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## **The Other and its Representation in Iranian Young Adult Novels**

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### **Abstract**

The present paper focusing on different types of “other”, examines the representation of otherness in selected Iranian young adult fiction. Most theorists contend that the binary opposition between adolescents and adults lies on the assumption of the otherness of the young. In this view, the adolescent is ascribed “otherness” in a network of power relations. However, the adolescent should not be understood only in opposition to the adult; rather, the indirect influence of power hierarchies and families should be taken into account. The adolescent, in turn, does exert influence not only on the adult but also on power relations and hierarchies. The image of the adolescent in Iranian young adult fiction is diametrically different from the reality of the experience of the youth. While most world young adult fictions tend to highlight dialogism, disindividualized perception of power, and celebrate ethnic and racial difference, and de-marginalization of the previously oppressed groups, the inclination to repress the voice of the young adults in Iranian works makes those type of fictions ‘othered’ and peripheral for young audiences. Iranian young adult fiction has rarely addressed the question of the other except in cases centering on poverty and people in the periphery of cities (in the countries) or those in villages. While there has been a recent surge of fiction dealing with issues of gender, ethnic, racial otherness, special diseases, and child labor, more creative and dialogic work remains to be done with regard to otherness caused by religion, illness, and child labor in order to truly give voice to the adolescents.

**Keywords:** Self, Other, Otherness, Adolescent, Adult, Cultural Semiotics, Young Adult Novel

### Introduction

Young adult literature, especially the novel, in Iran has undergone much change in the last decade of the twentieth century. However, the attention paid to the young does not necessarily mean that works produced in this field have truly given an independent voice to the adolescent. In a culture where power is still understood in its conventional form, legitimizing and giving voice to adolescents have had the adverse effect of more marginalization and othering them. In this period, a great number of creative and avant-garde works in different genres under the general rubric of “young adult fiction” was produced by the second-generation writers of Iran, for example, Farhad Hasanzadeh, Ahmad Akbarpour, Jamshid Khanian, Fereydu Amouzadeh Khalili, Hamidreza Shahabadi, Mohammadreza Shams and others. They all entered the new realms of children’s and Young Adult literature.

A look at the history of young adult fiction in Iran shows that the adolescent-adult relationship in these works has changed so much so that one could speak of a discursive paradigm shift in the last decade. While it is too strong a claim to say that the young have found their voice in contemporary fiction, the adolescent-adult relationship has been depicted more realistically to the effect that the adolescent is not relegated to a state of complete alterity vis-à-vis the “powerful” adult anymore. Most of the major contemporary Iranian young-adult fiction writers have tried to represent the youth subjectivity and culture, filling the gap in previous works, which had failed to do so. More specifically, these writers have dealt with the precarious state of youth subjectivity, e.g., young ethnic minorities. However, the assumed opposition between the adolescent and the adult has remained a running motif, which can be interpreted as the result of ideological pressures of the dominant culture over other subcultures. In such a view, “adolescence is an othered subjectivity. The adolescent himself or herself lives in a state of otherness: abjected from the cleanliness of the social body and continually acted upon by the structures of power that surround him or her, so s/he is not fully empowered. Campbell states adolescents usually have a lower position than the adults. They exist on the periphery of a web of power relations (35).

At any rate, the conflict between the young adult and the adult in determining the borders of self and other plays a pivotal role in literature, hence it requires further study. In this case, the complex word “power” is the key in analyzing the young-adult relationship. According to Roberta Seelinger Trites, young adult fiction reflects power conflicts more than any other genre:

The crux of defining adolescent literature as distinct from children’s literature revolves around the issue of power. While growth in children’s literature is depicted as a function of what the character has learned about self, growth in adolescent literature is depicted as a function of what the adolescent learns about how society curtails power. The adolescent cannot grow without experiencing gradations between power and powerlessness. Consequently, power is even more fundamental to the genre than growth is. (Seelinger Trites 472)

