

Elements Of Young Adult Literature in Prescribed Novels for Malaysian Schools

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<https://doi.org/10.24191/ajue.v17i4.16226>

Received: 15 August 2021

Accepted: 30 September 2021

Date Published Online: 31 October 2021

Published: 31 October 2021

Abstract: This article presents the results of a study carried out to explore the elements of Young Adult Literature (YAL) present in the prescribed texts for Malaysian secondary school English as a second Language (ESL) students (3rd cycle). The three novels studied were; *Captain Nobody* by Dean Pitchford, *Sing to the Dawn* by MinFong Ho and *Dear Mr. Kilmer* by Ann Schraff. The lens of reader-response literary theory was used for the study. Sampling was purposeful with six young adult Malaysian university undergraduates participating in the study. Data came from participants' in-depth written journal reflections during the reading of all three novels as well as from follow-up semi-structured qualitative interviews. The study found that all three novels discussed themes and events that were reflective of YAL such as family relationships and friendship. Two of the novels, *Sing to the Dawn* and *Dear Mr. Kilmer* had young adults as protagonists with significant instances of conflict between dependence and independence. The portrayal of the young adult protagonists also reflected the growth into mental and emotional maturity throughout the course of the novels although descriptions of their appearances and mannerisms were not clearly evident. There was however a positive resolution at the end of all the novels and the actions and decisions of the main young adult characters were major factors in the outcome of the conflict. The findings from this study primarily the presence of YAL elements would guide future decisions by curriculum planners on choices of suitable material in upper secondary ESL classrooms.

Keywords: ESL, Reader Response, YAL, Young Adults, Young Adult Literature.

1. Introduction

Young Adult Literature (YAL) which also goes by other names such as adolescent fiction or teen fiction can be considered as fiction that is written for the young adult (Nilsen and Donelson, 2005). Elements of Young Adult Literature include: a young adult protagonist, the point of view of a young adult, coming-of-age issues that are relevant to young adults, the story being marketed specifically to young adults, and the story being one that young adults willingly choose to read (Herz and Gallo, 1996). These elements, or characteristics, are important markers for a novel to belong to the genre of Young Adult Literature.

The boundaries of young adulthood are not clearly defined and could range between 11 to 22. A narrower span of about 12 to 19 is generally more accepted. (YALSA: Young Adult Library Services of the American Library Association.) As the characteristics of YAL include issues and themes that are relevant to those faced by young adults in this phase of their lives, it follows that novels in this genre would be more appealing to young adult students who are able to identify with them. When young adults identify with these novels and the characters in these novels it may lead to an enhanced reading experience. (Govindarajoo and Mukundan, 2013). A huge part of the literature experience, or interest in literature, develops during this stage. (Cole, 2009; Reed, 1994). Because of this, novel selections prescribed in secondary schools play an important role in harnessing young adults' interest in reading.

In Malaysian secondary schools, prescribed texts were introduced as part of the newly introduced literature component in the ESL curriculum in 2000. The selection of literary texts namely novels were done by a team of curriculum developers in the Malaysian Ministry of Education (MOE). The first cycle in 2000 included three novels for the upper secondary classroom. Studies conducted on the first cycle revealed that there were little if any YAL elements in these novels (Too, 2004, Subramaniam & Vethamani 2004). The studies also showed that the Malaysian young adult student showed little interest towards reading these prescribed texts of the literature component in the English Language syllabus. The texts did not match students' interests, reading competence and were not culturally compatible. (Sidhu, 2003). Govindarajoo and Mukundan (2013) in their study based on the 2nd cycle of texts which begun in 2010, found that students could identify with issues and themes in the novels that were relevant to their own young adulthood phase. In 2013, the MOE revised the cycle again with another new set of texts. Studies on these texts have so far only focused on their role as unifying tools in cultural diverse settings. (Kaur & Mahmor, 2014; Omar Y., 2017; Pillai et al., 2016; Thoo et al., 2017). The presence of YAL elements in these texts and the reading experience of the Malaysian young adults of these texts have still not yet been explored. selection criteria of these novels and how they have been matched to suit the young adult age levels of the students they are meant for in the Malaysian upper secondary classroom, still remains unclear.

