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Nature-Young Adult Relationship in Anderson's *Speak*: An Ecofeminist Reading

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Abstract

*This paper explores ecofeminism through a connection to the nature and a sexually assaulted young adult girl in Laurie Halse Anderson's novel *Speak*. This study argues that adolescents suffer from the effects of rape. It also contends that aside from abusing teenagers, sexual assaulters also damage the victim's ability to interact with the outside world. The rapists prevent the female protagonist from having healthy relationship with the nature. Therefore, it is crucial to re-establish connections with oneself, other people, and the natural environment in order to escape the horrible act of physical violation. For that purpose, this research paper employs the perspectives of Roberta S. Trites about young adults; and opinions of Carlos J. Adams and Greta Gaard about ecofeminism. In conclusion, this study hopes to pave the path for future research into the comprehensive interaction between a young adult's (female) body and nature.*

Keywords: young adult, rape, nature, rapists and ecofeminism

Introduction

The young adult novel *Speak* (1999) written by Laurie Halse Anderson primarily narrates the turbulent emotions of a fourteen-year-old, ninth grader, raped-female young adult, Melinda Sordino who studies at Merryweather High School. She encounters bullying and isolation in the numerous ventures of life activities. As the novel opens, she is quiet, unhappy, and aloof. Only at the end of the novel she speaks against body colonization and bullying. She steps into the positive and hopeful direction of life. Then, what drives the sexually traumatized adolescent to explore her lack of hope in life is the question that comes to mind. So, this paper attempts to dissect various conditions the young adult protagonist Melinda encounters after her rape by Andy Evans. It interrogates what kinds of problems Melinda face to build up her relationship with the outer world and the nature. It also examines interlink between the victim and the perspectives of ecofeminism. This study further analyzes the importance of reconnection of Melinda with oneself, others and the natural world to overcome the unsettled emotions of rape. Many scholars and theorists have dealt the issues of young adults, rape and ecofeminism. However, this paper employs the perspectives of Roberta S. Trites, Carlos J. Adams and Greta Gaard to analyze the arguments of young adult, rape victim, nature and woman.

Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

Following its release, a number of critics and academics have shared their thoughts on *Speak*. Numerous interpretations exist regarding young adult literature. Victor Malo-Juvera illuminates, "Young adult literature has traditionally been portrayed as a way to motivate disengaged students, it has also been argued that reading young adult literature provides possibilities for assisting adolescents with specific issues such as alienation, abuse, disabilities, eating disorders, divorce, adoption, substance abuse, teen pregnancy, and even suicide"(409). He means that the conventional view of young adult literature is that it can help disengaged students become more motivated. However, some argue that reading young adult literature can help adolescents who are dealing with particular problems like alienation, abuse, disabilities, eating disorders, divorce, adoption, substance abuse, teen pregnancy, and even suicide. Victor underlines the uses of YA literature. He further puts his ideas on *Speak*, a typical text of YA literature. He argues that the protagonist Melinda, "throughout the novel, struggles with increasingly severe psychological trauma as she struggles to remain in denial" (415). He claims that Melinda battles progressively severe psychological damage throughout the book while trying to maintain her denial. He further contends that the novel can be a means of changing the attitude of young adults about date rape. Then he concludes, "While date rape continues to be a serious problem for the youth today, this study offers promise in showing that it is possible to change students' attitudes toward rape by using a young adult novel in the context of English language arts instruction"(422). He clarifies that even though date rape is still a major issue for young people today, this study shows that using a young adult novel in the context of English language arts training can help students improve their attitudes regarding rape.

