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*Research Article*

# The Purpose of Teaching Young Adult Literature in Secondary Education: Focus on Poverty, Gender and Sexuality

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## Abstract

Although Young Adult literature has been around for quite some time, it has never been viewed or considered to be fit to teach in a classroom setting, as it was poles apart from classics. Young Adult Literature deals with current social, economic, political as well as personal issues relating to and addressing a particular group of people, the young adults. Taking the themes 'Poverty and Privilege' and 'Gender and Sexuality', this article discusses the purpose of Young Adult Literature in school curriculum and the methods of teaching them to students to spread awareness and help in shaping conscious citizens of the world. The themes and issues of the books 'The House on Mango Street', 'Hey Kiddo', 'If You Could Be Mine' and 'Some Assembly Required: The Not-So-Secret Life of a Transgender Teen' and the reason for teaching them in schools are explored in detail in the hope of shedding light on the darker aspects of life.

## Keywords

Young adult literature, gender, sexuality, poverty, privilege, teaching, school, classroom, secondary education

## Introduction

The genre Young Adult Literature (YAL) or the analytical approach, Youth Lens, has been overlooked or cautiously avoided by most of the educators of middle schools and high schools. This is much likely a consequence of the confusion it creates with its category of audience "young adult". There is a very thin line, sometimes blurred, which separates children's books from young adult stories or novels. The category "young adult" can include students from grade seven to twelve or adolescents of the age group 10 to 18. Herz and Gallo (2005) provides a list of characteristics for identifying and defining a good young adult literature. YAL can be described as those works which has a teenager/teenagers as protagonists and deals with issues with which teens can relate to. The events of the plot are created as the effects of the decisions taken by the protagonists unfold and sometimes "all traditional literary elements typical of classical literature" can be identified (2005, pp. 10-11). Most teenagers fail to grow an interest for classical literature because they are yet to be ready to read classics which do not deal with teenage concerns and are primarily related to adults. YAL explores the vast dimensions of themes which were either considered to be inconsequential, or a taboo/ scandalous. Inculcating themes like adolescent romance, homosexuality, multiculturalism, technology, religion, paranormalism and many others, which were highly avoided in the past, have made adolescents discover and build their personality. It reflects on the use of Youth Lens to help adolescents comprehend their surrounding socio, cultural, political and economic situations represented in the form of texts and helping them form their own "being" and not "becoming" (Petroni et al, 2014).

There are multitude of genres in which YAL can be categorized like friendship, love, relationships, poverty, identity, gender etc. Here, ‘Poverty and Privilege’ & ‘Gender and Sexuality’ are the two broad genres that are discussed with the purpose and the ways of teaching it to the students.

## Background

During the past few decades Young Adult Literature have come to be recognized as effectual for advocating the development of literary understanding, helping the students relate to what they read, thus, abetting them engage in analytical reading and writing. Nevertheless, many teachers of high schools avoid teaching Young Adult Literature and stick to classics, referring to novels that has been taught traditionally in English classes and valued for their timelessness, to inculcate in students the love for reading “real” literature. What they fail to understand is, as Diana Mitchell (2002) argued, that the Young Adult Literature’s range and intensity are equivalent to any other genre and that the recurring themes of love, death, loss, racism, and friendship are also portrayed in young adult literature and even more current issues are represented. She stated students can relate or connect the novels to their lives because young adult novels have the power to make certain issues, which are very complicated, concrete and comprehensible. It is important for teachers, educators, administrators, and guardians to realize what Young Adult Literature represents, how important it is for adolescents to read them, and why it should be taught by teachers instead of ignoring some of the social issues that the novels represent (Santoli & Wagner, 2004).

### Purpose of Young Adult Literature

Wolk (2013) explores the change necessary in school teachings so that students can relate, as adolescents, to what is taught in class and use them to understand bigger issues that are happening around them outside school. Reading books to understand the influence of media and technology, war and peace, global awareness, race and prejudice, sexual orientation is important for adolescents. It can impart wisdom and hope in them, “the great hope of having students read literature for social responsibility. These books and their wisdom—immersed in the unique power of young people engaged in thoughtful discussion and exploration—can heal a troubled world and help our democracy to thrive” (Wolk, 2013). It is difficult, with this age’s pressure and competition to thrive in the world, to motivate students to read outside classroom.