1.1 Objective of this study

This study therefore aims to find out the extent to which the prescribed novels in the literature component for the Malaysian Upper Secondary ESL classroom (3rd cycle) contain elements of YAL and how Malaysian young adults identify with these novels. This would provide an analytic perspective for all parties involved on the YAL texts' suitability to the reader audience. Most importantly, this study will shed light on whether these prescribed texts are suitable as for the Malaysian secondary school student who by definition is also a young adult.

1.2 Research Questions

To what extent do the novels of the literature component (3rd cycle) prescribed for students in the Malaysian secondary school English Language classroom belong to the genre of Young Adult Literature (YAL)?

- a) Are there young adult protagonists at the centre of the plot?
- b) Whose point of view or voice is projected in the novel?
- c) What are the themes and events in the novels?
- d) How are the young adult characters in the novels portrayed?

2. Literature Review

2.1 Who are Young Adults?

Boundaries for what is defined as the period of young adulthood are fluid and differ according to context and setting. A better description would be to consider it as the transitory phase between childhood and full adulthood, and the significant characteristics of this phase. (Nilsen, 2005). Although this period could range in its broadest definition from 11 to 22, a narrower span of about 12 to 19 is generally more accepted. (YALSA: Young Adult Library Services of the American Library Association.) The characteristics that signify this as a distinct phase include works from developmental psychologists including Erikson, Havighurst and Kohlberg. In his 'Lifetime Developmental Tasks', Havighurst (1972) describes young adulthood as the period where the young adult searches for self-identity, tries to be emotionally independent of his parents and other adults and begins to acquire a personal view of life.

2.2 Defining Young Adult Literature

In their definition by readership, Nilsen and Donelson (2001), refer to YAL 'anything that readers between the approximate ages of 12 to 18 would choose to read'. YAL is also defined as literature that is written for, published and marketed to young adults. ((Reed, 1994, Herz & Gallo, 1996) Both definitions have the common ground that literature written for the young adult would also be what they may independently choose to read. (Owen, 2003, Stephens, 2007)

The distinctive characteristics of YAL include the presence of strong young adult protagonists who are often portrayed as perceptive, sensitive, intelligent and independent; The point of view and voice of the young adult protagonist is projected, and it is their actions that often drive the major outcomes in the stories. Themes and issues in YAL are relevant and meaningful to young adults and often parallel their own lives in significant ways. (Brozo & Simpson 1995; Wells 2010; Wolf 2007) It is these identifying characteristics which strongly point towards a good fit when choices of literary texts need to be made for young adult adolescent students.

When young adult readers identify with the characters in the novel, it facilitates feelings of appreciation towards literature (Sivapalan, Idrus, Bhattacharyya, and Nordin, 2017). This helps them build a love of reading and encourages them to read even more. Sivapalan et. al (2017). Most importantly, the study found that Young Adult Literature in English helped develop an appreciation for reading among the aforementioned engineering students.

2.3 Reader Response Theory

The lens of the Reader-response theory perceives that the reader is an active participant in the reading and brings his own personal history and psychology into his reading thereby creating his unique and personal reading experience. Thus, the reader becomes part the creation and interpretation of the text. (Fish, 1967, Holland, 1968; Rosenblatt, 1976). Reading is a temporal event, one that unfolds through time and the reader's response is seen to be conditioned by this temporality. In her conclusions about text, Rosenblatt (1978) states that the text is a stimulus activating the reader's past experiences with literature and life

This is reaffirmed by Stanley Fish (1980) when he accords meaning of the text to the one receiving it thereby rejecting the intended message of the author. In so doing, Fish confirms the Reader -response theory by stating that meaning lies in the reading community which creates its own reality of the text. When no concrete basis for meaning actually exists, there cannot be any one interpretation of text that will always hold true but rather will depend on the distinct experience it produces in the reader. This is particularly important in determining elements or

genre of YAL because it is in the young adults reading and interpretation of the texts and allowing himself to 'enter' these texts that YAL can truly be defined.