This paper addresses the question of “otherness” in young adult fiction with a focus on representative Iranian YA novels, which narrate the young-adult relation. In studying the assumed opposition between the two, and sidestepping the current power relations in the field, my aim has not been to underline the conflict, but rather to suggest ways in which a dialogic relationship could be thought of between the young and the adult, something similar to intercultural dialogue. The growth of communication media has increasingly transformed the concept of youth and in so doing has led to the misguided assumption on the side of the adults that perhaps the “decadent” youth culture is not understandable altogether. More than often, adults compare their own youth with the contemporary young generation in a nostalgic manner. Even some writers project their own views and desires on how a youth subjectivity should be. “However, an adult author can no better wholly take the child’s side than a white author can wholly take a black character’s side or male author wholly take a female character’s side” (Nikolajeva 49). She believes that it is impossible to fully acknowledge otherness; that is, the adult fiction writer would fail in understanding the unique experience of the adolescent from the latter’s own perspective. As she

remarks: "The ideology that the novels convey is apparently based on alterity, the authors' perception of their protagonists as the other. Here we have once again the inevitable dilemma of writing for young audiences, the unequal power position between sender and recipient"(120). She argues, "Writing from disempowered perspective, **women authors have vaster experience of alterity** and can show more solidarity with a young character as such, and can show an opposite-gender narrator in particular" (137). Given this, one feels the need for young adult fiction to work as a bridge for negotiating the experiences of the adolescent and the adult. Explaining the parameters of adolescent-adult relations in fiction could facilitate the process of mutually dialogic understanding.

Similar to most theoretical approaches to literature in Iran, an investigation of the problem of self/other in young adult fiction is a new topic, as a look at previous studies would testify, e.g., Izadpanah, Aghapour, Khalifi, and Arameshfard. Among the excess of various philosophical, sociological, and psychological theories of selfhood/otherness, the present study has been inspired by Mikhail Bakhtin's theories and cultural semiotics for its theoretical underpinnings.

According to Bakhtin, one can understand the self only from the perspective of the other. Hermeneutically speaking, the process of understanding something is similar to the appropriation of the other. The other is the source of the existence of the self; the self is not able to recognize its own corporality in the absence of the other; facing oneself becomes possible through the mirror of the other. The culture of the other reveals features of the self's culture; however, intercultural dialogue does not necessarily mean empathic understanding. According to Bakhtin, the production of meaning is the result of interaction.

Cultural semiotics is "a study of the models conceivably brought to bear on the interrelationship of cultures" (Sonesson 538). As he argues,

Canonical model is built around opposition between Nature and Culture.... Nature is defined from the point of view of Culture, not the opposite. According to the canonical model, every Culture conceives of itself as order, opposed to something on the outside, which is seen as

Chaos, disorder, and Barbarism, in other words, as Culture opposed to Nature. In this sense Nature will include other Cultures, not recognized as such by the cultural model.... Textuality is relative to a center. (538-539)

Something which is considered a text in one culture might be called a non-text in another; textuality is defined in relation to a centre. In other words, each culture deems itself systematic and ordered while looking at things beyond its border as chaotic and barbaric (i.e., culture vs. nature). Accordingly, nature includes other different cultures that have not been identified by the canonical cultural model.

Acknowledging cultural otherness and thinking in terms of a semiospheres are some of the ways in which intercultural dialogue becomes possible. The model of cultural other, which I have used in this essay, emphasizes the role of empathic understanding as the key for overcoming obstacles in intercultural dialogue. Cultural texts are produced and circulated at the center of a semiosphere. Outside the semiosphere, there is chaos, disorder, and threat. However, the dialogue between the inside and the outside might lead to new cultural productions (Darzi & Pakatchi 33).

### **Types of Otherness**

The concept of otherness has various meanings in different literary and cultural contexts and can be studied in different types, e.g. ethnic, gendered, racial, and religious otherness. The subject of otherness has been addressed in various ways in Iranian young adult fiction. Most of otherness types are either absent from the fictional world or hardly represented in their multiplicity. In my view, those types of otherness which are more ideological and resist dominant political and religious discourses are either underrepresented or distorted as to fit the ideological frame. The other "is used invidiously to name the way a hegemonic culture or gender group views different and subaltern ones as exotic or inferior or just plain alien, and therefore as something it would be a good idea to erase or assimilate by some form, overtly violent or not, of ethnic cleansing... [The other is]"something

different, an element of the “completely other” that inhabits even the most familiar and apparently “same” (Miller 1).