### Poverty and Privilege

It is likely that many of the high-class society people will look down poor people without respect as they are not aware of the struggles and the pain of the people living in poverty. Intolerance and abhorrence come from ignorance and lack of consciousness.

Stover et al (2017) talk of using YAL to encourage students to spread social awareness, community service, work to make changes to better the society and “to make connections across huge boundaries of culture, time and space. The more YAL holds up current political, social and economic issues, the more interest is formed in students because they can relate to them. It is important for teachers to choose texts keeping in mind the kind of curiosity of and relevance to the students. Not just the students but the authors’ talk of involving the community and the students together to work for the welfare of the society. It is fascinating how a novel can move people to work for prosperity and betterment.

Hill and Darragh (2017) talk about how poverty and the underprivileged are represented in YAL and whether “life is all about ‘decisions, decisions, decisions.’” The authors’ state that “Many factors-some beyond the control of an individual or a family-contribute to poverty” (Hill & Darragh, 2017). They ask the teachers to teach students about novels representing poverty and how young people improve their lives in making good decisions, asking for support and help to improve their situation. They also warns teachers to teach some novels with caution which represent the racial stereotypes, generalized behavior of poor underprivileged people and the relation between the middle class and the poor- “All people’s lives have value, and those living in poverty do not necessarily need those who are financially stable to help them generate personal value and happiness in their own lives” (Hill & Darragh, 2017).

In a Ted Talk, Chimamanda Adichie (2009) says that the stereotypical stories are not untrue, but they are incomplete. She talks of how many stories matter- “Stories have been used to dispossess and to malign but stories can also be used to empower and to humanize. Stories can break the dignity of people, but stories can also repair that broken dignity.” The idea that is really liked is what Chimamanda says about stories that make

people see or experience only one side or segment of a class or culture or religion. For example, the stereotypical notions people have about India and its culture- India is just not about slums, poverty, charity work or messed up politics. There is so much more to it. People seem surprised if any Indians' choice of subject is English, as there is a cliched idea of Indian students only studying engineering, science or medical. That is why Chimamanda stresses on the importance of many stories and breaking stereotypes.

### **Gender and Sexuality**

Langer (1995) reminds us that “literature is a way to explore possibilities and help students find themselves, imagine others, value difference, and search for social justice.” (Renzi et al, 2017). YAL dealing with gender and sexuality issues help those whose voices have been ignored and humiliated for decades. It talks of the history and the present-day representations of homosexuality, bisexuality, transgender/gender expression and gender fluidity in novels. Initially these topics were not dealt with at all, and if they were at all represented in the novels, the characters either faced “death...rape and the rest in the realization that homosexuality as only a ‘passing phase.’” (Renzi et al, 2017). Gradually, as more novels or stories began to get published, the status of the characters progressed until in the present century where LGBTQ YAL has progressed rapidly and outspokenly discuss and portray the normalcy of it. Yet, LGBTQ YAL is not gaining as much exposure in schools and classrooms as it should. General assumption of teachers of the students' heterosexuality while teaching a text contributes to the homophobic environment. If educators and teachers do not create their classrooms to be a safe place for students of any gender and sexuality, then in future this will continue to be intolerant and suppression of people's freedom of choice. Sieben and Wallowitz (2009) explore the restrictions, fears and anxiety that a teacher faces while deciding whether to teach controversial topics or not. But it is up to a teacher to educate and spread the awareness among her students of the discriminations and humiliations that are subjected towards LGBTQ community, intentionally or unintentionally, and build a better future where LGBTQs will not find it necessary to open up and fight for their gender and sexuality choices just like any other heterosexual person.

Banks (2009) exclaims that while it is a noticeable progress that people show sympathy towards characters and their struggle to survive and establish identity in an LGBTQ novel, it is now necessary to relate emphatically with the real people who suffer bullying and hatred because of their gender and sexuality choices. Reading should not be just kept for pleasure of the mind but utilized in developing one's mind and personality and acknowledge the differences with an open mind.