2.4 Literature Component in Malaysian Secondary Schools

2.4.1 Introduction to Literature Component in Malaysian Secondary Schools

The Literature component was included in the teaching of English Language in the Malaysian secondary school syllabus in 2000. This component of English Language is categorised under the 'language for aesthetic use' learning outcome for the learners to appreciate literary texts matching their language proficiency and to enable them to write and speak creatively (KBSM English Language Curriculum Specifications, 2003:2). Findings by Patee, A (2017) also point towards young adult students enjoying learning literature despite it being difficult and hard to understand. Reading literature texts also allows the readers to appreciate things around them (Groenke, S., Reece, S., & Varnes, A. (2015). In relation to that, young adult students who are in their transitional phase of life; from teenagers to adulthood, would learn to appreciate aspects of life based on knowledge they have grasped over time. A study by Sivapalan, Idrus, Bhattacharyya & Nordin (2017) revealed that curriculum planners and literature teachers in secondary schools face the challenge of ensuring certain related aspects such as holistic education, and cultural accessibility. Participant readiness is also another key factor in ensuring a successful acceptance of literature by students in the ESL classroom. (Baba, J., & Rostam Affendi, F., 2020). Other studies have also found that using literature in the language classroom must fit the interest of the learners, cultural inclination and linguistic opportunity. (Sufanti, M., Nuryatin, A., Rohman, F., & J. Waluyo, H. 2021)

The incorporation of the literature component in the English language subject in Malaysian secondary schools in 2000 marked a formal acknowledgment and appreciation of the role of literature in English Language Teaching in Malaysia. Apart from the aesthetic value, the objectives of this move also intended to contribute towards personal development and character building. (MOE document 1999). The texts that were prescribed in the first cycle were however not met with enthusiasm by the students they were intended for due to lack of relevance to their lives as young adults. (Lian, 2002, Too, 2004, Subramaniam & Vethamani 2004). After the end of the first cycle, (2000-2010) in which the novels used were found to be 'uninteresting incompatible, and depressing, and without 'appeal to the targeted students,' the second cycle of literary texts was introduced in 2010. (Ghani et al, 2007) Compared to the first cycle, students could identify with the young adult characters and issues in most of the novels in the second cycle. (Govindarajoo & Mukundan, 2013)

The novels that were subsequently selected for the 3rd cycle of the literature component in 2013 are *Captain Nobody* by Dean Pitchford, *Sing to the Dawn* by MinFong Ho and *Dear Mr. Kilmer* by Ann Schraff.

2.4.2 Captain Nobody by Dean Pitchford

Captain Nobody by Dean Pitchford which was published in 2009 revolves around Newton Newman (Newt), a ten-year-old schoolboy living in the shadow of his older brother. Unlike his football-star brother Chris, Newt and his two friends, Cecil and JJ are always ignored by other kids at the school. One day, his football-star brother, Chris, is knocked into a coma during the biggest football game of the season. To keep Newt's mind off his brother's condition, his two best friends – Cecil and JJ help him to create his Halloween costume: Captain Nobody. Wearing the outfit, Newt begins to gain more confidence and courage. He feels strong and confident wearing the costume, so he keeps wearing it even after Halloween is over. Soon Newt proves himself to be a hero. Starting from helping a confused Mr. Clay finding his way home, Newt as

Captain Nobody foils a robbery, saving a planeload of passengers. He also saves Reggie Ratner – the football player who was wrongly blamed for causing Chris' concussion and finally manages to jolt his brother out of his coma.

