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De-constructing the Imaginary Child in Greek Cypriot Contemporary Young Adult Fiction Novels

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Abstract

According to literary critics, contemporary Young Adult novels reflect the adolescents' literary and psychological needs and focus on the de-naturalization of traditional identities and family patterns in order to deromanticize adolescence, as it can be a real identity crisis. Taking this into account, it is interesting to examine how male and female adolescents personalities' are constructed in Young Adult fiction within dialogic negotiations with society and family, where death is experienced literally and metaphorically due to multiple forms of victimization. This paper focuses on Andri Antoniou's polyphonic – and full of narrative complexities and dialogical resonances – fiction novels and examines how the Greek Cypriot Young Adult fiction author subverts the "adult's desire for the child" and challenges the myth of innocence in young age with her realistic and often naturalistic writing, reminding critical theorists' arguments that Young Adult fiction advocate psychoanalytical readings. Drawing on Young Adult fiction Literary Criticism, qualitative content analysis and the main principles of New Criticism, the way Antoniou represents male and female adolescents personalities to grow into maturity through death, depression, substance use and violence will be examined; additionally, the way the adolescent characters negotiate with themselves and others in order to balance their own power against their parents (or other authority figures in their lives) and their abusers will also be investigated.

Keywords: *adolescent fiction, novel, violence, trauma*

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Introduction

Adolescence is a period of personal and social identity formation in which different roles, behaviours, and ideologies are explored. According to Lorraine Green it is a concept “describing a transitional, semi-dependent state between childhood and adulthood” (2010:89). Family, peer groups, romantic relationships and education are all factors that influence the subsequent development of adolescents. Young adulthood and the aforementioned institutions and experiences are all reflected in contemporary Young Adult Literature (YAL). YAL’s appearance was inspired by postmodern culture and its institutional discourse became essential for socially constructing individuals (Trites, 2000: 16). It distinguished itself from children’s literature, introducing less predictable and more complex plots, such as identity formation, emotional entanglements, abuse, sexuality and unplanned pregnancy, substance use and, in general, experiences that often produce uncontrollable effects causing a long-lasting impact after the ostensible precipitating cause.

Young Adult Literature’s predecessor is the Bildungsroman, which M.H. Abrams (1999) defines as a novel of formation, which usually narrates an individual’s ‘coming of age’ process and focuses on the changes and growth the protagonist undergoes and suffers in their journey from youth to adulthood. The subject of these novels is the development of the protagonist’s mind and character, in the passage from childhood through varied experiences, and often through a spiritual crisis into maturity, the recognition of their identity and role in the world (ibid, 1999:132). For the purpose of this article YA fiction intersects with adolescent literature, as well as with fiction labelled as bildungsroman .

Sample and Methodology

The novels approached in this study are unconventional fictional narratives engaging with adolescents who encounter severely disruptive events, which profoundly impact their emotional status and perception of the external world. They are built on trauma, a word coming from the ancient Greek “τραῦμα” meaning “wound”, whose concept varies according to context and discipline; they are also built on sharp contradictions between identity and change, power and limitations, certainty and insecurity (Hardin, 1991: viii; Moretti 2000: 6-8). In these the main characters may not be extraordinary teenagers yet their adolescence is indeed an ‘extraordinary’ period , in the sense that they encounter extreme conditions which are experienced as events harboured within their unconscious, cause them anxiety as a protection mechanism against traumatic neurosis, unexpected fright and even dissociation, while altering their perception of the external world, leading them to the formation of new knowledge about the self (Balaev, 2008).

Andri Antoniou's YA novels, titled "The Summer I Grew Up" (Kedros, 2017), "Where Did Your Laughter Go, Orsalia?" (Patakis, 2018), and "Photographs on a Black Background" (Patakis, 2021), standing out for their literary merits and for their preoccupation with the relation of lived reality and aesthetic form, could be characterised as modernist bildungsroman novels whose very purpose is to follow the adolescent protagonists' journeys towards self-identity (Parsons, 2006: 22-23). In them the narrative revolves around the portrayal of the adolescent protagonists' efforts to regenerate and negotiate their own being and identity as well as to express their conscious and unconscious thoughts, while they experience gradations between power and powerlessness within the family structure and are called upon to face traumatic situations, such as domestic violence, sexual abuse or the shocking death of a loved one and are forced through alienation and adaptation to abruptly mature. The protagonists' immediate thoughts, speech and inner conflicts are presented through the referential use of language and the narrative techniques of free indirect discourse and interior monologues. The third-person narrator and past tense are used to penetrate inside the character's conscious or not-so-conscious thoughts, perceptions and feelings (Banfield, 1982; Genette, 1980). At the same time, in all of her novels, the multiple narrative voices add more depth to the fictional characters. Also, the subjective perception of external stimuli by the individual mind is represented and the readers' own sensory participation in forming a response to the texts is encouraged (Parsons, 2006).

