Girls in Text: Information of Girlhood in Young Adult Literature

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Abstract

Girlhood is a constructed concept that is brought into existence through representations in a variety of media. This paper examines how young adult literature contributes to the construction of girlhood. As a medium whose stated audience is young adults YA literature is still mediated by adult gatekeepers and therefore still represents cultural constructs of adolescence as understood by adult concerns. Therefore it is worthy of problematizing the representations YA literature present. This paper uses feminist theory to examine how current dominant narratives of girlhood are represented in a selection of texts published post-2014. While patriarchal cultural expectations still figure prominently in narratives of at-risk girls and mean girls in the literature a shift in more openly feminist narratives are beginning to interrogate the limits of those narratives and challenge dominant power hierarchies in explicit ways.
Keywords: girlhood; young adult literature; feminism

1.1. Introduction

Catherine Driscoll (2002) reminds us, "Girls are brought into existence in statements and knowledge" (p.5). These statements are produced and shaped by media. Therefore, representations of girls in media including film, television, journalism and music shape our cultural knowledge of girls. It is how we form a narrative of girlhood. However, these representations are primarily mediated through adults who have the power to constitute institutions and produce narrative through mass media (Griffin, 2004; Lesko & Talburt, 2012).

In constructing girlhood adults present it as a narrative of *other*. Girls, are not us, even if we have been.

Young Adult literature is often positioned as a reflection of authentic youth voice and experience. Using defining languages such as "coming of age" and with references to "becoming" (Alsop, 2016) YA literature is seen as emic to youth experience. The assumption it is a representation of "authentic" experience, a *window, mirror*, and *map* of girlhood. It is however still a medium that is mediated through adults – authors, publishers, and other gatekeepers. In this way it contributes to the narratives of girlhood that are adult narratives, and the girlhood may not be authentic.

1.2. Statement of Research Problem

By interacting (reading/responding) Young Adult literature girls may understand and make sense of their role and place in the world. Therefore, YA literature impacts how readers conceptualize and understand girlhood, and may provide insight and models into girls' experience, or may perpetuate narratives of girlhood that are narrow and otherizing.

Issues that have concerned researchers regarding girls' experiences such as body image, gender performances, sexuality and identity have been studied when represented in other media, such as advertising, movies, television, and music (Attwood, 2007; Bae, 2011; Gill, Porfido, & Ryan-Flood, 2009; Harris, 2004; Trites, 2004). And yet a medium considered to be primarily for teens, with an assumed emic position has not grappled with the narratives of girlhood that emerge in a broad sense. This paper begins asking: what are the narratives of girlhood in Young Adult literature? And more importantly how might they shape girls' own understandings of girlhood?

1.3. Literature Review

Girl's experiences are diverse, and while dominant discourses emerge they are generalizations, not absolutes (Currie, Kelley, & Pomerantz, 2009; Driscoll, 2002, Harris, 2004). And yet there are particular girlhood narratives including sad girls, bad girls, mean girls, smart girls that shape how we talk about what it means to be a girl (Brown, 2011; Pomerantz & Raby, 2017; Wiseman, 2002). The sad girl that Brown (2011) identifies is an outgrowth of the at-risk girl popularized in the 1990s as Ophelia in Reviving Ophelia: Saving the Lives of Adolescent Girls (Pipher, 1994). This girl is at risk for behaviors related to low self-esteem such as eating disorders, cutting, lower school grades, etc. Programs related to combatting the loss of self-esteem that led to risky behaviors led to girl power programs. Girls were encouraged to develop their own voices, to be independent (Currie, Kelley, & Pomerantz, 2009, Taft, 2004).