2.4.3 *Sing to the Dawn* by Minfong Ho

In this novel, Dawan, a young village girl who lives in Thailand at Bangkok gets first place in an examination and wins a scholarship to study in a city school. Her brother, Kwai, places second in the examination and is initially jealous, creating a rift between the two previously close siblings. This hostility is further exacerbated by Dawan's father, who feels that the city is no place for a girl, and that Dawan should give in to Kwai and let him go to the city instead of her. Dawan faces major obstacles at every turn, and eventually overcomes these obstacles and proves to herself and to others that she is fully capable of handling the scholarship and the responsibility it entails. But she faces the disapproval of her father, who is convinced that city life and further schooling are not for a girl. Through her determination Dawan's manages to overcome these obstacles and proves to herself, as well as others, that she is indeed worthy of the prize.

2.4.4 *Dear Mr. Kilmer* by Ann Schraff

Unlike his father and older brother Gus who enjoy outdoor activities like sports and hunting, fifteen-year-old Richard Knight prefers to spend his free time reading and writing poetry. Due His love for nature and belief in the sanctity of life makes him averse to 'killing anything', and thus he is always a somewhat reluctant participant in the hunting activities with his father and older brother.

When his teacher introduces the poetry of Joyce Kilmer, a well-known poet, to the class, Richard becomes very interested especially when he discovers that like himself, Kilmer reveres nature and the sanctity of life. World War 1 breaks out and Kilmer volunteers for service in the army to fight for his country even though he does not believe in war. Richard begins a correspondence with Kilmer which in time develops into a deep friendship. In the background of the war, they exchange thoughts on poetry and snippets of what is going on in their lives. Richard learns about the evils of war and in his surroundings, he is confronted with issues related to discrimination, patriotism and sacrifice. Throughout all that happens Richard matures and learns about responsibility and the meaning of true courage.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Design

As the study aimed to determine the extent to which the three novels belonged to the genre of YAL, the interpretation and in-depth responses of the young adult participants were needed. To best suit the purpose of the study, the researchers had to employ a qualitative research method. (Creswell, 2003, Merriam, 2009, Guest, Bunce & Johnson, 2011) Responses from Qualitative Interviews and reflective journals from research participants were used to gather the data that was needed.

3.1.1 Qualitative interviews

Qualitative interviews were used as a method in this study as the researcher needed to gather information related to the young adult participants' deeper perceptions related to the YAL elements in the texts. (Xie, J., & Huijser, H., 2020). Qualitative interviewing also allowed the co-construction of the data and knowledge through the dialogue between researcher and participants. (Guba & Lincoln, 1985; Mason, 2002; Richards 2010.) During the course of the interviews, guiding questions were used which were not fully structured to encourage greater expression of thoughts and feelings among the participants.

3.1.2 Reflective Journals

The present study also used data gathered from the participants' written reflections during their reading of the three novels. A set of guiding criteria was provided by the researcher in line with the research questions. Apart from being effective introspective tools for 'investigating behaviour in context' (Nunan, 1992) reflective journals also represent a form of self-observation and studies of reflective journals involve systematic personal accounts of feelings, thoughts, beliefs, attitudes and reactions over a period of time. (Ortlipp, 2008, Etherington, 2004)

3.2 Procedures

3.2.1 Selection of Participants for Interviews and Reflective Journals

The sampling for the study was purposeful and participants were six undergraduate students from a Malaysian university between the ages of 18 and 20. They were chosen based on belonging to the young adult age category, high English proficiency and interest in reading. After they were briefed about the study and consent was obtained, participants were supplied with the three novels and a set of guidelines on what was expected from them in the writing of their journals. To cover the required scope of the research, a semi-structured interview protocol including open-ended questions was constructed. Qualitative interviews were then conducted with each participant. All interviews were recorded and transcribed before analysis. Based on a pilot study, several guidelines and interview questions were modified.