The author, aiming to convey the fullness of adolescent experience, rejects both the romantic myth of innocence for and in childhood (Rose, 1984) and the concept of a "happy ending" in adolescent fiction considering on the one hand that adolescents constitute a distinct group of readers, since they prefer realistic texts seen through their own perspective that are not caught up in the lure of didacticism (Tribunella, 2010: 89) but "help teenagers in their search for understanding the complex world of today" (Herz & Gallo, 2005: xvi) and, on the other hand, that the "child" is no more than a construction that varies according to the demands of different perspectives and ideologies (Lesnik-Oberstein, 1994:10).

Bearing in mind that the exposure of young adult readers to traumatic events enables them to better understand others and themselves and to "dissolve" between childhood and adulthood, (Westwater, 2000), Antoniou renders in fiction the plurality of life as we experience it and draws attention to the creative effort of her art, writing stories that are characterised by the adolescent perspective, raw realism, and a somewhat naturalistic disposition. Trauma is "a peculiar kind of wound" (Marder, 2006: 1), "a piercing of the skin, a breaking of the bodily envelope" (Garland 9); it is not just a "simple illness of a wounded psyche: it is always the story of a wound that cries out, that addresses us in the attempt to tell us of a reality or truth that is otherwise unavailable" (Caruth, 1996:4). Since there is no specific set of physical manifestations identifying it, it presents a unique set of challenges to understanding. Therefore, drawing upon trauma studies that explore the impact of trauma in literature by

analysing its rhetorical, psychological and cultural significance paired with psychoanalytic theories that examine emotional suffering in texts, the study investigates trauma's representation in language, the complex psychological and social factors that influence the Self's comprehension of traumatic experiences and how the adolescent protagonists "come of age" having experienced extreme events (Caruth, 1995; Felman & Laub, 1992; Mandel, 2006; Rothberg, 2000). The study is also inspired by the argument that in order to perceive and comprehend trauma in literary works we need to acknowledge its various facets and to take into consideration various contextual aspects (Balaev, 2012, 2014).

The texts under scrutiny are also approached through qualitative content analysis in combination with the main features of New Criticism: theme, plot, setting, and the representations of their main character's development. In order to examine the texts' aesthetic principles and thematic concerns and the way the author captures the evolutionary structure of adolescent subjectivity caught between the characters' "stream of consciousness" (Saha, 2016) and unconscious transactions of both childhood and adulthood, enabling her readers to assume an adolescent identity (a challenge initiated by the act of reading adolescent narratives), the study relies on narrative theory and uses insights from psychoanalytic and psycho-linguistic theories (Coats, 2004; Kristeva, 1984; Winnicott, 1971) as well as the evolving body of critical research on YAL and the application of literary criticism and theory to adolescent fiction (Aljomaa, 2018; Lesnik-Oberstein, 2004). Regarding the interrelationships between the text and the reader the study supports Barthes's account of textual pleasure on reading rebellious narratives that demand readers' effective participation, where pleasure becomes *jouissance* (1976). Finally, the study explores the author's ideology.