In the early 2000s a different narrative emerged, that of the mean girl (Simmons, 2003; Wiseman, 2002) which was further popularized in a movie: Mean Girls (2004). Mean girls were relational bullies; they ostracized peers, spread rumors, and deployed their own social power to maintain popularity. As mean girls became more of a common belief regarding girlhood news media shifted to focus more acutely on violence among (white) girls, despite two specific critiques. The first critique is despite sensationalistic news stories about girl fights in places like the white suburbs of Chicago and Florida actual data of rising violence among girls does not support this narrative (Brown, 2011). The second is that we use policy based on cultural assumptions treat girls of color different which creates different narratives. Girls of color are ignored in the mean girl narrative and are more often constructed as bad girls (Brown, 2011), more violent and prone to committing crime (again a myth not a reality). Further sexuality is constructed within bad girl narratives and complicated with the over-sexualization of girls of

color (Brown, 2011: Orenstein, 2016; Weekes, 2004). Therefore, there are two narratives – white girls are mean girls, girls of color are bad girls – which has specific concerns related to the justice system.

With all the focus on girls – creating opportunities for success, developing self-esteem, and providing tools for coping with social bullying a new girl narrative has more recently emerged. This girl is successful academically, she is participating in extracurricular activities, she is kind and has friends without being considered a popular mean girl. Pomerantz and Raby (2017) document this narrative in Smart Girls: Success, School, and the Myth of Post-Feminism. Harris (2004) has identified it as the "can do" girl and Brown (2016) highlights the neoliberal aspect of individualism which isolates girls from their communities. This narrative has critique as well as these girls are facing undue pressure for success and are not recognized within a collective.

Girlhood narratives – girls at risk, mean girls, bad girls, and smart girls who are the teenage version of women who have it all – dominate our media images of girls despite a lack of complexity of the narratives.

These narratives are reproduced in young adult literature (Hill, 2016; Trites, 2004) as we will explore below. As such they reproduce and inform girlhood (Day, 2013). In (re)producing girlhood YA literature lays bare power structures related to adult interests (Day, 2013; Ma'ayan, 2012; Seifert, 2015; Trites, 2004). However, as readers girls' construction of their subjectivity while they are interacting with stories requires them as readers to negotiate their own understanding of the girlhood as represented in YA literature (Day, 2013; Ma'ayan, 2012). A close examination of those narratives, how they fit within current knowledge systems inform our teaching, youth literacy development and girls' identity development (Day, 2013; Hill, 2015;

Ma'ayan, 2012). Therefore, understanding recent girlhood narratives in young adult literature provides insight into teaching, supporting, and mentoring young women who interact with these texts.

1.4. Methodology

Using both feminist theory, and current narratives regarding girlhood this study is a content analysis of a sampling of texts published post-2014. The time bounding is significant as in 2014 Emma Watson delivered a speech to the U.N. on gender equality and Beyonce took the stage in front of the word *feminist* marking a cultural turn in which prominent popular figures openly engaged in conversations regarding gender equality. The changed some of the discourse around girlhood empowering young women, encouraging them to claim a label of feminist. As our culture shifts to openly discuss gender equality, rape culture, the impact of the patriarchy on our systems media reflects this shift.

1.4.1. Theoretical Lens

I approach the analysis of girlhood through a feminist standpoint. Standpoint theory suggests that "knowledge is constructed in a specific matrix of physical location, history, culture, and interests" (Sprague, 2005, 41). Narratives are socio-culturally constructed and cannot exist in a vacuum. Feminist standpoint theory acknowledges and concerns itself with the "distortions created by power imbalances due to gender, race/ethnicity, class, and nation" (Sprague, 2005, 53). It assumes that power guides what is valued as knowledge (Crotty, 1998; Sprague, 2005) and that knowledge is constructed into a narrative. There are two assumptions that influence my data collection and analysis. The first is that we live in a patriarchal culture in which power rests with men, allowing them to shape narratives through institutions including media. The second assumption is that age is a part of identity in which youth are outside power structures. This

implies that a power imbalance exists when adults control and perpetuate structural institutions in a manner that others youth (Harris 2004; Woo 2012). In a patriarchal culture (assumption 1), gender-based power imbalances inform and contribute to narratives of girlhood (assumption 2) and these are further complicated by issues related to race and class (Currie et al. 2009; Driscoll 2002; Harris 2004).