Another critic Lisa Detora puts various opinions on *Speak* and its protagonist Melinda in "Coming of Age in Suburbia: Sexual Violence, Consumer Goods and Identity Formation in Recent YA Novels". Detora underscores, "Melinda gradually discovers that her primary failure, to find a voice, equally prevents her from saying "no" to an attacker, reporting what happened, or answering questions in history class. Her quest to claim a voice and an identity propels the powerful coming-of-age narrative of a young girl overcoming a significant trauma at her initiation into sexual identity" (26). She underlines that Melinda gradually realizes that her inability to find her voice is the main thing keeping her from reporting what happened, refusing an attacker, and responding to questions in history class. The moving coming-of-age story of a young girl enduring a tremendous trauma at her introduction into sexual identity is propelled by her drive to establish a voice and an identity. Detora further claims, "*Speak* emphasizes the simultaneous compunction to speak and remain silent about sexual trauma, creating a compelling primary focus each author handles with sensitivity" (27). She means that *Speak* highlights the conflicting impulses to talk and keep quiet regarding sexual trauma, establishing a powerful central theme that each author sensitively addresses. Additionally, she offers some ways for the teenagers to get past their issues. She acknowledges, "The potential for recovery from trauma by the use of consumer products comes at a price: neglecting the emotional work of differentiating the allure of capitalism from more valuable relationships based on common interests or true sentiment" (33). She means that the use of consumer goods has the ability to help people recover from trauma, but doing so has a cost: ignoring the emotional labor involved in separating the appeal of capitalism from more meaningful connections based on genuine feelings or shared interests.

Elaborating the importance of young adult literature to teens and the critical reading of *Speak* in "Politicizing YA Literature: Reading Anderson's *Speak* as a Critical Text", Janet Alsup contends, "Literature can be a way for teens to release these tensions, and the literature class can become a forum for talking about issues adolescents want and need to talk about but are often too shy or embarrassed to address" (160). Alsup suggests that YA literature can be a window for the young adults to gaze the things which are unnoticed. She adds more points about *Speak* how trauma stands instrumental in the life of Melinda and her friends. Then she claims, "The emotional and psychological effects of Melinda's rape are devastating, not only because of her personal trauma but also because none of her girlfriends know or understand what happened" (161). The forced sexual activity does not only affect to Melinda but also to her friends as well. Alsup considers the ending of the novel incorporates positivity. She believes, "The end of the book is positive as Melinda begins to come to terms with her trauma and regains her dignity (and her voice) with the help, in part, of a supportive art teacher"(162). By that, she means positive things happen at the end of the novel as Melinda starts to process her trauma and regain her voice and dignity with the assistance of an understanding art teacher, among other things.

Reconnecting the novel with trauma in "Like Falling up into a Storybook: Trauma and Inter textual Repetition in Lauri Halse Anderson's *Speak*", Barbara Tannert- Smith

asserts, "Laurie Halse Anderson's award-winning young adult novel *Speak*, with its vivid depiction of the teenage protagonist's rape, recovery, and coming out as a rape victim, is one of the most popular and critically acclaimed examples of trauma fiction written for young adults" (397). Tannert-Smith considers the novel *Speak* as a much-admired trauma narrative. She further claims, "Anderson's novel also exemplifies the difficult ethical and ideological questions that attend this generic revision" (397). She also connects trauma of the protagonist with the identity. Then she reveals, "The trauma of her rape causes Melinda's fragile sense of adolescent identity to disappear" (399). Finally, she concludes, "The example of *Speak* suggests that young adult trauma fiction may in fact be a genre of literature that effectively makes these anxieties manifest, and in so doing it foregrounds how, for the young adult writer once a young adult herself, such anxieties may not be resolvable in recovery at all" (410). She means that the case study of *Speak* raises the possibility that young adult trauma fiction is a genre of writing that successfully brings these fears to light. By doing so, it highlights the possibility that these fears may never be fully resolved in recovery for the young adult author who was once a young adult herself.