"The Summer I Grew Up"

The novel's main protagonist and first person narrator is Anna, a teenager who epitomises the adolescent's troubled state which is further exacerbated by a particularly horrific historical crisis; along with her mother, she encounters a high degree of anger and abuse in her home environment due to her violent father, who "managed to build the image of a perfect father and a perfect husband" (Antoniou, 2017: 74). Anna is a 14-year-old girl who experiences trauma as an event that temporarily shatters her identity; this trauma of hers is unspeakable, since she is ashamed of what she experiences and somehow feels obliged to support her father's fake image, at least in the beginning of her journey into maturity, remaining outside narrative representation. Thanks to her thoughts and interior monologues readers are informed about how she constantly wished to become "invisible" in order to avoid her father's repeated, sudden episodes of impulsive, aggressive behaviour and verbal outbursts that "could make one cry even without yelling" (ibid: 34) and "nullified the moments of her life" (8). The father threatened to kill her mother because he was jealous of her and intimidated the protagonist to a point that she had "to oppress her

true desires" (32). She was allowed to have "neither a cell phone nor a computer" (30), and her father would even "monitor her calls from the landline" (30), making her feel like "a fly trapped in a car, desperately searching for an exit to fly again freely" (43).

The adolescent protagonist is thwarted by her father, who "seemed to always stand above her joy and cast his shadow" (15), causing her "nightmares" and "claustrophobia" (60) to such an extent that she sometimes even "wished to die" (73). Anna comes of age when she witnesses her mother, filled with guilt, shame, and reluctance, becoming a victim of her father's lies every time he expressed remorse for his actions and brought her flowers, sweets, and gifts, promising that he "would do anything to ensure that his family would be united" (22). Eventually Anna comes of age when she gets tired of "always doing something other than what she truly wanted" (32) and realizes that she must set up clear boundaries and attain a stable identity of discrete borders. In certain points within the novel the young protagonist is represented to perceive herself as a separate human being, setting her own boundaries between herself and the others, such as the incident when she consciously clashes with her family environment (Moretti, 1998:64-9; Moretti, 2000:16) and decides to go to the party of the boy she had fallen in love with, overtaking the fact that her father had just beat her and disregarding his threats that "she would die" (38) if she dared to live like a girl her age – an episode which arguably symbolises the painful yet necessary attempt of an adolescent to free up their enclosed boundaries for renewal and claim their right for freedom, socialisation, peace and romance.

It may be stated that Antoniou wrote this novel in order to encourage her readers, who are equally allowed to identify with the protagonist's subject, to reposition themselves in relation to family structures and define their own boundaries which may often be a poignant experience that turns out to be rewarding in terms of their own subject-formation. In this particular coming-of-age novel, Anna is morally vindicated when her persistent efforts to convince her mother to break free from their oppressor finally bear fruit. The catalyst for her mother to take action and assert her rights in her personal space is the brutal beating of Anna, whose personal growth also comes through the sad realisation that her father behaved this way because he was himself mistreated as a child: "His father was an alcoholic and his mother abandoned him at a young age". Anna's coming of age is accomplished the moment she realises that her father had nothing personal against her or her mother but instead suffered the fear of abandonment and, since he did not have the opportunity to mature himself, he adopted the dysfunctional behaviour of his caregiver (Widom, 2001). Her own difficult stage of transition from childhood to maturity is fulfilled when she understands and accepts her mother's passivity, taking into consideration the fact that she had no experience with an angry or unavailable parent on her behalf.

"Where Did Your Laughter Go, Orsalia?"

In this novel, readers become familiar with the experience of losing a loved one while the author underlines the impact of parental attitudes on adolescents' psychology in

similar circumstances. She also indirectly correlates parental behaviour with the development of their personality. By portraying the way of coping with loss by a ten-year-old boy, it may be argued that Antoniou, as she delves into death, exorcises one of the most significant aspects of human life and nature (Seibert & Drolet, 1993), while “violating childrens’ mythic innocent status” (Coats, 2004: 145-46) and adopting Kristeva's perception that adolescence can occur at any age.

Solon, the protagonist and first-person narrator, is a “fragile” boy who must deal with the death of his twin sister, Orsalia, and, at the same time, confront psychological obstacles in order to establish a secure place in the adults’ world. Given that traumatic experiences, although repressed, often return in dreams (Freud 1920: 8), we read that Solon continues to “search for his dead sister’s laughter in his dreams” and relies on his memories of her to confront this traumatic experience. While dealing with death and at the same time trying to distinguish between himself from the outside world, the protagonist is described as overwhelmed with: rage, posing questions such as “why someone reaches a hundred, and another doesn't even make it to ten” (Antoniou, 2018:11); guilt, because the last thing he did to Orsalia before she died was to call her “stupid” during a sibling argument and told her “not to sleep in the same room with him” (27); and fear, about “what he would do if his parents died” (65).