Codes assigned to the six participants are P1, P2, P3, P4, P5 and P6. Data from all parts of the study were read a few times and further reflections and notes were added by the researcher during the reading of the journals and listening and transcription of interviews. Data analysis in this study was an on-going process. The preliminary readings yielded general ideas. The emergence of specific units or segments of information were recorded and reduced to themes relevant to the research questions. The data was also examined for clustering of units. Analytic coding was used to develop themes as categories and subtopics emerge.

Based on the emerging themes, a thick description was written, and a comparison was done between all parts of the study to confirm the findings and to answer research questions. The data was examined further through member checks for discrepancies and for confirmation and triangulation purposes.

4. Results and Discussion

This study aimed to answer the following question:

To what extent do the novels of the literature component (3rd cycle) prescribed for students in the Malaysian secondary school English Language classroom belong to the genre of YAL?

To answer this research question, the researchers have pinpointed the elements and characteristics meant to be present in Young Adult Literature in the Literature Review, and thus, narrowed the focus down to these sub-questions:

- a) Are there Young Adult protagonists at the centre of the plot?
- b) Whose point of view or voice is projected in the novel?
- c) What are the themes and events in the novels?
- d) How are the Young Adult characters in the novels portrayed

4.1 Are there young adult protagonists at the centre of the plot?

4.1.1 Presence of young adult protagonist at the centre of the plot: *Captain Nobody*

In *Captain Nobody*, there were no young adult protagonists but there were young adult supporting characters. Most of the participants do not mention Newt Newman in their journals as they did not connect with him even though he was the main character.

The book reads a little bit too childish and simplistic to me, for 17-year-old Malaysian students to read. It definitely sounds like a kid talking. (P4)

Participant 5 seemed to agree with Participant 4,

“It was a slight challenge to pick up the novel because the cover of the novel, in my opinion, was rather childish, especially if the novel was meant to attract young adults (P5)

“...the book doesn’t seem so realistic and a little too childish for secondary (SPM) students to learn in school”. (P1)

The recurring words and phrases in most responses was ‘childish’, and ‘not relatable’ to the young adult participants. The cover of the novel with a 10-year-old boy in a superhero costume, was one of the major reasons stated by participants on why it was not appealing to them. Participant 5 adds;

In my opinion, the suitable group age in novels to attract young adults would be perhaps 16-20 years old, that coming-of-age age. Instead, the main character in this novel is a 10-year-old boy”. (P5)

4.1.2 Presence of young adult protagonist at the centre of the plot: *Sing to the Dawn*

There was unanimous agreement that the 14-year-old protagonist Dawan in the novel was a young adult. One of the participants even mentioned Kwai, her 13-year-old brother, as a young adult.

4.1.3 Presence of young adult protagonist at the centre of the plot: *Dear Mr. Kilmer*

There was also no doubt among all participants on the presence of a young adult protagonist in the character of 15-year-old Richard Knight, who was indeed a young adult by the definition used in this study. Apart from Richard, two participants (P2, P3) identified other other young adult characters in the novel as being pivotal in the novel’s plot and outcome.

Richard Knight, his brother Gus, his sister Angie, his girlfriend Hannah, Hannah’s brother; Otto, and Richard’s schoolmates; Peggy, Millie, Abner, Blanche, Harry, Herbie, and Mildred. The amount of young adult characters in this novel actually helped bring out the ‘young adult’ feel”. (P5)

4.2 Whose point of view or voice is projected in the novel?

4.2.1 Point of view: *Captain Nobody*

The point of view used in the novel was first person, and it was narrated by Newt Newman, a 10-year-old boy in middle school. This means that Newt is not a young adult protagonist, and therefore, not a relatable ‘voice’ to the participants. Participant 2 writes in her journal;

...books. I can definitely hear the voice of a kid, if that makes sense; from the way he thinks about Halloween costume ideas to the usual ‘drama’ that he has to encounter in his class. However, instead of this being a mature, typical TV show Teen drama, I would say that Captain Nobody has a more innocent, Disney vibe to it. (P2)

Perhaps one of the reasons why I’m not as invested to this story as much as the other two books is because I cannot relate to some of Newt’s daily life or struggles mainly due to the fact that I’m much older than him. But for some reason I was able to immerse myself into the other two books because the characters are less childish than Newt”.(P1)

Participant 3 added that “It definitely sounds like a kid talking”.