1.4.2. Data Collection

Narratives of girlhood were developed through a literature review spanning almost thirty years which covered both second and third wave feminism, as well as resulting backlashes. While second wave feminism tended to ignore the girl (Currie, Kelley, & Pomerantz, 2009; Driscoll, 2002; Lotz. 2007) it still impacted how girlhood was constructed (Lotz, 2007; Pipher, 1994) encouraging a long-term vision of girlhood narratives. While there are other versions of girlhoods, particularly documented by Currie, Kelley, & Pomerantz, dominant narratives emerged in the literature review. The themes were echoed in popular media through narrative nonfiction works for adults, journalistic think pieces, news stories, episodes of talk shows, and in fictional universes represented in film and television (even popular music, mean girls was successfully mined by P!nk in multiple songs).

In addition to identifying common narratives of girlhood feminist issues of interest to girls were identified. This occurred through two processes: 1. a scan of cultural conversation via social media including memes, blogs, and news stories on sites such as Jezebel, Feministing, and the now-defunct Toast and 2. observation of a zine club working on an issue with the theme of Feminism. Emergent in these two areas were concerns regarding bodily autonomy such as dress codes, rape culture including harassment, assault, and male complaints regarding "friend

zoning", sexual health and education, peer relationships, and identity management. These issues were identified in order to guide selection of Young Adult texts.

1.4.3. Text Selection

Initial texts were selected through reviewing best seller lists in the New York Times and Amazon, award nominations such as the National Book Award and the Printz Award, and online lists of feminist YA texts. Additionally, a scan of recently published titles that centered on issues identified as feminist issues suggested titles beyond the above criteria. Attention was paid to copyright and only texts published post-2014 are included in this analysis. Texts in this paper are representative and do not represent the full scope of material that was initially or even secondarily read.

1.4.4. Data Analysis

Initial readings of texts established the broad narratives of the representation of girls. Quotes were highlighted, and notes were made regarding the feminist issues that were reflected in the text. In second close reads for analysis the follow questions were considered:

- Who is the girl? What is the representation of girlhood that is presented?

- How does the text reinforce or subvert narratives (stereotype) of girlhood?

- How does the text address issues of concern to young feminists in ways that provide diverse representation of girls' experiences (thereby addressing girlhood narratives)?

Summaries and analysis were written as exploratory memos and then revisited as the scope of the texts analyzed expanded, allowing for emergent themes of girlhood in YA to shift, grow, and develop.

1.5. Narratives of Girlhood Represented in YA

1.5.1. Good Girls/Smart Girls

Good girls are not uncommon YA literature. They are represented as good students who rarely get in trouble (in fact good girls in YA closely resemble the smart girl narrative outlined by Pomerantz and Raby (2017)). They are well liked, but not popular per se, with a small circle of friends. They often have part time jobs or are active in extra-curricular activities, get along with their parents and family- mostly, and do not exhibit typical at-risk behavior in terms of limiting alcohol (if at all), no drugs, little sex, healthy body image, and no self-harm. They are commonly thought of as typical high school girls. And yet they set expectations of girlhood as heteronormative, middle class, usually white. Most commonly found in romances good girls are likable narrators.

There are authors who specialize in good girl narrators: Sarah Dessen, Morgan Matson, Jenny Han, Huntly Fitzpatrick. These are girls who primarily are navigating romantic relationships, although other conflicts involve loss of a friend, or changes in circumstance. They are primarily white, suburban, and upper middle class. Since fiction is built on conflict a closer look suggests difficulties for good girls. These difficulties range from navigating a culture that has expectations of heteronormative couplehood with a message that girls receive of needing to be independent and "strong" – in other words strong female characters – while still being "nice". For girls of color good girls face a different definition and must traverse cultural boundaries highlighting the ways intersectionality has impact on girlhood narratives.

