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Extended Abstract

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Young Adult Novel as an Open Text for an Open Reader: Interpreting Interwoven Symbols and Signs in *Dark Sisters* Based on Umberto Eco's Interpretation Theory

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Introduction

Author, text, and reader are a triad whose relationship has always been matter of consideration throughout the history of literary criticism. The text is nothing more than a set of signs, inviting the reader to construct the meaning of it. One of the controversial issues in reading and understanding the meaning of a text has always been whether the text itself provokes the reader's act of interpretation or the reader's own interpretive strategies impose solutions to the problems posed by the text. Before the recent reader-response theories, Umberto Eco in *The Role of the Reader* (1979), spoke of open and closed texts, defining open text as a text that allows multiple or mediated interpretation by the readers. In contrast, closed texts lead the reader to one correct and valid interpretation.

Regarding the diversity of definitions of adolescence, the young adult novel has had various definitions as well, which are in relationship with young audiences. The adolescents define their identity in fluctuation between various binaries and challenge pre-existing meanings with openness. The young adult novel is, consequently, an arena of conflict and redefinition of meanings. It is necessary to reflect the

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intertwined relationships between signifiers and the signifieds of text in form and content, and to move towards polysemy and acceptance of multiple meanings by involving its audience in reading and interpretation process. Therefore, reader-response theories might be helpful in understanding the relationship between the adolescent reader and the texts written for them.

Adolescents need “open texts” that reveal the fluidity of meaning in the play of symbols and signs, also along with the adolescents’ cognitive development, make them more capable of decoding the ambiguity of the text and understanding it. Texts are constructed in reading, and taking the young agent readers into account in process of reading and creation of young adult literature promises to move towards new horizons.

Mehdi Rajabi’s novel, *Dark Sisters* (2016) is a psychological thriller that requires active reading by creating a complex network of symbols and signs. This novel is considered a new step in terms of form and theme compared to Iranian young adult novels, and the interpretation of its textual world can make its salient features more evident. In interpreting the aforementioned text, I have used Umberto Eco's theory of reception, the concept of "open text" and "model reader".

Literature Review, Research Method and Objectives

This study aims to examine the interwoven network of textual symbols and signs in *Dark Sisters*, based on Umberto Eco's "open text" and "model reader." The research method is qualitative content analysis with descriptive-interpretive approach.

Prior to this study, Zhian Jahani et al. (2018) have examined *Dark Sisters* from personality disorder perspective with the bibliotherapy approach. No other research has been allocated to this novel. Also, in the field of practical application of Eco's theory, Salis (1989) examined Eco's novel, *The Name of the Rose,* based on Eco’s semiotic theory and his definition of open text and the model reader. He believes that Eco has moved from semiotic theory to semiotic fiction in this novel.

Discussion

In this section, relying on textual, intertextual, and metatextual implications, including my understanding of culture and reading patterns, and considering the genre, I have tried to present a critical reading of *Dark Sisters* in terms of attention to the audience and a close reading of the text in terms of attention to the text in the construction of meaning. Eco considers the interpretation of the text as the result of collaboration between the text and the audience. I have interpreted the novel in four parts:

1. Playing with binary oppositions, colors, and numbers: The opposition between life and death, conscious and unconscious, black and white, and playing with other colors are repeated throughout the

novel. The names are all purposefully chosen and have symbolic and mythological references. Symbols related to numbers, including nine and three, and the game of Sudoku, are used frequently in the novel.

2. Intertwined threads of fantasy and reality: The novel fluctuates between fantasy and reality. The narrative develops in both domains and creates a complex network of symbols with the help of myths, folk beliefs and intertextuality, including the use of proper names, songs, spells and so on.

3. Form-content play and the connection of motifs with deep structure: Several symbols, including the snail, talisman, Sudoku, and fog spreading in the forest, are repeated several times in the novel and, apart from being related to each other, are linked in deep structure to the adolescent character's states and her mentality.

4. The Reversibility of Evil in Symbolic Places and Objects: Moving through different narrative levels and moving back and forth in different parts of the narrative, we can see that the symbols of places are repeated in the past and present. The forest, the villa, the well, and the pool are dark and evil places, and objects such as the lock symbolize evil. In *Dark Sisters*, there is a will and power that goes beyond the power of the characters, which is evil. Darkness has cast a shadow over the lives of the three friends and never disappears.

By creating complex and symbolic occasions, the novel creates a delusional and psychological world. The symbols are so intertwined and numerous that they cannot be deciphered in a single reading, and some of them remain undecoded until the end of the story. Such a text can be read in two ways: naively and critically, or as an open and closed text. The implied reader of *Dark Sisters* as a narrative strategy is a critical reader who does not simply ignore the images, dialogues, and codes, but constantly challenges the text and her/himself. On the other hand, for the inexperienced reader, encountering the meaning underlying the narrative can be disturbing and confusing, because at the surface of the novel, the unity and coherence of the plot are not achieved, and the gaps of the narrative lead to dissimilation of story elements at the ending.

Conclusion

As results show, *Dark Sisters* is approximating to "open text" and its "model reader" is defined as a critical reader, sensitive to words, signs, symbols, and intratextual connections. *Dark Sisters* allows the reader to read more actively. Ambiguity and interwoven signs keep the meaning-making process open and prevent focusing on a single, straightforward meaning. The process of discovering and constructing the meaning is complex and intricate, and the novel, by utilizing the techniques such as time stops, the shadow cast on the main character's mind and perception because of mental illness, signifiers with multiple signifieds, and recurring universal and personal symbols in the structure and the content (including talisman, snail, well, fog, forest), guides the reader to read actively and construct various meanings and interpretations. But in the end, the author fails to make a coherent network of symbols and in the surface of the narrative, many questions remain unanswered. Such texts are rare in Iranian young adult literature, and regarding the mostly

polyphonic, curious, and critical nature of adolescence, they define a new category of adolescent model audience compared to their similar texts. The current adolescent audiences, at least serious readers of young adult literature, seems more eager toward open texts, in which they are not just narrative objects, but rather part of texts' construction, immersing happily in its playful structural ambiguity.

Keywords: Mehdi Rajabi, Open Text, Model Reader, Semiotics, Young Adult Novel

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