Relating and problematizing violence in Young Adult Literature, Judith Franzak and Elizabeth Noll argue, "*Speak* explores the psychic violence that accompanies physical assault. In Melinda's internal dialogue, readers experience her alienation from all that the institution of school represents. The structural-cultural level of violence is evident in the way Melinda internalizes guilt, even though she is the victim of crime" (668). Franzak and Noll emphasize the importance of problematization and internalization of the violence by Melinda. Concurring with them, Chris Crowe advocates how the voices of the students or teenagers are undermined or unheard by the institutions and adults in "Young Adult Literature; Defending YA Literature: Voices of Student". Crowe asserts, "Melinda is a lonely ninth grade girl. The summer before she started high school, the people she had thought were her friends ditched her because she called the cops to break up a party she was at with her friends. Ever since the party, no one will talk to her, and no one will even listen to her reasons for calling the police. She is invisible to everyone in school" (117). Crowe discloses the sufferings and challenges faces by the young adults in the course of growing up.

To the best of my knowledge, not many academics have thoroughly analyzed and studied all of the evaluations of *Speak* from the standpoint of ecofeminism. The novel's analysis that links young adult rape with ecofeminism is still lacking in research. So, Roberta S. Trites, Carlos J. Adams, and Greta Gaard's points of view have helped to examine a research gap. Trites examines various aspects of adolescents. She primarily delves into the relationship or conflict between social forces and adolescents. In *Disturbing the Universe: Power and Repression in Adolescent Literature*, Trites writes, "In the adolescent novel, protagonists must learn about the social forces that have made them what they are. They learn to negotiate the levels of power that exist in the myriad social institutions within which they must function, including family; school; the church; government; social constructions of sexuality, gender, race, class; and cultural mores

surrounding death" (3). She indicates that the protagonists of the teenage novel need to understand the societal influences that have shaped who they are. They acquire the ability to navigate the various power structures found in the various social institutions they must operate in, such as the family, the church, the government, the school, the social constructions of sexuality, gender, and race, and the cultural mores surrounding death.

In addition, Trites introduces young adults to sexual activity on a deeper level. She contends, "Adolescent novels that deal with sex, whether they are obviously ideological, usually contain within them some sort of power dynamic wherein the character's sexuality provides him or her with a locus of power" (85). She intends to vindicate that sex-related adolescent novels, even those that are overtly ideological, typically have a power dynamic where the character's sexuality gives him or her a locus of power. Linking sexual activity with the feminism and nature, another scholar Carlos J. Adams familiarizes dualism through ecofeminism in "Ecofeminism and the Eating of Animals". Adams pleads, "Ecofeminism identifies a series of dualism: culture/nature, male/female, self/other, rationality/emotion and humans/animals" (125). Ecofeminism seeks to dismantle these dualism in order to promote equality, justice, and sustainability for all beings.

Adams also addresses ontological issues. He argues, "Ontology recapitulates ideology. In other words, ideology creates what appears to be ontological: If women are ontologised as sexual beings, animals are ontologised as carriers of meat" (126). He intends to say that ideology is reviewed in ontology. Put another way, ideology produces what seems ontological: If women are considered sexual entities, then animals are considered ontologous as meat-bearers. Furthermore, an additional academic Greta Gaard expands upon ecofeminism by incorporating the idea of vegetarianism. In "Ecofeminism Revisited: A Review Essay," Gaard makes a connection between ecofeminist and vegetarian viewpoints to revitalize the relationship between nature and women. She argues, "Vegetarians and Ecofeminists have been able to make sympathetic connections between human experiences and the experiences of animals" (120). She means that compassionate linkages between the experiences of humans and animals have been established by ecofeminists and vegetarians.

Integration of the ideas of Trites, Adams and Gaard about the teenagers, nature, animals and women supports to analyze the novel comprehensively by connecting rape of young adults with the lens of ecofeminism. These viewpoints serve as agencies to explore the novel's arguments that foster the teenagers' rape and ecofeminism. These perspectives facilitate to draw conclusions about how a raped teenage girl can resemble nature and what can be done to better both the girl's and nature's conditions.