In the 2017 title The Upside of Unrequited Becky Albertalli introduces Molly. Molly is the quiet twin, a satellite to Cassie and her whirling social life and many loves. She struggles with her own image of herself, worries she will always be alone, and in a text that is matter of

fact about sex and sexual identity she is the girl without a partner. As good girls have boyfriends this conflict with notions of "strong females" is something Molly explicitly struggles with. In this awareness of "I spend a lot of time thinking about love and kissing and boyfriends and all the other stuff feminists aren't supposed to care about" (p. 91) Molly acknowledges the impact of feminist narratives on her experience of being a girl.

Vivian, the protagonist of Moxie, another good girl, shares:

> *Girls who try not to stand out. Girls who have secret crushes they'll never act*
>
> *on. Girls who sit quietly in class and earn decent grades and hope they won't*
>
> *be called on to explain the symbolism in line 12 of a poem. So, like, nice, girls.*

Good girls are not angry, they do not challenge the status quo. Moxie is about girls standing up, about using their voice to challenge the patriarchy.   Being a girl who wants to be strong and fight the culture and having a boyfriend causes conflict. When Vivian begins to find her voice through an anonymous zine her first boyfriend, Seth, is aware of her activities. At one point Seth articulates a #notallmen argument, "not all guys are dicks" but she considers:

> *"he can't ever know what it feels like to walk down a hallway and know*
>
> *you're getting judged for the size of your ass or how big your boobs are. He'll*
>
> *never understand what it's like to second guess everything you wear and how*
>
> *you sit and walk and stand."*

It is this awareness that Vivian tries to manage without losing Seth while still standing up, and ultimately how to be a good girl. Both Moxie and The Upside of Unrequited demonstrate a shift in allowing girls to acknowledge a perceived tension in how to be a good girl and how to be a feminist.

The recent emphasis on a need for representation in YA literature has also provided voices that represent the intersectionality of girlhood and the tension between cultures for girls of color and how we define good girl. Two titles exploring themes of what it means to be a good girl in Latinx culture are Gabi, A Girl in Pieces (Quintero, 2014) and I Am Not Your Perfect Mexican Daughter (Sanchez, 2017).

Gabi, who wants to be a writer, struggles with her mother's expectations:

> *She says that a nice young woman does not expose her thoughts like that to the*
> *public. That writing is something that only men should do, like going to*
> *college. She still hasn't wrapped her head around the fact that I am going to*
> *college (I hope). (Loc 1800)*

Julia, the non-perfect Mexican daughter, struggles similarly:

> *"That's not how I want to live Am`a.' I'm not sure if I'm supposed to speak but*
> *I can't help it. "I'm sorry that I'm not Olga and I never will be. I love you, but*
> *I want a different life for myself. I don't want to stay home. I don't know if I*
> *ever want to get married or have kids. I want to go to school. I want to see the*
> *world. I want so many things sometimes I can't even stand it. I feel like I'm*
> *going to explode." (p. 290)*

Good girl for Latinas looks different than for white middle-class girls.

This is also true for Dimple and Maya – both Indian-American protagonists. Dimple wants independence, and to find success in a career, and avoid the plans her mother has for her: wife, mother. Maya is similar:

> *"No suitable boy will marry you if you can't cook."*

"Counting on it," I whisper to myself. (p. 21)

While all four of these protagonists are good girls by the definitions of our good girl/smart girl narrative in American culture, as Americans they also struggle with generational cultural pressure that honors their family's culture that has different definitions of good girl.

The capacity of literature to explore interior lives allows the good/smart girl narrative to be challenged in that it exposes uncertainty, and the limits of an assumed girlhood identity. While good girls are represented in the literature with regularity, emergent titles explore the complexity of these representations. Still for these four books I could identify even more that promote the need for conformity by punishing behavior of girls who walk beyond the limits of what we identify as good – the good student, likable, with friends she is nice to, and who does not participate in "at-risk" activities like sex, drugs, and yes, rock and roll. Still narratives of good girls in YA can be more complex than media narratives of good girls.