It is from the beginning, just at birth of a child, the society projects clear demarcations of two communities, male and female, with blue and pink color respectively. It becomes of utmost necessity that the boy must play with his cars and mix with other boys, whereas the girl must play with dolls and be friends with other girls. The moment when the society will let them choose their own colors and their own company, accept their choices, there will be no fear or anxiety among teachers to teach certain novels or they won't need to separately teach and spread awareness towards the fair treatment of LGBTQ.

Greenbaum (1994) talks of teaching different sexualities and genders in schools through literature as being a closeted lesbian herself at first and then coming out. She begins with the thought of how teachers and educators assume the heterosexuality of students while teaching a literary text and ignore or avoid homosexual traits, if any at all, in the texts- “every text, and everyone, is assumed straight” (1994, p. 71). Greenbaum started teaching gay subtexts in literature and gradually students themselves started to find out the underlying indications to homosexuality which were long avoided in texts. Teachers bring out Emily Dickenson's letters to Rev. Wadsworth and Higginson but her letters to Susan Gilbert Dickinson are intentionally avoided.

Greenbaum talks about one of her students, Steven, opening to her as gay and later expresses his happiness and peace in at least coming out to someone. His fear of being discovered as a homosexual reflects the unsafe and homophobic environment that still resists in school, home and society. Greenbaum is surprised to see the excitement and thrill Steven experiences while exploring homosexual subtexts in Joseph Conrad's *The Secret Sharer* and later researching on other literature and subtexts related to different sexualities. Greenbaum urges the teachers to “broaden their vision to include others beside themselves, beside the common Everyman which exclusively dominated literary vision and practice for far too long” (1994, p. 72). Another experience that Greenbaum shares is teaching a class, mostly of immigrants, the text, *Cat on a hot tin roof* where the topic of homosexuality was met with the common reaction of the class as “eeew”. Eventually, class after class, she was able to teach the students that homosexuality was as normal as heterosexuality- “By the time we got to writing,

students discussed sexuality in terms of the play, in terms of a real person (me), in terms of people they've known and seen on the street.” (1994, p. 74)

Renzi et al (2017) perfectly recapitulates the arguments made to include YAL in school curriculums. Every school's primary purpose should be not just making students literate but also educating them, shaping them to form a more tolerant society where people can come out from stereotypical ideas, accept diversity around them and build a more caring and harmonious world.

## Teaching Young Adult Literature

Scholars have recognized a new analytical approach to study texts, the Youth Lens, to concentrate on texts for and about youth. The Youth Lens holds some theoretical assumptions like adolescence is a construct, adolescence is not a universal experience, varies and depends on individual's circumstances and personalities, adolescence often represents or is symbolic for broader social, political, and nationalistic agendas and concerns (Petrone et al, 2014). The Youth Lens makes readers focus on how race, gender, sexuality and other social constructs interplay with notions of adolescence. It helps readers to explore the vast dimensions of Young Adult Literature which were either considered to be inconsequential, or a taboo/scandalous. Inculcating themes like adolescent romance, homosexuality, multiculturalism, technology, religion, paranormalism and many others, which were highly avoided in the past, Young Adult Literature have made adolescents discover, relate to the current social, cultural and political issues and build their personality. Some of the themes that young adult literature portray and their books are- multiculturalism in Young Adult Literature (Sandra Cisneros's *The House on the Mango Street* (1983), Terry Farushe's *The Good Braider* (2012), Thanhhai Lai's *Inside Out and Back Again* (2011)), romance in Young Adult Literature (Meg Cabot's *Princess Diaries* (2000), Gayle Forman's *If I stay* (2009), Lauren Myracle's *The Infinite Moment of Us* (2013)), LGBTQ issues in Young Adult Literature (M. E. Kerr's *Deliver Us from Evie* (1994), David Levithan's *Two Boys Kissing* (2013), David Levitan's *Every Day* (2012)), contemporary realistic issues in Young Adult Literature (Judy Blume's *Forever* (1975), Tony Abbott's *Lunch Box Dreams*(2011), Jay Asher's *Thirteen Reasons Why* (2007)), modern technology and science in Young Adult Literature (K. A. Applegate's *Everworld* (1999), Erin Hunter's *Warriors: The New Prophecy* (2005)) and many other topics like religion, fantasy literature, dystopian science fiction, graphic novels and so on.