Although the first-person point of view which is a usual characteristic of a young adult novel is used in *Captain Nobody*, in this case the voice happened to belong to someone who in the opinion of the participants was still very much a child.

4.2.2 Point of view: *Sing to the Dawn*

The point of view employed by the author in *Sing to the Dawn* was third person, which is not a typical characteristic of a Young Adult Literature novel. Most of the participants did not mention Dawan as being the voice of the novel but talked more about what she did in the novel. This confirmed their perception of Dawan as the main character and thus, a relatable young adult protagonist, because the participants seemed to favour her choices and actions throughout the course of the story. One participant (P3) confirmed this during the interview;

As a young adult, I have to admit that Dawan spoke to me, and I could feel myself being in her shoes. (P3)

This was echoed by another participant in her journal.

Though written in third point of view perspective, I do hear the voice of a young adult telling the story of Dawan and her conflicts; with wanting a better education for herself so she could change the world, and to please her family (especially her brother). In my opinion, the story spoke well of the hardships that a girl has to go through, especially when she is shadowed by her brother and that her gender is considered inferior to males. The sadness, desperation, and excitement, all can be heard from Dawan’s point-of-view, and though it may not be relatable, but it was understandable by me (P4)

4.2.3 Point of view : *Dear Mr. Kilmer*

The story was told in the first-person point of view, by the main character, 15-year-old Richard Knight. The researchers’ perspective is that it falls in line with the aforementioned characteristics of Young Adult Literature. As for the participants, they unanimously agreed that the novel was told by a young adult, and therefore, had the ‘voice’ of a young adult protagonist.

One participant said, “The setting of this book was set a lot in high school and involved a lot of high schoolers therefore gives out a young adult’s point of view throughout the story”. Interestingly, another participant felt that the novel started off a little too adult-like for them,

“When I read the first few pages, the writing seemed a little too omniscient and a little too sophisticated for someone who was a young adult, but I was also generalising at the time. I feel this way because the themes talked about in this book are very dark, deep, and disturbing, and is no less viewed by someone who was only 15 years old”. (P2)

Three participants (P1,P3,P6) believed that the point of view began as omniscient, and then moved on to first person as Richard takes centre-stage. Participant 5 however, believed that it was told in third person,

“At first glance, I thought *Dear Mr. Kilmer* would be a boring story that surrounds the war back then, but I was wrong - not the whole war part, but how the story revolved around war, and yet it wasn’t really about war. Though told in the third point of view, I could still hear the voice of Richard compared to the rest of the characters”. (P5)

4.3 What are the themes and events in the novels?

4.3.1 Themes and events : *Captain Nobody*

The main themes that were identified from participants’ responses were familial love, friendship, bullying, acceptance from peers, and suicide. Participants were divided in terms of their opinions regarding the suitability of some of the themes present in the novel. One participant noted;

“I personally feel that the bullying cases, and the suicide content is not suitable for the secondary students to read as the contents in the book did not really explain much in detail how everything was resolved. All the actions were explained through three to four sentences and were not taken very seriously.” (P1)

“What I disliked most about the story was how it seemed to touch on complex problems and dark issues in a very light manner, which is a bad message to send to young adults Bullying is not taken as seriously, even when the teachers all witnessed the bullying scene taking place.” (P3)

However, one participant felt that, “This story is a magnificent story of self-discovery, bravery, friendship, love and inspiration.” (P1)

Despite professing that the novel contained issues that were more suitable for older readers, most of the participants however felt that this novel was too ‘simplistic’ and ‘childish’ for young adults.

4.3.2 Themes and events: *Sing to the Dawn*

The main themes as outlined by the participants revolved around female empowerment, injustices in the economic system, misogyny, and the right to an education. One participant said,

“This tale is about the frustrations, hardships and political injustices. Dawan wants the chance to continue her education in high school by getting good results for her exams.