1.5.2. Mean Girls/Bad Girls

Mean girls who commit relational aggression using popularity are not often the protagonist in YA, they are secondary characters or antagonists. When they are the protagonist it is set up for reform (Example: Before I Die, Lauren Oliver). However, the more extreme mean girl, the girl who commits violence, who acts physically on rage has found voice in YA – both in contemporary fiction and fantasy, including dystopian fiction. As with good girl/smart girls the nature of the medium, the exploration of interiority allows for a complex reading of girls who can be cast either as mean girls, or bad girls. While it may be hard to call these characters "likable" that they exist with edge, sarcasm, rage and have back story that exposes the root of their actions it forces a reader past simplified notions.

In What a Girls Are Made Of (Arnold, 2016) Nina has achieved and lost what she wants – she commits an act of cyberbullying against a girl she finds threatening – who is nice, beautiful, and desired by the boy Nina desires. While at first this gives her that desire it is eventually taken away from her. In her author's note Elena Arnold writes:

It [sugar and spice] reads to me now as a warning rather than as an assessment. It's an imperative: to be a girl, one must be sweet and delicious. One must be made entirely of everything nice. There is no room in girlhood (and, perhaps femaleness) for anything else. (p. 185)

And she creates a character who is none of those things, but who is desperate and pained; obsessed both with her ex-boyfriend and with the pain women endure.

"As long as there have been women…there have been ways to punish them for being women" (p. 156).

While Nina is difficult to care for, the story explores the pressure of needing a boy/man as power, and how this is actually a weakness in a way that upends the narrative of mean girl power and exposes the limitations of the way that power is obtained.

In a book that explores both the mean girl and the bad girl Nova Ren Suma introduces two narrators: Violet – the mean girl, who once created an act of severe violence and escaped justice and Amber, the chronicler of bad girls in a juvenile detention facility. Amber as observer is the challenger of narrative of bad girl, providing context to the girls.

Maybe, long ago, we used to be good. Maybe all little girls are good in the beginning. There might even be pictures of us from those early days, when we wore braids and colorful barrettes, and played in sandboxes and on swing sets,

if we knew days so easy or wore such barrettes. . . . But something happened to

us between then and now. Something threw sand in our eyes, ground it in, and

we couldn't get it out. We still can't. (p 155)

And while Violet fits this narrative (*Keep that good girl mask on and on one will be able to see past it to the bad, unstable girl inside. At least they never did with me.* (Suma, 2015 p. 70)) she has escaped because she is upper middle class, because she is white, and because she can look innocent. The intersection of class and race in how we understand the difference between mean girl and bad girl and who we are willing to believe is the underlying truth that is at the core of Violet's crime, and ultimate justice. For all our diverse books and emergent girl of color narrators this remains under represented in YA, the intersection of race (class, less so) in how narratives of mean girl and bad girl are tied to cultural myths.

1.5.3. Sad Girls/At Risk Girls

In 1999 Laurie Halse Anderson published Speak, which has become canon in YA literature, so much so that in 2018 a graphic novel version of the original title was released. Melinda of Speak is a model of the Ophelia's introduced into mainstream consciousness by Mary Pipher (1994), explicitly in the ways Melinda is both a victim and in the manner she responds to this with silence. While Melinda is an example that those familiar with YA will immediately recognize the sad girl, the girl who

grows up in a hostile cultural climate that is oppressive to females, sexually

charged, and dangerous, circumstances that beak them of their pre-teen

confidence and splinter their authentic selves into subservient, depressed, and

alienated versions of the self (Brown, 2011, p.111)

is perhaps the most recognizable girlhood in YA literature.

In the past four-five years conversations about the "hostile cultural climate" have given name to a culture and engaged in mainstream debate about the climate -ranging from rape culture conversations stemming from national cases such as an assault, social media spreading, and cover-up in Stuebenville, Ohio or the conviction and resulting six month sentence levied against Brock Turner for a rape (excused by the judge because of his prowess as a swimmer) to the #metoo movement in 2017-18 identifying and naming those who commit sexual harrassment, assault, etc. This has had impact on the Ophelia narrative in YA literature providing a few titles that address this culture with girls willing to challenge the status quo. Titles such as Moxie (Matthieu, 2017) (mentioned above) and The Nowhere Girls (Reed, 2017) explore girls coming together to give voice to their need for safety and autonomy and to battle the rape culture/patriarchal structures of their community.