When it comes to teaching Young Adult Literature in classrooms, it is generally observed that teachers or schools refuse to include them in curriculum in order to avoid controversial and complicated issues and stick to the stereotypes instead of encouraging diversity or differences. Sieben and Wallowitz asserts “creating classrooms free from controversial topics does not situate the teacher as impartial or objective. Nor does it ensure that all students feel comfortable. As Kruger suggests that the “safer” our classroom spaces, the more we silence students for whom school seems foreign, hostile or irrelevant” (Sieben & Wallowitz, 2009, p. 44). Therefore, it is important for every teacher to understand that what they choose to teach and choose to omit, what they say and do not say, may have an impact on students. It becomes important for educators, then, to include young adult novels and train pre-service/in-service teachers in their curriculum so that they can enhance their pedagogy accordingly and gain the ability to handle diversity in classrooms, discuss about it openly and create a space for students where they can open up about their ideas, thoughts, choices and opinions, and shape their personality to being a more tolerant and sharing human being.

Exposing pre-service teachers to young adult literature dealing with issues like race, gender, sexuality, class, gives them the opportunity to understand the issues and their interplay with adolescence in depth and question/challenge their own assumptions or stereotypical beliefs. As with diverse themes and issues, “pre-service teachers need the opportunity to challenge their own beliefs... and to work toward accepting students and ideas that are different from their own.” (Steffel & Renzi-Kenner, 2009, p. 30). Even if some teachers do try to incorporate Young Adult Literature in classrooms, schools or other teachers refuse to participate in it to avoid the burden of discussing or explaining debatable topics. Thus, it is likewise necessary to support the teachers with professional development who take the initiative to introduce Young Adult Literature and controversial issues into the syllabus and open opportunities of discussion and better understanding. For example, training a pre-service teacher to introduce a text like Sara Farizan's *If You Could Be Mine* with LGBTQ issues in a classroom that is assumed to be heterosexual and homophobic, managing and supervising the class discussion in such a way which makes students realize the normalcy in homosexuality and guide students out of the usual homophobic temperament, can be a big step in shaping well aware and tolerant human beings. Analyzing a text with youth lens provides a path “to engage future teachers in an examination of their own often implicit



assumptions about their future students as adolescents, as well as, the roles that literacy curricula have in constituting these ideas. By starting with those ideas, a YL promises to challenge future teachers to deepen their understandings of how the life stage known as adolescence informs their thinking about their students, their own role as teachers, and the function of literacy curricula.” (Petroni et al, 2014, p. 527)

When asked to a bunch of six graders of an English Medium school by a middle school teacher in the suburban towns of Calcutta, India, why their reading habits were poor as they had not performed well in English grammar and essay tests, they seemed to care less. It seemed most of the students were least interested because they did not know books outside the school prescribed classics like Dickens, Louisa May Alcott etc. even if suggested to read more books to improve their grammar, vocabulary and writing skill. They lacked enthusiasm in reading as they found no similarity or connection between the protagonists and themselves or a similarity in the times and issues. English being a second language, they found it hard to select books and read by themselves. To at least inculcate in them the habit of reading they were suggested to start with Enid Blyton’s works. Although not a YAL, students started growing interest in reading her books as they could relate with the protagonists who were mostly children. Gradually they progressed over time, made a habit of reading a book each week and their class works showed significant improvement. Teachers must form different strategies to motivate the students to read more and expand knowledge. Introducing YAL gradually in classrooms can arouse interest in adolescents and inspire them to read more, be avid readers and benefit from it. Once the habit of reading is being rooted in them, they will find no difficulty in reading books of any genre.