### **Sexual and Religious Others**

As a result of censorship, Sexual and religious others have never had the chance to be represented in Iranian young adult fiction and are assumed as null themes. While religious literature published on a small scale may deal with the issue, I am more concerned with the dominant and canonical works enjoying a large audience, published in the country. It should be mentioned that given Iran’s cultural diversity, representatives of minorities may be present in literary works, but in reality, they do not have a distinctive voice because they are not allowed to speak for their own ideologies, and are instead made to conform to the dominant discourses. Iranians living in border areas, most of whom are Sunni, would usually be underrepresented in literary works. For example, the young adult novel *The Restored* by Anousheh Monadi depicts Iraqi-Kurdish adolescents during the Iran-Iraq war. The Iraqi-Kurdish are Sunnis, but this is not clarified in the book; instead, the emphasis is on Shi’ite religion, the dominant discourse, as the common ground. Following the war, the adolescents in this novel, who have lost their homes, are made to stay in war camps and say their prayers the way Shi’ite Muslims do. Here, it is obvious that the other is homogenized into the self’s domain and hence the possibility of cultural diversity is reduced.

One of the writers, who has depicted Zoroastrianism in his works with a sense of reverence, although sometimes biased, is Arman Arian. The mythic themes of his works seem to give Arian the opportunity to deal with the issue dialogically. However, in practice, the references to Zoroastrianism turn out to be stereotypical, uttered blatantly by the narrator, which works against the literariness of the novel. Arian’s trilogy, *Ashvazdangaheh*, which narrates the story of a wandering eternal man in history, shows the writer’s interest in prophet Zoroaster.

### **Ethnic and Racial Other**

In comparison to other types, ethnic and racial otherness have had a less silenced presence in Iranian Young Adult literature. Different ethnicities in Iran, e.g., Turk, Baluch, Arab, and Turkmen, have been depicted in works written for children and young adults. In the following, I refer to some examples and then discuss *The Tumultuous Plain* by Ali Akbar Kermaninejad in details.

*Wake Me Up When the War Ends* by Abbas Jahangirian represents the lives of Arabs living in southern Iran, who following the Iran-Iraq war, are now homeless. These people are condescendingly called “war-stricken Arabs” (Arab-e jangzadeh) by some other characters. *Nahi* by Jamshid Khaniani depicts black slaves living in the south of Iran. Because of her thick lips and black skin, Dade Bambasi is not regarded the same as other villagers. She finds a baby at seaside and decides to save her. For seven years, there is no rainfall and people consider the seven-year-old girl, Nahi a cursed creature and the cause of drought and famine. She is later expelled from the village and lives with Dade Bambasi on the outskirts of the village. Although Nahi forms a relationship with the granddaughter of village’s reeve, Liva, nothing changes about their position. Blacks are often looked at as the “other” in the southern Iran even if they are rich; the local people hardly marry them; thus, everything related to them, may be unpleasant other. Naser Yousefi’s *Another Journey* narrates the story of gypsies in Iran while *The Monster’s Shadow* by Jahangirian deals with the traditional customs of Turkmen, especially with regard to Young girls’ marriage.

*The Tumultuous Plain* is a science-fiction novel which narrates the adventures of Kakaei, a Baluch wealthy boy, who is trying to save his father, the thane of Baluchestan, but who eventually falls into the trap some drug trafficker thanes have plotted against him. The novel’s hero symbolizes the new Baluch identity, a marginalized ethnic group with very orthodox customs. Kakaei tries to change these traditions by inserting his own agency into the cultural sphere. He embarks on a series of dangerous adventures. Despite his reluctance, he is helped by fantastic creatures, and is finally successful in carrying out his mission. Once in the story, when the fantastic

creatures ask him to murder his own sister, who is possessed by evil forces, Kakaei resists the temptation and relies on kindness and the power of a common language between them, to save her.

One of Kakaei's guides is an old man called Eiduk, who turns out to be his father's half-brother. Eiduk has been cast out from the Baluch community because of his non-Baluch mother and being a son of a slave. Having been deprived of education, he is later banned from marrying a Baluch woman. He is deemed as other and is expected to serve the Baluch people ("the better race"). The irony is that Eiduk is otherized in a community which on a broader level is itself a marginalized one. By representing this ethnic minority, the novel gives voice to the previously marginalized community, who demand more cultural recognition. The adolescent represents a new generation dealing with other cultures and trying to come over the cultural limitations of Baluches in a dialogic way. Moreover, the novel highlights another form of otherization, that is, the bitter class conflict between wealthy village lords and the children of slaves (e.g., Eiduk and Kakaei). While on the one hand, Kakaei befriends Eiduk and fights racism as he tries to resist orthodox racist behavior, on the other, he too treats Eiduk condescendingly and with a sense of self-superiority. It appears that otherization has been unconsciously internalized by Eiduk himself. One positive thing about the village thanes, despite their opposition to Kakaei, is that they treat him as a person belonging to the Baluch race and thus worthy of respect. However, best as he does in serving the village thanes, Eiduk will never be accepted as one true member of the community; he does not do anything for his own freedom and has accepted his low position.