Solon serves as a role model since he undergoes a maturing process within the traumatized environment in which he lives. His parents, instead of providing him with biological and psychological support, create a stifling and unstable environment for him. His constantly anxious father lets fear overwhelm him and “did not let his son do anything anymore” (25), a behaviour that he justifies by saying that it is his duty to protect his child from “life’s unpredictability” (14), and essentially deprives him of carefreeness and joy, under the pretext of “fearing that he would lose him, too” (24). Solon is described as overwhelmed, due to his father’s pressure to manically “drink juices and take vitamins” “for his own good”, not to engage in bicycle races “and not to play with his best friends, as there was a risk of sweating and getting sick” (14). Apart from facing his own fears and his father's oppressive behaviour, Solon is also represented as struggling to understand and to confront his mother's trauma response: unspeakability and dissociation (Caruth 1996: 160, 163; Van der Kolk et al, 1996), which he perceives at first as indifference. It is not easy for young Solon to realise that his mother is in mourning and, as a result, is disconnected from her thoughts, feelings, memories or sense of identity while coping with her emotional suffering (Caruth 1996: 61). He is hurt by the fact that his mother resigned from her duties as a mother and wife, “was antisocial” (40), did not cook for them, “avoided to even look at her son” (19) and was so “detached from what was going on around her” that she even “slept with blankets, even though it was mid-summer” (21).

As the main character did not receive the emotional support he needed from his parents, who did not share their thoughts and emotions within the family environment and refused to contribute to the preservation of the vivid memory of his beloved sister, he faces insomnia and depression and believes that he “destroyed everything” (31)

with his presence. Thanks to the psychologist he turns to, Alexia, a secondary character, Solon finally understands that his parents' silence and unspeakability were a strategic and self-conscious mechanism for coping with their daughter's death (Mandel, 2006: 172); that his mother "was not angry with him" (Antoniou, *ibid*, 22), as he initially thought, because "he was the one that survived" and "she was left stuck with him" (31), but rather she was behaving like this because of her dissociative disorder.

Alexia, the protagonist's psychotherapist, stands out as a discreet mentor who "knows how to make everything sweeter" (30) and makes "the iceberg that had grown in his heart melt" (34) with her comforting words. Near her, Solon completes his apprenticeship process as in an *Erziehungsroman* (Buckley, 1974: 17). Upon her encouragement he starts keeping a diary, which his mother reads, and only then does she realize the pain she has caused her son. It could thus be claimed that, by mentioning Solon's visits to the psychologist, the author aims to reduce or remove the social stigma associated with seeking help from a psychologist or undergoing therapy, while she emphasizes the fact that people who have had traumatic experiences can gain a greater understanding of the harsh events through the narrative reproduction of the past (Freud, 1920: 19, 20).

Additionally, it could be argued that she enables implied readers to share their own consciousness with Solon's consciousness, and to vicariously experience this provisional state of re-identification (Holland, 1989: 35). This is probably why she presents Solon as growing up abruptly but sufficiently, capable of reconciling with his grief, of appreciating himself, asserting his independence (Coats, 1999) and defending his right to maintain friendships with the people he chooses, realising that "regardless of how his parents react, he bears no responsibility about anything whatsoever." (Antoniou, *ibid*: 34). The novel ends with Solon forgiving his wounded parents and accepting that trauma's unspeakability is one of many responses to death (Breuer and Freud, 1955: 35) while promising that he "will never forget Orsalia's laughter" (Antoniou, *ibid*: 63). It could therefore be supported that while she encourages the readers' response to narrative, she underlines that proper communication, patience and understanding are the best ways to tackle family crises and that she empowers adolescent readers who lack emotional support from their parents to realise that often adults are unable to deal with their own psychological traumas.