Understanding Ecofeminism in Young Adult Novel *Speak*: An Analysis

Understanding the traits of adolescents serves as a foundation for investigating the relationship between nature and raped young adults. The term young adult, coined in 1957 for the first time, refers to the adolescent who is within the range of twelve to nineteen years old. Children in this age group are referred to as young adults, teenagers, or adolescents. Nonetheless, the phrase "young adult" has a significant place in the literature.

Compared to other human demographic divisions, young adults have specific qualities. Resonating the characteristics of the young adult, Trites argues, "Indeed, adolescents occupy an uncomfortable liminal space in America. Adolescents are both powerful in the youthful looks with physical prowess and disempowered. It is no wonder that the body of literature linked to this population pursues the exploration of power relentlessly" ("Preface", xi). She intends to say that teenagers do, in fact, live in an awkward transitional period in America. Adolescents are both disempowered and strong in their youthful appearance and physical prowess. It makes sense that the literature associated with this group constantly explores the concept of power. In the same vein, Melinda from *Speak* encounters disempowered milieu despite having youthful appearance. Having been sexually assaulted by Andy Evans, she feels alone and depressed in the school. She claims, "I am Outcast" (4). She does not find her space in the school. She herself evokes as outcast. She finds herself disempowered. No friends of Melinda desire to sit with her. Her former best friend Rachel especially demonstrates her cruelty towards her.

Melinda showcases skeptical attitude in the school premises as the young adults are found quite cynical. They do not believe adults and even to their friends. Tuning with this notion, Trites argues, "Disbelieving to others stands as a part of young adults" (23). Young adults are known to be disbelieving of others. Melinda finds ten lies occurred in the school premises. On the one hand, they claim, "We are here to help you" (5), her friends and the school administration, however, are unable to provide her with this level of collaboration. She reacts dubiously to the behavior of Heather as well. She retorts him as "Another wounded zebra turns and smiles at me" (5). She tags him as a different injured zebra turns to face me and smiles. She is incredibly cynical but she is smart and funny as well.

Melinda's depression continues for a long time. The dualism persists within herself. She attempts to differentiate between herself and others. She employs mocking technique to overcome the depression and alienation. She ridicules the English teacher by projecting her teacher as:

Hair woman wastes twenty minutes taking attendance because she won't look at us.
She keeps her head bent over her desk so the hair flops in front of her face.
She spends the rest of the class writing on the board and speaking to the flag about our required reading. She wants us to write in our class journals every day, but promises not to read them. I write about how weird she is. (6)

Her English teacher assigns writing assignments centered on daily life. She makes fun of her though, writing about how strange she is. In the same vein, Adams argues, "According to ecofeminist theory, nature has been dominated by culture; female has been dominated by male and emotion has been dominated by rationality" (125). Ecofeminist philosophy holds that society has controlled nature, and that emotion has been dominated by reason, women by men, and women by themselves. Melinda herself feels stigmatized from the beginning in the school. Her activities produce the sense of self alienated and aspire to unearth a new voice and consciousness.

Melinda's emotions spread positively and vibrantly when she gets a tree in the art room as an assignment. She employs the tree as a source of sharing her emotions with her friends. She shares her thing with Rachel. Nevertheless, Rachel bulls her continuously. Melinda reveals, "Rachelle blows a candy cigarette smoke ring at my face. Blows me off. I have been dropped like a hot Pop Tart on a cold kitchen floor" (21). Despite these activities, Melinda seems to be happy and driven following the attachment with the tree, however, the sense of disconnectedness and isolation still prevails within herself as Adams argues, "Ecofeminism affirms that individuals can change, and in changing we reposition our relationship with the environment" (140). Repositioning our relationship with the environment, ecofeminism maintains that individuals are capable of change. In the same way, Melinda takes tree as a source of transformation in her life.