### **Vulnerable Young Adults**

Vulnerable adolescents, especially child laborers, have always been presented in Iranian Young Adult literature. The most recurrent motif since the 1980s and 1990s is poverty. However, during these decades, the representation of the poor was under the influence of Marxist-Communist ideologies, which seem to have left their indomitable mark in the imaginative field of society. Child labor is dealt with in most of the works written by



Houshang Moradi Kermani, especially in *A Sweet Jam*, and *The Children of Textile Factory*. Similarly, as another representative work, “Two Unripe Dates” by Fereyduun Amouzadeh Khalili depicts poverty and child labor.

Another group of vulnerable adolescents is the homeless and the vagrants. This has been frequently represented in young adult fiction. Two particular novels, whose heroes are homeless adolescents, are to be mentioned in this regard. *Call Me Beautiful* by Farhad Hasanzadeh narrates the story of the protagonist Ziba (meaning beautiful) who lives in an orphanage. Her father has been sent to a mental hospital. The story begins with Ziba helping her father to escape the hospital in order to celebrate her birthday. They run away to the city. The writer includes the precarious state of adolescents in the character’s dialogues and the novel’s scenes. Ziba, having no social support herself, has to take care of her father. Dealing with this theme and the depiction of physical and mental problems caused by homelessness for a young girl appear to be a subversive move on the side of the author. In many ways, this can be interpreted as a form of “otherness”, which is at the same time a very familiar everyday experience; it gives voice to this particular social class.

Another novel which realistically represents homelessness and vagrancy is *From Her Twelve Cursed Fingers* by A’zam Mahdavi. The main character of the novel, Ava, is an orphaned adolescent, who used to live with her aunt, but decides to run away because of being maltreated. She meets Khepel<sup>1</sup>, a homeless old woman with six fingers on each hand who has escaped a care center herself. They do whatever they can to find shelter. However, they are cast out by the society. Even those who do help them find a shelter would later abuse the two characters. A mosque, which is supposed to be a safe haven for all the poor, would not welcome them for more than one night. In such a society, the female adolescent has no choice but to resort to cross-dressing. She dresses like boys, shaves her hair, and speaks like men in order to find a job. The concept of family is questioned throughout the novel, especially the rule of homogeneity and conformity. Ava decides to leave her aunt and cousins and live with the homeless people who have escaped

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<sup>1</sup> It means fat.

their past and intend to start all over. Class and cultural borders are determinative and even consanguineous people may be considered as other just because of a different culture they grew up in. In this novel, the culture defines the borders of self and other more than family relations. The story deals with a controversial subject, a serious social problem. Homelessness is becoming widespread, hence, the representation of a homeless female voice, her feelings and efforts to access education and a better life in the novel, can be understood as a constructive move in improving the condition. However, it should be noted that the author has treated the subject too idealistically. The characters of the novel are too fortunate to experience the social damages caused by homelessness. They even succeed in finding a job in a safe place. The presence of the old woman, the symbol of experience, helps Ava protect herself against some of these damages. However, Ava is too hasty in trusting the old woman. In reality, only a few run-away adolescents would have the chance to survive the dangers of homelessness. The idealistic perspective of the novel is reflected in the attempt to bring together the loneliness of characters in order to create a new coherent 'self' for them. According to Izadpanah, in most societies, identity discourses are made by means of drawing borderlines between self and other. The other becomes important for us only when we can strengthen our own sense of identity through differences. The other is reduced to something like "non-us" and is considered to have an instrumental function, while remaining beyond the borders of the self (3). Ava, the old woman, and Saeed are all cast-outs; people who are thrown beyond the borders of the self by the society. However, these three are able to form a family and create a new identity for themselves.