Wilson and Kelley (2017) discuss the reasons for the decline of reading habit among adolescents and how to motivate them again into reading books, specially books that are self-selected and out of school curriculum. They researched different procedures for creating “motivational strategies” for teachers to inspire students to read book of their interest. Some of these procedures are Motivation to Read Profile (MRP), Me and My Reading Profile (MMRP), Adolescent Motivation to Read Profile (AMRP). The results indicate that there is a discrepancy between the texts taught in school and the texts that interest the students. Teachers should encourage the students to read and make it more interesting to modern readers with the help of techniques like scene dramatization, scrapbook, posters etc.

If changes in reading books and assessments inside the classroom can be achieved, then the students might find a new interest or renew their love for books. Choosing books for class which are more relatable to students, which instigates interest and fascinates them, thus leading them towards independent reading can boost their self-concept and self-efficacy. Four recently published Young Adult Literature books are discussed below and how they are appropriate in a classroom setting.

### **The House on Mango Street by Sandra Cisneros (2013)**

Hill and Darragh (2017) talk of how YAL represent how “most of the teenaged protagonists were actively engaged in improving their lives making decisions in there and their family’s best interest.”

Esperanza in *The House on Mango Street* has always shown an interest in owning a house which she can call her own, not depending on lotteries, or father, or husband. She sees herself as her only option to come out of her neighborhood, improve her living conditions and be a savior to all others who cannot. This decision did not come over night but with the witnessing and experiencing social and cultural restrictions around her.

Along with introductions of her different kinds of neighbors and family members, Esperanza upholds the lives of sadness and laughter, mostly sorrow, of the “dangerous” people of their “neighborhood” (p. 28). The first thing one notices is the great divide between the underprivileged poor people and the people “of another color” (p. 28). Esperanza says- “Those who don’t know any better come into our neighborhood scared. They think we are dangerous.... All brown all around and we are safe. But watch us drive into a neighborhood of another color and our knees go shakity-shake and our car windows get rolled up tight...” (p. 28) These lines from the chapter “Those Who Don’t” indicate the differences, disparity and the divide there is between the classes. Even in school Esperanza experiences humiliation when she is not allowed to have lunch in the canteen. Because of this divide Cathy hesitates to be her friend and ultimately leaves her.

Early marriage, trapped in houses and domestic violence and sexual assaults at an early age are repeatedly seen and experienced by young Esperanza who decides, thus, not to “grow up tame like the others” (p. 88), not wait

for a husband but be “like a man” (89) herself. She sees multiple girls and women like Rafaela, Minerva, Sally getting married and be victims of house arrested and domestic violence and she also sees the singular girl like Alicia who is a rare example of a neighborhood girl who has not tried to escape the neighborhood through marriage, but instead works hard and hopes to change her life from within. This inspires Esperanza to be like her and read books.

She also gets the support of her parents who push themselves to work harder to give her education. She is sent to a Catholic high school instead of a public school. Her mother narrates how her shame restricted her from going to school even when she was a brilliant student and advises Esperanza not to be ashamed, ashamed of her upbringing, of her background, of other people with more advantage and opportunity. I think it is also from Alicia that Esperanza learns not to forget her roots “Like it or not you are Mango Street, and one day you will come back too” (p. 106).

This novel is an example to all the students, specially females, in overcoming all that restrictions, social or cultural, and emerge to empower oneself. It also relates “Many stories” (Adichie, 2009) of poverty and injustice. The novel is a peek into the lives of the deprived and the neglected where the mayor never comes. There is violence, assault, paucity, superstitions, all the stereotypes associated with being poor, but there is also a beautiful flower garden, supporting family, friendship, education, poets and poems, opportunity to rise higher, and much more. In a classroom setting this novel is an example of “Engagement with story as a way of knowing” (Stover, Bach, & Carver, 2017, p. 181).

### **Hey Kiddo by Jarrett J. Krosoczka (2018)**

The effects of drug addiction and how it ruins relationships is shown in Hey Kiddo by Jarrett Krosoczka. Jarrett faces the dilemma of accepting Leslie as her mother- “I am who I am in spite of my mother, but I also am who I am because of her”

Jarrett’s story begins with him receiving driving lessons from his grandfather in a cemetery where his grandfather visits his mother’s grave and hopes to lie near to his parents when he dies. That is the moment we learn how close grandfather, Joe, is to her mother and Jarrett feels how he will never understand or have that kind of affection in his life from his mother.