Having observed tree surgeon trimming a tree in her backyard, Melinda goes to visit the place where she was raped. In a serene orchard, she makes a commitment to tend to her former self like a seed in the hopes that she would soon be able to flourish once more. Melinda implants her confidence to be brighten and workable in future. She projects her hope in this way:

I have survived. I am here. Confused, screwed up, but here. So, how can I find my way? Is there a chain saw of the soul, an ax I can take to my memories or fears? I dig my fingers into the dirt and squeeze. A small, clean part of me waits to warm and burst through the surface. Some quiet Melinda girl I haven't in months. That is the seed I will care for. (188-9)

Melinda's traumatic expression resonates when she revisits the sexually assaulted location. However, association with the nature nurtures her to grow and rise again. Correlating with this opinion, Gaard discloses various aspects of vegetarian ecofeminist. She explicates, "Vegetarian ecofeminists have also contributed to the conceptual development of ecofeminist theory more broadly by introducing several theoretical concepts that illuminate human-nature relations: the truncated narrative, the critique of holism, the absent referent, the mass term, and contextual moral vegetarianism" (133). Additionally, by introducing various theoretical concepts that shed light on human-nature relations, vegetarian ecofeminists have contributed to the broader conceptual development of ecofeminist theory.

Melinda's upsetting experiences continue for a long time because of Andy Evans. He even attempts to rape her in a second time. As he goes to unzip his jeans, Melinda screams 'no'. She beseeches, "A sound explodes from Me. 'NNNOOO!' I follow the sound, pushing off the wall, pushing Andy Evans off balance, stumbling into the broken sink. He curses and turns, his fist coming, coming. An explosion in my head and blood in my mouth. He hit me. I scream, scream" (194). She involves into the violence against Evans. She employs her both inner and outer strength to gain her maturity and independence. Adams tunes with the given context as, "In ontologizing women and animals as objects, our language simultaneously eliminates the fact that someone else is acting as a subject/agent/perpetrator of violence" (136). By treating women and animals as

objects, our language also removes the possibility that someone else is committing acts of violence as a subject, an agency, or a perpetrator. Evans treats Melinda as object. He commodifies Melinda for acquiring sexual aspiration. In this context, Melinda's objection functions as a beginning of resolution for identity and maturity. Speaking against her rapist can be seen as a metaphor for breaking the silence and challenging oppressive systems. She even imagines killing him in her dreams.

Encountering multiple hindrances and obstacles in the course of life following the rape event, finally she sits in the art room and at last creates an imperfect but beautiful tree. She reconnects with oneself, others and natural world for healing and empowerment. Throughout the novel, Melinda's journey towards healing is portrayed as a process of reconnection with her own emotions and with the nature. She begins to add birds in her tree. She explicates, "My tree needs something. I walk over to the desk and take a piece of brown paper and a finger of chalk. Mr. Freeman talks about art galleries and I practice birds- little dashes of color on paper. It's awkward with the bandage on my hand, but I keep trying" (297). She connects herself with the tree. She aspires to decorate the tree. Her development as an enthusiastic artist connects with the development of a person.

Conclusion

To conclude, Melinda's rape incident and her traumatic experiences throughout her school life reinforce the readers to associate the teenagers with the coming of age difficulties and abjection they encounter. Melinda like other teenagers does not get proper support from the friends, adults, institutions and society to cope up with the stigmatized milieu of life. She encounters isolation, bullying, detachment and disconnectedness in her school after the rape incident. She motivates herself toward the rout of growth when she gets a tree to paint in the school. The tree, an integral component of the nature, functions as a nurturing factor in the life of Melinda. She endeavors to draw a good tree by adding different branches and birds. She intends to grow in her life as she decorates the tree. She understands the dichotomy between herself, nature and society. Then she carries herself toward the direction of maturity, freedom and chutzpa. She attempts to gain hope in her life by associating with the tree. The nature stands as an agency to resuscitate Melinda from the state of downheartedness, disinterestedness and distress.

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