### **Gendered Otherness: A Model for Agent Female Adolescents**

The presence of girls and women in Iranian young adult fiction would be considered unproblematic 'other' within the parameters of the censorship system if the representation of bodies and sexualities fit the dominant ideology. This topic has been increasingly dealt with in contemporary fiction. While young female characters have always been represented in literature, the transformation of cultural and gendered discourses has made these

characters more active and subversive in contrast to previous characters who were usually passive and subservient. These young female characters transgress the dominant borders and try to subvert the center-periphery opposition. In some cases, their rebellion has a more obvious outward manifestation, e.g., Hasti, the main character of Farhad Hasanzadeh's novel, who is able to totally subvert the gender schemas. Hasti resists the semiotic and cultural sphere of the self's gender (feminine culture), and is gradually attracted to the other's culture; however, the other culture (masculine society) does not accept her as a member, and at best, considers her as a peripheral second-rate member. Her male peers call Hasti, "Mr. Hasti!" (Hasanzadeh 27). In a game of soccer, Hasti has to play the goalkeeper, where she is not considered strong enough to play other posts. While she is apparently accepted as a member, she nevertheless remains an outsider. She believes in certain gender rules, and expects the boys to respect and observe them too, while she uses boyish culture. Hasti does not return to the self's culture; rather, being on the threshold of two cultures, her new identity is formed in dialogue with two semiospheres.

In contrast, there are young female characters whose actions are directed at liberating the inner self in themselves and demarcating the borders of identity on their own loneliness. Aida in *The Midget Emperor of the Land of Lilliput* is one of the best examples of such characters. She is a highly intelligent person who reads books and lives in her own imaginative world of mind. Despite her loneliness and independence, Aida tries to interact with others as much as possible. From a Bakhtinian perspective, we could say that in the dialogic encounter of two cultures, while the two sides preserve their own identity and totality, a new synthetic identity is created, which enriches both (Ljungberg 136-7). Put differently, Aida has opened the doors of "self" to meet others. Having found a magic gift box, she goes to all the floors in the apartment she lives in, and enters into dialogue with the neighbors, who are the representatives of different cultures. She asks each of the neighbors if they could tell what is in the box. The neighbors' responses reflect their concerns and desires. Aida sympathizes with others, and helps them feel brave and self-assured. Meanwhile, she is able to free herself from the mental limitations

and achieves an inner freedom and independence. Unlike Hasti, she is not pretentious and does not resist obviously. She trusts her own abilities and whenever her parents place limitations against her wishes, Aida quietly ignores or resists them. Against her parents' wishes, she goes to the grocery herself, buys fruits, and even convinces her father to participate in English class. Not caring much about the adults, she lives in her own imaginative world.

With regard to the topic of otherness, Khanian's novel has another important aspect. Ava (which in Persian means voice), the novel's other character, seems to be a double for Aida. Ava is not one of the main characters of the novel. However, the ending of the story seems to suggest that what has happened so far is her first-person narration. In other words, the main narrator is Ava, not Aida. She is the daughter of the house janitor, and hence, belongs to the poverty-stricken class in the society. Throughout the story, Aida looks for her but they never meet. The opposition between these two characters throughout the story and their different social classes are meaningful. At the end, Ava finds the mysterious gift box and opens it. A scream is heard from the inside of the box, which frightens her. The scream inside the box can be interpreted as repressed rebellion. At first, Ava suppresses the scream, but later, she opens the box and frees the scream. In this sense, she becomes the same with the scream, freeing herself from the constraints of time and space; in the complex web of reality and fantasy, she has nobody but the scream in the box. At this moment, only the voice (Ava), who has turned into a scream, seems real. Experiencing freedom and independence, Aida feels like she is about to fly; however, Aida has no choice but to scream if she really wants to climb the steps of growing up. These steps are symbolically represented by big numbers beginning with a thousand. Later, Ava is depicted as washing the steps. This shows Ava's sufferings as a highly intelligent girl caught in the web of social inequality and marginalization in contrast to those who are at the center of cultural and social privileges and advantages.

I wanna lift the box's lid when I suddenly hear a strange scream. It scares me off. I replace the lid and take a deep breath. My Mom's voice

rings in my ears: “Ava! Why are you talking to yourself again? Hurry up! It’s noon already!”

“I’m almost done Mom!” and I say, “I’m on the quintillionth step.” Then, I turn to see Mom. But I can’t. Mom isn’t there. Now, even Aida isn’t there. The landing, steps, and the apartment, and... nothing. Nothing except me and a beautiful wrapped gift box. I lift the lid of the box: “Screeeeeeeeeeeeeeaaaaaaaaaaaaam!” (Khanian, 2015: 85).