Being addicted to drugs from an early age, Leslie could not give up even after birthing Jarrett, as a result of which his grandparents had to acquire his legal guardianship. Time and again Jarrett experiences nightmare of demons surrounding him and slowly closing up on him as if devouring him. I think it represents his fear of losing his mother or rather the loss of love and affection, rendering him desolate and depressed, surrounded by darkness. The color choice for the pictures, mostly black and grey, show the misery and sorrow he faced. Although his grandparents did shower him with as much love and affection, yet they could not replace his mother. The constant exchange of letters and drawings with his mother helped him cope up with the absence he felt in his life- “It is said that books save lives, but I also say that empty sketchbooks save lives too. I filled up many, and there is no doubt they saved mine.” The book also reflects what Wilson and Kelley (2017) say - “instead of a traditional assessment on a text, a teacher can develop a menu of ways to demonstrate an academic objective or a goal.” We see Jarrett’s teachers accepting his art as his way of expressing himself and encouraging him towards it instead of restricting him in with traditional rules and punishments.

Fortunately, he was given enough love, affection from his family, especially grandparents. Jarrett was always given that personal space of his own where he had the choice of being anything he wanted to and not excessively controlled everywhere for being a drug addict’s son. It is good to see his grandparents helping him with his love for art and supporting him on his dreams. In the Author’s Note at the end of the book he says, “It wasn’t an easy decision for them, two people who grew up in the Great Depression, to send their kid to art college. It simply wasn’t practical. But they had faith in me, and I worked hard not to disappoint them.” He was even quite lucky to have a friend, Pat, apart from family, to help him outside the house and in socializing. Kids, in most of these cases, are seen being bullied and outcasted from the society. Jarrett had amazing friends and teachers to support him and live his dream of being a cartoonist. Towards the end of the book we see him building up a bond with his half siblings and through them building up a friendship with his father, a closure which helped him gain inner peace and finally move on. Instead of fighting it, which he earlier did, he later accepts the fact that his mother might not be always with him on his special moments, she might be a drug



addict, he might have missed the fatherly presence in his teens, but he had so much more in his life to hold on to- “I always wondered who my father was...where my mother was. But that entire time? I had two incredible parents right there...They just happened to be a generation removed.”

This story is a perfect example for a classroom setting in so many ways. It reflects on the destructive effects of drug addiction, following one’s dream, love and care of grandparents etc. But what is felt the most important issue is that the book talks of accepting the situation one is in instead of denying it and also accepting the fact that it does not make that person different from the rest or something to be ashamed of. Jarrett understood this during his eighth-grade graduation dinner- “I met a lot of my friends’ parent...Some were old, some were young. Some were single, some were divorced...Every adult at the dinner had a hand in raising all of the eighth grade graduates, and I had my true parents there.” It is very important to understand that more books on these issues come out, more children/ adolescents understand that they are not alone in dealing with the problems or it does not make them guilty.

### **If You Could Be Mine by Sara Farizan (2014)**

“English teachers know the power of literature. We know the power of seeing ourselves in a text (mirrors), but we also understand the importance of seeing others (windows and sliding glass doors), other ways of life, and other possibilities that those that surround us on a daily basis. We understand the need to question our surroundings, the environments in which we live, work, and breathe. But we also understand the need for our students to be safe—safe from the harm of being seen as different and ignored.” (Renzi et al, 2017, pp. 118-119)

An Iranian teenager Sahar, in *If you could be mine* by Sara Farizan, grows up in a very restricted and confined society where her love for her best friend, Nasrin, is seen as a crime and is punishable by law. The two have been in love since they were six years old and now, with the sudden engagement of Nasrin, their love and relationship is put to test.

Sahar is sometimes doubtful of Nasrin’s love for her as she is able to put up with the engagement with a smile. Sahar is seen struggling with her emotions and accepting her love being taken away. Perhaps, she is comparing this loss with the loss of her mother at a very early age. She has experienced the pain of losing a loved one and does not wish to lose Nasrin as well. The lack of support she receives from her depressed father, in every aspect of her life, leaves her frustrated.