But, she has to face disapproval from her dad, who is persuaded that town life and further education is not for a girl. (P2)

Most of the participants also spoke about determination as a theme in the novel. But the primary issue, as pointed out by most of the participants was the gender issue, the fact that Dawan “was a girl.”

“It seems that girls are not meant to be educated or at least that’s what most people believe in. Women are meant to stay at home, while men are supposedly the saviours. It’s absurd”. (P4)

All participants agreed that the novel was one of female empowerment and was a good feminist novel. Most of the participants saw themselves in Dawan but admitted that they did really have to go through the same struggles Dawan did to receive an education.

4.3.3 Themes and events : *Dear Mr. Kilmer*

From the responses of the participants, the themes that surfaced were self-acceptance, family bonding, friendship, love, war, discrimination and xenophobia. Two participants noted that the story was geared towards popularity more than it was about the war,

“The things the young adults believe in within this novel mirror real life. Most of them only care about popularity and mundane things like that. Although war is a recurring theme, the teenagers seemed to care more about what other people thought of them, even the main character Richard. Hannah is one of the few people who accept how people view her and doesn’t want to stand up for herself.” (P6)

Another participant said, “The story focuses heavily on popularity. Young adults nowadays seem to care a lot about popularity status because the more you’re known, the lesser the chance of you getting bullied or being left out.” (P4)

Gender roles were also cited as a theme in the novel.

“As we know, Angie was forced to quit school in the eighth grade and take over her mother’s duties while her brother still got the chance to continue going to school. I felt that it was very unfair and sexist because these types of situations still happen and it very much tells us the sad truth about women.” (P3)

4.4 How are the Young Adult characters in the novels portrayed?

4.4.1 Portrayal of young adult characters: *Captain Nobody*

Although none of the participants referred to the main character Newt One participant noted that while Newt as a young adult, all of them professed a grudging admiration for his independence and intelligence which marked a maturity beyond his age.

“I do however, like how mature Newt is. He is independent, he often takes care of others, not just himself. He craves attention and helps others carry out their duties while being responsible himself. He is only ten years old, but he acts so much older than that. He understands why people dote on his brother, and rarely seems to complain about it. If anything, he is one of his biggest fans”. P3

One participant however felt that somehow the novel had spoiled Newt’s characterisation by making Newt ‘end up wanting recognition – and getting it.” P5

When asked about their feelings towards the novel’s ending, all participants confessed that they were happy with the novel’s positive ending which was largely attributed to the main character Newt.

“In the end, the scene at the water tower, I think, was a turning point for both Chris and Newton (even though he’s not considered as a young adult, in my opinion) and we could see changes in point-of-view and the real, defining personality of these two characters”. (P6)

4.4.2 Portrayal of young adult characters: *Sing to the Dawn*

Participants described Dawan, the young adult protagonist as ‘smart, mature, and becoming even more mature by the end of the novel.’ (P1,P2,P3,P6)

This however did not discount Dawan’s own inner misgivings and doubts of her own strength and abilities at different points in the novel which she ultimately overcomes through fierce determination and perseverance. This conflict between her self-doubt and her belief was expressed throughout all the interviews and in the journal reflections. This development of moving into maturity by the young adult protagonist is a definite characteristic of YAL.

“Dawan however, starts to show that she is breaking out of this constrictive mold through subtle actions. She doesn’t mind getting dirty, and is reluctant, but speaks up with the help of her brother. She also tells her brother that she is afraid of getting the scholarship and I concluded that this is because she fears the unknown, and what the future holds.” (P5)

4.4.3 Portrayal of young adult characters: *Dear Mr. Kilmer*

In *Dear Mr. Kilmer*, participants unanimously agreed that the young adult protagonist Richard was portrayed as someone who had to struggle between standing firm to his own beliefs and pleasing others. Despite this conflict between what he believed to be true and fitting in with society, the participants agreed that Richard’s growth into maturity was evident. The positive resolution in the novel was also favourably received.