The linguistic links between the word ‘Ava’ (meaning voice) and the ‘scream’ is important in this regard. In the Bakhtinian sense, polyphony means multiple voices, interaction of diverse voices, and struggle of ideological views (Reyes & Torres 81). The interaction and dialogue between voices requires an open and carnivalesque space. The concept of voice belongs to democratic societies and spaces. From an idealistic perspective, voice necessitates the presence of opposing views. However, “scream” is a form of protest caused by hopelessness and coercion. The need for a scream is felt when voices turn louder and louder in order to be heard. In other words, a scream is a suppressed voice, which tries to prove its existence. Voice is not as harsh as scream and reminds us of music, peace, and construction. Scream is the result of crisis and internally reflects the external pressures.

In this story, Ava intends to enter into a dialogue and interaction with others. She is flexible and welcoming, that is, open towards others. However, she cannot ignore the unpleasant realities around herself, including the dominant discourses of her society, which leaves no option for women but to make them scream.

Aida possesses certain personal traits which help her resist the monopoly of wealthy class to which she belongs. She is highly flexible and is greatly capable of de-concentration. Therefore, she has a good relationship with others. On the one hand, Ava shoulders the burden of cultural relationship between her and Aida. Ava has not been imprisoned in her own cultural circle and has instead tried to adjust to non-self-culture. Ava and Aida belong to similar adolescence cultures, which could facilitate the process of dialogue. Although dialogue has not been achieved in a face-to-face manner, Ava seems

to have established it via her narration. Hence, this otherness is among the types which make the person feel closer to the non-self-culture, and tries to move beyond the borderlines of the self. Accordingly, a certain form of interaction and communication can be achieved between different cultures.

### **Types of Disabilities in Young Adult Fiction**

In the past, the image of disability and disabled people in literary works would tend to imply a sense of evil bringing about negative feelings. Physical disability or ugliness are clichés often used in children’s literature to represent magicians, witches, and evil fortunetellers. Other examples include crippled pirates and one-eyed evil ship sailors. Unfortunately, people with mental and physical disability have not only been marginalized in the society because of the rights they have been deprived of, but they have also remained on the periphery of young adult fiction, not having given any distinctive voice in the literature. However, Mohammadreza Shams’ *The Nutty Girl* and Mohammadreza Yousefi’s *A Star Called Monster* are among the few novels whose protagonists are disabled people who suffer from loneliness and social ostracism. In *The Nutty Girl*, the narrator is Khanombas, which literally means “enough of girls.”<sup>2</sup> She is a mentally confused girl who is considered mad by others. However, she is very much like a trickster, and hence, a “wise fool.” The whole story is narrated by the use of stream-of-consciousness technique, that is, the product of the fragmented mind of the narrator. The traditional patriarchal society treats Khanombas very ruthlessly. Under the dominance of her dictator father, she is married to an old man. Having chosen an intrepid “mad” female narrator, the author creates a space in which the suppressed voice of the women has a chance to be heard; the women who are only expected to work at home and not protest to anything are now represented as agentive and active. Khanombas uses her madness to stand up against the dominant patriarchal system. However, nothing more than protest can be done, and she, just like hundreds of women, remains oppressed. For example, she says to her lord husband: “Don’t be so rude man!” (Shams 53).

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<sup>2</sup> The name reflects a patriarchal society in which male children are a value while it is a dishonor to have female children.

Other women would never dare talking to their husbands like that. The marginalization of women, who are clearly considered the symbols of fertility in the novel, is depicted as the cause of famine in the village, a symbol which can be analyzed in more details.

*A Star Called Monster* is one of the few novels which presents a positive image of adolescents with physical disability, describing the real conditions of this marginalized group. Reza, who is called Reza-Ghul (meaning Reza the monster) in the novel, suffers from gigantism and has an abnormal physical appearance. The author describes Reza as bulky, having a big bald head, thick lips, thick brows, tiny nose, fat hands, and huge legs. His friends call him “monster” and “gorilla”, and keep teasing him. They compete with each other to see him, and believe that they are watching “an animal in the zoo.” Reza tries to make others call him “Mr.,” but he does not succeed in gaining a new identity till he returns to his own homeland and begins reliving with the people he has something in common with. The urban people would not stop making fun of him. In contrast to this, the villagers call him a hero (Rostam Khan, who is the epic hero in Ferdowsi’s *Shahnameh*) and encourage him to use his physical prowess in working on the farm. This helps Reza feel useful for the community he lives in. In the novel, ethnicity, as an element of identification, stands against disability, and helps Reza gain new identity.