The book not only shows the struggles of homosexuals but also transgenders. Sahar gets the opportunity of interacting and mixing with transgender people and learning of their struggles and pain in adjusting to a society. They accept their trouble of being trapped in a wrong body and undergoing complex painful surgery and psychological treatment to complete their transformation. Sahar makes the mistake of deciding to change her sexuality for Nasrin- “No. I’m not going to give up. Even if it’s wrong, there is still a chance, and that’s more than I have as a woman. A chance.” (p. 107) Later on she comes to terms with her acceptance and love for her own body and realizing her love for another girl is no illness.

The book not only shows the love of two girls for each other, but the strong love and instinct of protection of their parents. Nasrin’s mother knew all along about Nasrin and Sahar, but forcefully arranged Nasrin’s marriage to another well-to-do man. She prefers to see her daughter alive in a loveless marriage, rather than seeing her die for a love which will never be accepted by society or law. From the perspective of a mother, and her loveless marriage, her natural instinct is to protect her daughter. Sahar’s father, may not be aware of Sahar’s homosexuality, shows the strong bond he shares with her daughter. Sahar discards her plan to relocate with her gay cousin only because her father needs to be taken care of. Both Nasrin and Sahar sacrifice their love because of the lack of family support and also because of their love for their families- “I would hold her hand forever if I could. But I can’t. So I let go. I love her, and I have to let go.” (p. 166)

The book gives an opportunity for the teachers to show in the classroom the pain and struggle one goes through to be with their love. It shows the love between two persons, and how their gender and sexuality should not come in between them. YAL on LGBTQ issues help others understand the need to accept the differences that surround us and give them the space and respect that they struggle for- “They are not heard from because they are seen as different, as not acceptable, and as deviant. As teachers, we need to change that; we need to keep our students safe... We need to make sure that ALL students, even students who identify as bisexual and transgender see themselves in the literature we read in classrooms.” (Renzi et al, 2017)

### **Some Assembly Required: The Not-So-Secret Life of a Transgender Teen by Arin Andrews (2014)**

*In Some Assembly Required: The Not-So-Secret Life of a Transgender Teen* author Arin Andrews shares his journey of transition from being a girl, Emerald, to being a boy, Arin, and all the battles he had to fight not only with the society or family but with himself as well. Born in a girl's body, Arin could never align his body to his soul- "I lived in some weird dimension, peering out at the rest of existence from the strange prison of a body that didn't match my mind." (p. 25). Arin, then Emerald, tried to reject his sexuality by hiding behind boyish clothes, or more outdoor activities like motocross or rifle shooting when girls of the same age were more into makeups and indoor activities. Joining dance and CAP made him feel more masculine and in control of his body- "I loved learning the controlled movements, teaching my body to behave exactly the way I commanded it to" (p. 18). His mother's desperate attempts to make him embrace his femininity by admitting him in dance classes or beauty pageants failed, to which Arin remarked "I sometimes wonder, though, if she was also subconsciously trying to fix my rejection of femininity." (p. 36) The book opens up to the world, in detail, how painful it becomes to a child when the society thrusts gender roles on him/her to which he/she cannot relate, making the child lose self-confidence, power, identity- "I kept going around in circles in my brain and couldn't land on an answer, an identity." (p. 54). And when the child does find out about his/her issue, it is of utmost importance for the family to give him/her the space and respect, accept the change and support him/her. Arin's mother was quite against him liking girls, which then appeared to be lesbianism and then coming out as a transgender, pushing Arin at one time towards suicide, that finally made her understand how challenging it was not only for his mother but for him as well "I will support you. I can't lose you." (p. 88) Acceptance from his mother opened up huge opportunities for Arin and began the long process of his transition.

Unlike Arin, Sahar from *If you could be mine* by Farizan did not get the support from anyone, nor his family, nor school nor society. Born in Iran in a Muslim community it is difficult, rather next to impossible, for anyone, especially a girl, to admit being lesbian. Sahar could never open up about her feelings for Nasrin and ultimately gets separated from her as Nasrin is forced into marriage to an older groom. Sahar was not as lucky as Arin to share her story to anyone or progress in anyway about her being homosexual. For her it was a punishable crime, a sin.