"Photographs in Black Background"

This is also an adolescent text which appears to be written in a way that engages readers and demands their active participation. As in the previous novels, the main character fights her way into maturity through an extremely tragic event; her sexual assault by her mother's boyfriend. Amalia, the 16-year-old protagonist and first-person narrator, is unable to seek support from friends since she does not have any. She becomes antisocial after the incident and has difficulties trusting other people, unable to receive support from her broken family. Thus, she is represented as struggling alone

with this traumatic experience and attempting to cope by defying adult authorities and forgiving herself and her mother for not having done anything to prevent her assault. The text uses an unconventional narrative style and employs powerful and graphic descriptions of the feelings of rape victims. This approach can be emotionally charged and thought-provoking, requiring readers to engage with the text on a deeper level to fully understand and empathize with the experiences of the adolescent protagonist.

Amalia's "childhood ended at eight" (Antoniou, 2021: 39), when "her mother allowed X", her rapist "to enter their lives" (22). Through her inner thoughts readers are informed that she constantly wishes she could fly into the past and transform herself "into the fairy girl" (13) she once was, when she was filled with joy; when she was not deterred by her parents' divorce or the fact that she and her mother, a cleaning lady, live in a "cold and filthy house" (23). After her rape by X, the rich man who seemed as a saviour to her mother's eyes when she first went to his house as a cleaning lady, Amalia admits that she has lost her optimism and will to live. After the tragic incident she "did not see bright colours nor rainbows around her" but only "the mould in her mother's house", and she could only smell "her father's alcoholic breath, his girlfriend's burnt food", and "X's heavy cologne" (30).

Notably, the author studied in detail the profiles of those who have been rape victims. Amalia behaves and speaks in a way that conveys her despair, low self-esteem, melancholy, rage, aggressive behaviour, wonder, guilt, isolation and suicidal tendencies (Gilmore, et al 2020): "She ate her lunch in solitude" and "lived a life on the edge of the precipice" (Antoniou, *ibid*: 88) with her soul full of "fear, jealousy and loneliness" (89), while her heart could "feel nothing but pain, anger and hatred" (76). She is constantly swearing as she is angry about what happened to her and she constantly wants to "throw up" in front of seemingly or truly happy people. Amalia confirms Cathy Caruth's argument, according to which, "to be traumatized is precisely to be possessed by an image or event" (1995:4). According to her innermost thoughts, she hates herself so much that she "scrubbed her skin to bleed in the shower with rage" (Antoniou, *ibid*: 18), aiming to wash away X's dirt and "the stench she felt hidden under her skin" (47). She only finds relief in taking pictures of other people, "stealing something from their lives" (15) concentrating on their faces, so as to "forget the face that had been chasing her for the last eight years" (63). She "imagined herself living the life she dreamed of", where "she would fear nothing" (70) like the people in the photographs, with which she decorates her room. She even paints the walls black to fit her dark mood.

When Amalia is not longing for her life before she was eight years old, she "often imagined herself dying" (18). She also make numerous chilling and, admittedly, shocking scenarios about "X's death" (104). As the novel depicts the indelible imprint of the "eternal X" on Amalia's soul, who feels as if she has been "condemned" to "eternal darkness" by his "eternal hand", "and his icy fingertips" (60), the first-person narrator admits that "even if she saw her rapist in front of her, a dead carcass wormed in the ground, his hand would still wrap around her body for ever and ever, as if it were a poisonous snake" (20). Notably, in her novel, the author describes X's behaviour in a

way that proves that she had also studied sexual predators' traits, arguably in order to warn her readers about sexual abuse.

Interestingly, Antoniou represents Amalia's desire to return to the mother's womb, the archetype of supreme security and pleasure, "one's warm, hungerless paradise before birth" (Holland, *ibid*: 45), in an attempt to depict her desire of feeling safe again. The narrator confesses that after her first rape, she "layed like a foetus, begging for a mother to accept her tiny existence inside her" (Antoniou, *ibid*: 18). She states:

"I will always be amazed by the female womb. This little nest, with the ability to protect and nurture the most precious thing in the universe. Human life. I will still be amazed by the contrast of the womb with the outside world. How the outside world has the ability to hurt, harm, and destroy the most precious thing in the universe?" (*ibid*: 40).

As Amalia is battling to overcome her insecurities and define her own boundaries (Coats, 2004: 145), she looks back on her intrauterine life and wishes to "become an embryo again and return to her mother's womb, the only place she wanted to be" (Antoniou, *ibid*: 19), so as to bear "the pitifulness of her existence" (53), and to "be fearless, as she would have a mother singing to her heavenly lullabies" (99).