A representation of physical disability caused by damage can be seen in Hamidreza Shahabadi’s *A Lullaby for the Dead Girl*. The main character of this fantasy fiction is Hakimeh, a dead girl, who has come back from a hundred years ago, whose face and hands have been burned because of working in a kitchen. She is one of the Turkmen girls who were sold to foreigners in her childhood. Most Turkmen families had to sell their children due to poverty, which would increase the risks of living as an adolescent or child. In Shahabadi’s novel, when Hakimeh is wounded in the fire, her boss who had bought her, throws her out of the house and she is later killed under the hoofs of a wagon’s horses.

### **The Reflection of Adolescent-Adult Relationship in Light of Otherness**

From the perspective of cultural semiotics, interdisciplinary dialogue in the semiosphere can be achieved when the two fields become ‘self’ to each other in order to achieving conceptual replacement. This form of becoming self is possible in relation to other peripheral points, which could find their ways into the central areas. Transformation is the most important goal in models of semiosphere. The basis of otherness in young adult fiction is the binary opposition between adolescent and adult, which is manifested in various ways. The contours of adolescent-adult relation depend on culture, dominant discourses, social norms, and definitions of youth and adolescence. These issues depend on historical changes and may be different even in two literary works at the same time. The two sides of adolescent-adult relationship should try to improve their interaction because the notions of being inside or outside of culture are uncertain and replaceable. However, from another perspective, adolescents and adults who are closer to the border, that is, those with a better relationship with the others beyond those borders, can play a pivotal role in facilitating the success of this process; adults and adolescents who insist on their prejudice and loyalty to the central culture may be less prepared to initiate a constructive interaction.

A look at Iranian young adult fiction brings to the light two types of adolescent-adult relationship: 1. Dominant adult and passive adolescent, 2. Powerful adult and agent-subversive adolescent. My focus is mainly on the second type where the adolescent and adult are capable of achieving a constructive-dialogic interaction, or else, when the adolescents are able to impose their own culture on the adults in order to gain recognition. It goes without saying that the first type has a long genealogy in Iranian young adult fiction and there are numerous examples which are beyond the scope and concern of this essay. In the following, I refer to one particular novel which is highly creative and avant-garde in its genre, but the similar view has been continuously and increasingly represented in present young adult fiction.

*Hasti* is a representative novel of the second type of relationship. *Hasti* is a female adolescent with male behaviors who lives in a traditional family



in Khoramshahr<sup>3</sup>. Because of her “abnormal” behavior, her father is not on friendly terms with her. Following the Iran-Iraq war, Hasti and her family have to emigrate. Despite her broken arms, Hasti helps ride her uncle’s motorbike and hence plays an important role in reaching the destination. They are accommodated in a camp in Mahshahr and lead a very difficult life. Hasti insists that her uncle’s motorbike should be returned to him, but her father ignores this frequently. Then, Hasti dresses like men, rides the motorbike and goes to Khoramshahr to live with her aunt and uncle, apart from her family. Hasti’s father goes after her, and having conceded to her independent identity, decides that he needs to compromise, which convinces both of them to return home.

Hasti proves her own agency when she makes her father come back to the war areas – her father has always been frightened of war. This allows Hasti to ask for more rights and legitimation. After the friendly dialogue between Hasti and her father, when the latter tries to take Hasti back to Abadan, she shows more flexibility toward her girlhood and hence appears to be a kinder person. Hasti’s father creates a dynamic connection between two generations by standing on the borders of two cultures. Gradually, what becomes highlighted in the characters is their flexibility and readiness and openness in understanding others. In such a condition, the diffusion of power relations is more balanced, and there is a more open space for dialogue and mutual understanding.

The society that the novel depicts places the adult at the center and the adolescent in the periphery. Narrative progression and character’s actions transform the far-fetched other to the familiar other, and help move the peripheral culture toward the center. The father, as the figure of the center, confesses that he has always envied his daughter and considered her superior to himself:

-To tell you the truth, I really envy you most of the times

This was something new. I never thought of this. He said: “I’ve been to school only up to the sixth-grade, but even so, I think that everyone’s character is made in their childhood. This was my childhood and so this

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<sup>3</sup> A seaport in the south of Iran.

is me now. I wonder how your adulthood would be when I see you such a child now” (Hasanzadeh 248).

Hasti’s culture is peripheral because of two reasons: being an adolescent and being a girl. Hasti’s fight is limited to the family, and more particularly, to her father. The self-other opposition is reflected in her relationship to her father. At the end, her father decides to join her and a new process of interaction and friendship begins.