“Richard on the other hand was quite easy to relate to. Feeling isolated and alienated for his own beliefs and stance, I think, is something a lot of young adults relate to”. P4

“I have felt that way before. Sometimes I dare not speak up about what I truly believe in. But Richard did and though it was sad in the end, somehow Richard came out victorious”. P6

5. Discussion and Implications

The findings of this study showed that out of all the three novels studied, *Captain Nobody* was the least favoured choice. Participants were put off by the cover of the novel itself, which features a little boy in a superhero costume. The fact of the protagonist being a 10-year-old boy was another factor adding to their disapproval of the novel as reading choice for young adults. Although they admired the independent spirit portrayed by the protagonist, they felt that the events and descriptions in the novel were ‘unreal’ and did not relate to young adults generally.

On the other hand, the other two novels were looked at favourably in this regard, as the participants noted that the protagonists for *Sing to the Dawn* and *Dear Mr. Kilmer* by were young adults. In *Sing to the Dawn* and *Dear Mr. Kilmer*, the hesitation, insecurity, and growth shown in the protagonists’ journeys throughout the novel mirrored the voices of young adults, and this rang true for most participants who could relate to them. This adds weight to previous findings that point towards YAL being defined by the identification of young adult readers with the characters and events in what they are reading. (Groenke et al., 2015; Stephens, 2007).

As for the themes and events in the novels, all three classified as young adult novels in the sense that they showcased protagonists’ mental and emotional maturity. All three novels discussed familial love, friendship, and touched on issues such as bullying and peer pressure. In *Sing to the Dawn*, education, female empowerment, misogyny, and financial hardship were among the issues present in the novel, making it the most favourable one out of the three. *Dear Mr. Kilmer* comes in second, where the vulnerability Richard showcased was deemed relatable for the participants as they were growing up, despite not being raised in the same era or country. *Captain Nobody* was also relevant in this regard, as the issues discussed in typical young adult literature were present in the novel. However, participants noted their dissatisfaction on how the novel brought up serious issues, only to brush them aside for comic relief.

The portrayal of the young adult characters in *Sing to the Dawn* and *Dear Mr. Kilmer* were believable, as they displayed mental and emotional maturity. What is perhaps, a missing element in all three novels, were detailed descriptions of appearances and mannerisms young adults usually display in young adult literature. The inner conflict between independence and dependence was also mentioned by the participants, as present in all three novels.

In summary, the findings from the study confirm previous studies that indicate young adult readers are more drawn towards books that they can identify with in terms of characters, themes and issues. (Cart, M. 2001, Hopper, R. 2006). The presence of YAL elements in novels therefore is a definite factor to encourage continued engagement and reading interest of young adult readers. The findings have significant implications to text selection in Malaysian secondary schools to sustain young adult students’ interest in reading.

6. Conclusion

In conclusion, although elements of YAL were present in all three novels, the absence of a young adult protagonist in the center of the plot in *Captain Nobody* strongly influenced the participants’ opinion of the novel. While more serious discussion and thought revolved the other two novels in terms of themes and portrayal of the young adult protagonists, *Captain Nobody* was often treated a little dismissively as being somewhat too ‘juvenile’ for their consideration. A limitation of this study was that it only reported the perspectives of students from a similar young adult age range. Further research could be done with respondents from different young adulthood age groups and backgrounds. These findings can contribute to future curriculum development and material selection in Malaysian ESL classrooms.

7. Co-Author Contribution

The authors affirmed that there is no conflict of interest in this article. Author1 carried out the field work, prepared the literature review, wrote the research methodology and overlooked

the writeup of the whole article. Author2 and Author3 carried out the analysis, interpreted the findings and presented the implications.

8. Acknowledgments

This work was supported by the Internal Research Grant provided by UNITAR International University, Malaysia.

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