Feeling unable to constitute her own entity, Amalia cannot create a space of her own away from the mother. We read:

"In some other life, I fear I will open a door and find myself in a warm baby's room. Inside the room, there will be a mother sitting on a wooden rocking chair. Immediately, I will become a baby and go into her arms to be put to sleep" (99).

But as it is impossible to return to her mother's womb, Amalia is represented as feeling unsafe and believing that "she would feel like this as an adult, too" (48). All she can do to remain protected is to wear "wide woollen blouses", and "baggy clothes" (43) "that made her look ridiculous" (44) but she prefers this to having men "looking at her body, whether with lust or of mere curiosity" (55).

Indeed, Amalia's mother fails to make her feel safe. Instead, she forces her to remain silent whenever she tries to discuss her assault in the hands of X and warns her not to "dare ruin her happiness" (97). Amalia is represented as delving into her mother's past so as to understand her, and only when she eventually realises that her mother is too miserable to be able to help her, does she forgive her. Amalia dismisses the attachment to her mother and everything that "threatened the purity of her own body" and soul (Lechte, 1990: 159) when she comprehends that her grandparents, whom she names "grey, drowned souls" (Antoniou, *ibid*: 16), "neither gave worth to her mother nor to their other nine children" (17). It was thus natural for Amalia's mother to get married to the first guy she met, solely "to escape from the unhappy and difficult

family environment in which she had grown up" (33), "believing that she would escape from her misery" (30); something that turned out to be untrue, since Amalia's father proved to be a "worthless drunkard" (13) who spent his nights with other women and at parties. Taking into consideration the above, Amalia ultimately comes of age, and to terms with the adult world, after forgiving her mother, who found it difficult to accept that the second man in her life abused her daughter. Yielding to her need "to feel normal again", (12,28,32) she manages to build new forms of contact with others (Caruth,1996:10-11) and befriends her classmate Billy. Thanks to his discretion and gentle nature he wins a place in her heart and makes her feel like "spring on its brightest days" (107).

Conclusion

Adolescence is a time of metamorphosis and transition. It is often portrayed as a psychodynamic phenomenon in narratives of adolescence, where the exploration and negotiation of identities are central themes. Young Adult fiction frequently delves into the challenges and transformations that adolescents undergo as they navigate the complexities of their identities, emotions, and relationships during this crucial stage of development (Kristeva, 1995: 139). These stories often resonate with readers in the same age group who are also experiencing similar psychodynamic changes and identity struggles. For the purpose of this study, I examined novels where the mythical notion of childhood is undermined and the adolescent (character or implied reader) is approached as an *espace* where "the two edges of childhood and adulthood simultaneously ebb and tide towards the adolescent" (Mervat, 2010: 2). Antoniou seems to understand contemporary social and individual adolescent issues. Taking into consideration that literature serves as a powerful medium through which we share complex emotions and experiences that often transcend the constraints of conventional forms of expression, she wrote novels that manifest particular dynamics of adolescence with its general connotations of metamorphosis, whose protagonists undergo psychological tension not only because of the unsettling transition from childhood to adulthood, but also because they had to cope with trauma in their daily life.

Their free indirect discourse and interior monologues coexist with the voices of the secondary characters and create multifocal narratives that allow the audience to examine the represented events from multiple perspectives, connect what they read with real-world occurrences, and reflect on child abuse, a global issue having serious causes and consequences that most often accompany the abused individual into adulthood. However, since the protagonists in the novels under study are represented as being engaged in an ongoing process of subject formation, a process that may result in articulating a stable future identity, it is implied that adolescents have the power to shape their identities in dynamic ways, just as the novels' characters are able to gain self-awareness, regenerate and negotiate their own being, despite facing harsh realities (Trites, *ibid.* 2). In this way, Antoniou confirms that contemporary novels for young adults, even when addressing "difficult" issues, can provide readers with a

hopeful ending. Through the combination of fiction with the realistic portrayal of social reality and the use of simple language, it may be supported that Antoniou highlights the complexity of trauma in a way that proves that adolescent fiction allows us to explore the depths of human existence, offering insights, as well as allowing us to process and communicate traumatic events (Marder, 2006: 3).

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