Father warmed himself up like a sportsman and said: “a game of penalty or soccer?” I couldn’t believe it. I stood between the two trees and said: “kick the ball and let me see how good you are!” He began kicking the ball here and there. I still couldn’t believe I wasn’t dreaming (ibid. 250).

### Conclusion

The adolescent and adult are not two isolated islands. They are the forerunners of two cultures, which are rooted in civilization and which could legitimize individual voices. The adolescent and the adult help each other overcome obstacles and move forward. Therefore, the assumed opposition and conflict between their cultures can be interpreted as a sign of dynamism and progress. This type of competition is necessary for the existence of any dynamic society. The two sides are expected to challenge dominant discourses and create a new functional discourse to gain power.

The main motivation behind this essay was not merely emphasizing the binary opposition between adult/ adolescent, but the unequal relationship between adolescents and adults. My aim was to investigate the topic in order to suggest ways in which this type of inequality could be eliminated or reduced. With a focus on young adult fiction, I tried to propose critical readings to demonstrate how we can help adolescents achieve freedom, justice, and equality. They are always exposed to ideologies and face a vast world of otherness. The adolescents, while endlessly competing in a web of power relations with their parents and other adults, need to enter into a dialogue with those in power, ethnic groups, and values, religious and local

traditions, which are the 'other'. By integrating and localizing the voices of these types of otherness in their own culture, they are certainly capable of gaining a better identity.

In my view, their lives would be more enjoyable if they acknowledge the presence of different others. If literature can be considered as playing an important role in redefining power relations, and acknowledging 'others', it would become more dialogic and hence pleasurable. Such a literature would not try to impose dominant ideologies on the teenager and adolescent. Instead, it would admit that the adolescent has a creative role in the process of reading, which through pleasure and dialogue reads the text critically and as an audience is one of important sides of reading process. This is in contrast to the view that looks at the adolescents as subaltern subjects who need to be educated for socialization.

Another issue is the wide gap between the adolescents in society and their representation in young adult fiction. The discourse that young adult fiction writers have relied on, rather than being reflective of the thoughts and actions of the adolescents, is about the authors' experiences of their own youth. Conventional power relations may be reproduced in the contemporary world. Although these conventions adapt themselves to the modern situation, the reproduction of traditional masculine power can still be seen in the society, which suppress the adolescents, or at best, otherize this type of monophonic literature. While most world young adult fictions tend to be more dialogic and subversive, emphasizing the web of power and tending to reduce inequality by bringing to the fore previously marginalized ethnicities, the question is whether the contemporary form of young adult fiction could make progress given its inattention to the agentive role of adolescents? In the long run, the authors of young adult fiction themselves would stay outside their audience's culture. I believe that a dialogic representation of otherness and interaction with the adolescents would as much benefit the adolescents as the adults, enabling them to resist the dangers of being in periphery.

One of the concerns of scholars and writers in young adult literature is the inclination on the side of adolescents to read translated works, which has made Iranian works less popular. From the perspectives of cultural semiotics,

one can say that what has happened in this regard is the authorization of other's culture and subordination of self's culture by the adolescents. The adolescents who have always remained on the periphery of self's culture, having distance from the center, are more prone to leave self's culture and adopt the other's culture. Young adult fiction published in other countries seems to have a more realistic representation of the lives of adolescents and respects their autonomy and singularity more than Iranian ones. They have come to terms with the adolescent's developments alongside the advancements in information technology, and have gradually resisted didacticism and direct pedagogical aims. Moreover, most themes like diaspora, special diseases, and online friendships have been dealt with, while they remain almost absent from Iranian young adult fiction. This is ironic given the fact these issues have direct influence on the lives of Iranian adolescents.

A brief look at non-Persian theoretical and applied studies in young adult fiction shows that topics like power, adolescent's voice, identity, gender, embodiment, carnivalesque and ideological readings are among the most important ones. The emphasis on these topics can be interpreted in at least two ways: first, the attention paid by various scholars to these topics; second, the existence elements of agency in young adult fiction which necessitates the need for theoretical discussions. The more avant-garde and innovative young adult fiction, the more fruitful theoretical creativity can be achieved.

As mentioned earlier, Iranian young adult fiction has hardly addressed the question of otherness, and even in cases it has, poverty and people in the periphery of cities (in the countries) or those in villages have been the main focus. While there has been a recent surge of fiction dealing with issues of gender, religious minorities, ethnic, racial otherness, special diseases, and child labor, more creative and dialogic work remains to be done in this area in order to truly give voice to the adolescents.

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