mails, is narrated through emails exchanged between Sara, the protagonist, and Pirouz, her electronic friend. Mohammad Khani's narrative not only depicted the polyphony of postmodern works through the intersection of male/female, adult/young adult, “self”/“other”, and reality/fantasy discourses, but also created space for Interaction and rereading of various worldviews and discourses of power by giving voice to different groups. By representing the daily conversations and online life of Sara Sabouri, a 12-year-old teenager, Mohammad Khani depicts the experience and the emotional dependence of young adults on this space and the role of this space in filling their emotional void. Mohammad Khani's protagonist is an ordinary teenage girl who, like other teenage girls, is involved with issues such as identity crisis, parents' lack of understanding, generational gap, puberty problems and relationships with the opposite sex. Using the floating nature of virtual space and the freedom of expression that governs it, Mohammad Khani uses this space to depict Sara's confrontation with these issues while representing the positive effect of this space, despite the existing threats, on Sara's personality development.

Conclusion

It is argued that the expansion of the cyberspace along with the possibility of equal access by everyone has resulted in the formation of a heteroglossic, democratic ambiance, which triggers a polyphonic world. It is in this world of virtual reality that everybody’s voice, especially young women’s, is heard. The experience of such polyphony and freedom of maneuver on the part of women affects their conceptions of their ‘selves’ and their identities. No longer do they consider their identities an essential entity that is fixed and predetermined by norms set by liberal humanism. On the other hand, affected by the collective nature of the cyber space, these women consider identity as “performative” and fluid. That is, they approach identity as a social “construct” that lies somewhere beyond notions of anatomy, race, and religion. The result is the formation of female intersubjectivity that resists dominant power structures and gender norms.

Keywords: epistolary novel, technorealism, young adult literature, polyphony, Maryam Mohammad Khani

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