The novel, *Some Assembly Required*, shows people's reaction to Arin's coming out in different settings- at home, in school, and to larger public through media. Although at first he faced bullying, absolute solidarity and separation from friends, he received much appreciation and support later. The novel points out the shameful actions and reactions of the society which towards LGBTQs and their consequences. It deepens the belief that more novels based on LGBTQ issues are published, the more people are going to aware of their struggles and pain which they do not deserve at all. It beautifully presents the message of how the story of a transgender child can help other people, heterosexual or homosexual, bisexual or trans, to accept the differences around them, create an environment of tolerance and support each other.

It is important that teachers create a safe place in the classroom where every student can openly discuss the issues, bring an end to the fear and pain by letting the gay and lesbian voices be heard. YAL based on LGBTQ issues can be a firm step in breaking the taboo and making people realize the inessentiality of the struggles and pain one must go through in "coming out" in a homophobic society.

Well informed and encouraging teachers can further help the students to nurture and develop "civic habits of mind" through young adult literature. Students can mold their individuality and form identity by understanding who they are, their values and principals, and forming progressive and unbiased attitudes. Through these books, argumentative issues are situated in stories that are entertaining, applicable, significant, and thought-provoking. Students are exposed to engage in consequential debates of issues and concepts that truly matter to them and society at large. While reading Jarrett J. Krosoczka's *Hey Kiddo* students experience the turmoil, struggle and pain that a teenager of a drug addict mother goes through. It is very important to understand that more books on these issues come out, more children/ adolescents understand that they are not alone in dealing with the problems or it does not make them guilty. Jarrett Krosoczka (2019) said "As I continued to travel the country...every single school I attended I would meet a young person who also dealt with a similar affliction...those young readers gave me the strength I needed to write the book...I've learnt how not alone I am in this plight."



Instead of preparing the students solely for global competitiveness, schools and teachers should form a curriculum which is “life-centered, student-centered, democracy-centered, community centered and world-centered” (Wolk, 2013, p. 46). Educators have stressed on an inquiry-based teaching and motivating the students to carry out independent reading outside classrooms. Encouraging students to question, analyze and explore helps them to build the intellect to form their knowledgeable beliefs and judgements. The responsibility of compelling students to read inside and outside classrooms falls on teachers.

## Conclusion

Although it is quite progressive to include themes in literature which were either overlooked or ignored intentionally, it is upsetting to see extreme violence, wild behavior, emotional heart breaks, drug problems, death and other issues reflected in the books. If the books are representing the reality truly, then the kind of world the adolescents are living in is highly disturbing and alarming. The books, coping up with current social situations, show increasing rate of negativity and violence has created a world of tension and brutality for the youths, thus pushing them towards disorder and outrageous ways of existence.

Even if schools agree to introduce YAL, there will always remain a doubt how much parents and guardians will be willing to accept the discussion of sensitive matters or generally avoided social issues in class. But these are essential in forming a student's perspective and thinking process towards certain highly debated issues. Again, it is very important to discuss such matters in class because the students should know that what they know or get to know from particular beliefs is just one side of the picture. It is quite essential to break the orthodox notions of some issues or cultures or regions and embrace the totality of it. Training a teacher to handle "heated" and "awkward" situations in classroom will pave path for more reading of texts representing various sides of a story, or of social, political and economic issues, thus, the more students will be able to form their own understanding based on entire information and question the stereotypical beliefs. Remembering what Paulo Reglus Neves Freire, a Brazilian educator and philosopher who was a leading advocate of critical pedagogy, says in an interview (1996) (which might help students, teachers and parents) "...the virtue of tolerance. It is through the exercise of tolerance that I (Paulo) discover the rich possibility of doing things and learning different things with different people. Being tolerant is not a question of being naive. On the contrary it is a duty to be tolerant, an ethical duty, a historical duty, a political duty, but it does not demand from me that I lose my personality."

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