> *When Rosina, Grace and Erin emerge, blinking from Chief Delaney's office,*
> *the station erupts in an explosion of sound. The three girls try to figure out*
> *where all the noise is coming from. What is all the cheering? Girls' voices*
> *bounce off walls and ceiling and floor, gathering momentum, gaining speed,*
> *crashing into one another (Reed, 2017, p, 397-98).*

In both Moxie and The Nowhere Girls the coming together, at first anonymously, and then publically to give voice to girls is the penultimate moment in the text, as is Melinda fighting Andy in the closet allowing her to say on the final page "Let me tell you about it" (Anderson, 2018). YA literature's Ophelias are about finding their voice, about speaking up. This is both the structure of fiction (conflict and resolution), the coming-of-age aspect of YA through character growth, and the interiority of fiction that explores emotion in ways difficult in other

mediums. The difference in Moxie and The Nowhere Girls from say Speak in both formats is the collective voice of girls – the coming together particularly in a non-hierarchal fashion.

The above focuses primarily on rape culture, and the risk girls find themselves in within that culture – it is also represented in Sydney from Saint Anything (Dessen, 2015) who is fending off an older boy in her home who gives comfort to her mother who is dealing with Sydney's brother's addiction, crime, and conviction. It is represented in Alice in The Truth About Alice (Mathieu, 2014) who is the victim of sexual rumors and harassment. By Romy in All the Rage (Summers, 2015) who uses makeup as armor, and isolates herself after being shunned for reporting. And in the rage and violence of Alex in The Female of the Species (McGinnis, 2016) who actively responds to predators of girls. It is perhaps the most common risk the at-risk girl faces. But in more recent text the girls act with agency that is focused outward and towards finding voice rather than through self-destructive behaviors such as cutting or eating disorders more common in titles from the turn of the millennium. (Which isn't to say that Romy, and particularly Alex don't engage in self-destructive behaviors).

1.6. Discussion and Implications

In stories we explore who we are. Through reading we interact with inner dialogues that represent, interrogate, and challenge existing narratives. This is the opportunity, and sometimes the risk of Young Adult literature. Do the themes, the stories reflect adult narratives, concerns, and stagnant memory of their own youth? Or do they challenge narratives, provide space for readers to explore information that shapes their own understanding of the world? Confirming that girls experience the information in YA as reflection, or challenge of cultural narrative requires recognizing what narratives of girlhood are represented and how so that we can discuss stories in the context of their culture.

Day (2013) writes, "the cultural expectations and demands associated with young people, particularly young women, shape the ways that readers approach and understand messages within literature" (p. 22). In YA literature narratives of girlhood are reproduced for adolescent readers, but the nature of fiction allows for problematizing popular narratives, producing empathy and understanding through the demonstration of complexity and exploration of girls' interior lives. Recent titles have reflected a cultural shift to naming and calling out how patriarchal constructs are impacting women and girls, and how women and girls have responded through a coming together of cultural voice – from #yesallmen to #blacklivesmatter to #metoo to #neveragain girls have amplified each other's voices. In doing so they have challenge good girl narratives of quiet, hardworking, smart girls who fit within the patriarchal narrative while still achieving success – trying to grow into a woman who is a version of super mom, having it all. And they expose the ways they find power in mean girl narratives, through boys and heteronormative practices. And they give space to recovery and strength in the sad girl.

1.7. Conclusion

Despite the titles discussed here that reach for intersectionality, that challenge traditional narratives of girlhood, that provide a map to finding voice and power in the collective there are still many titles that reinforce narratives of girlhood that inhibit girls. Narratives related to sexual activity tend to promote abstinence (Seifert) or needing to be in love (Harlan). Girls are still primarily required to be likable narrators (Summers). If stories provide information that assist us in developing identity (Day) and empathy then we need to identify and evaluate that information.

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