

For the Young Adult, Autonomy is a Dream: Tracing the Power Dynamics in Ugandan Literature

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ABSTRACT

Age stereotype and its impact on literature is a factor that has not been sufficiently researched especially in Uganda. This article uses the postcolonial theory to reveal that the young adult demographic category is pushed to the periphery in literature as it is in life. It is part of a research done on representations of the young adult in the fiction of selected Ugandan women writers; where the third objective in the bigger study investigates the power dynamic in literature. The article is a projection of a documentary study that uses critical analysis to explore how young adult characters are denied power in literature. It proposes that since literature has had a positive effect on society by reducing marginality in other aspects, it can do the same in the aspect of young adult power. The study confirms that writers (who target the young adult audience) by portraying young adult characters positively are likely to eventually influence such readers by making them aware of their peripheral positions and subsequently contributing towards redressing the problem of age stereotype. The novel *Voice of a Dream* by Glydah Namukasa (2006) is the core of the analysis.

Keywords: Power¹, Autonomy², Young Adult Characters³

¹Power can be briefly defined as the ability to be autonomous as far as language, decision making, taking responsibility for one's action, and imposing one's will on others for self-survival is concerned.

²Autonomy is the ability to exercise freedom and make independent decisions; to think, act, and speak without restriction. This means that if you have power, you have autonomy.

³Young adults characters are those characters that are: "Not children any longer but, not yet grown-ups". The term has overlapping meanings depending on the definer, the subject where it is being defined and the context where it is applied. Publishers and marketers consider the young adult as that person who is found in fiction that targets an audience of age range 12-18. The protagonist of such fiction is always in that age range. To psychologists, a young adult falls in the category of adolescents; people aged 12-19 years (Hall, 1919). Scholars of young adult literature such as Trites (1998, p. 1) call a young adult "a Hamlet-like middle-aged man who is immobilized by indecision" Another critic of children and young adult literature, Perry Nodelman, (1985) (calls YACs people who "live ordinary lives but see themselves in terms of melodrama" (Ibid, 3), while Dillard in (Jefferson, 1985, 13-18) defining the category in terms of YAL, says that young adult literature depicts an adolescent as the central character rather than a child or an adult. This reference recognizes the fact that an adolescent is in a transitional stage; not a child anymore, not an adult yet but somewhere in between. Young adult characters in this article are considered to be those characters in literature that are not children (1-10 years) though they are not yet adults (above 25 years).

INTRODUCTION

Critical analysis of representations of the young adult character in literature (YAC) is an area that has suffered neglect. This article investigates the representation of the young adult's struggle for power and autonomy in literature. The view that marginalised entities need a voice to air their views is brought out by the nexus between the YAC and the domineering adult character; manifested in

age disparity, adult manipulation, young adult repression, and efforts by the young adult to self-assert. The investigation is based on the postcolonial postulates of otherness, stereotype, and the discourse of the oppressed. The theory redresses the marginality of the disempowered. The treatment of young adults as appendages or mere supplements means that they have no power or authority and the adult parents, guardians and administrators, even authors form

the dominant group that has a colonising presence which overpowers the subordinate one of the young adults.

Everything that a young adult character experiences in a literary work helps the actual young adult in the lived in world to understand her/his confusion during adolescence and affects their emotional and psychological autonomy and eventually their attainment of self-identity. Young adult characters are regarded as people who do not conform to the norm; they are passionate about making an impact on the fictional world and seeing themselves as different from children and adult characters (Rana & Adhikari, 2015). The non-conforming behaviour termed by Roberta Seelinger Trites (1998) as 'disturbing the universe' is regarded by adults as rebellion in life and subsequently in the literature thus the portrayal of YACs as in need of tough restraint and fit candidates for denial of power.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

By doing a concentrated review of literature that locates the young adult's depiction particularly the power dimension in Ugandan literary scholarship and through a descriptive research design and textual analysis, the novel *Voice of a Dream*(2006) by Glydah Namukasa is analysed.

In other critical works in Uganda that analyse literature with young adult characters, the critics do not address young adults as a demographic category or even consider their issues. A good example is Peter Nazareth's article; "Waiting for Amin: Two Decades of Ugandan Literature" (1984) who comments on post-colonial Uganda and concentrates on the effect of Amin's regime on Ugandan literariness particularly, the dearth of creativity during the regime and the flourish of it especially about Amin after his fall. In his article, some works feature young adults but they are not considered as either a demographic or an analytical category. Instead, the works merely use them as 'surrogate carriers' of ideas.

Likewise, Abasi Kiyimba (1998) also comments on the toll that Amin's regime had on the country's literature. He highlights Ugandan writers' portrayal of violence, terror, corruption, and other atrocities, writers unleashing their creativity while in exile and using all manner of genres; such as fables, poetry, etc. to be subtle while others were blatant and spelt it all out. Not even in this article are young adults paid attention to; even when some of the novels analysed feature young adult characters (exemplified by *The Rape of the Pearl* by Magala Nyago, 1985).

In "Male Identity and Female Space in the Fiction of Ugandan Women writers"(2008), Kiyimba, in this very informative article concentrates on patriarchal practices that discriminate women and the way women writers present the power dynamics that exist between them and men. In his article, Kiyimba analyses some of Barbara Kimenye's and Mary Karooro Okurut's novels that feature YACs but he only looks at them from the gender perspective, not from the age viewpoint or even consider their search for autonomy .

Marie Kruger, who redresses the neglect of women's writing in Kenya and Uganda in her article; "Women's Writing in Uganda and Kenya: The Trouble with Modernity" (2011) and tackles matters of marginality, comments on the delayed response of criticism to women's literary creations. She also overlooks the young adult characters and their issues in the women's writing and only looks at their gender-related issues. This article is, however, an analysis of young adult representation in Namukasa's novel *Voice of a Dream* to gauge the magnitude of power that young adults are denied or that they enjoy in an adult dominated setting. The analysis is done by examining related literature and by doing a thorough reading of the fictional work under study using specified post-colonial postulates namely; otherness, stereotype, and the discourse of the oppressed.

DISCUSSION AND RESULTS

In *Voice of a Dream*, Nanfuka a beautiful ambitious girl studying to be a nurse is forced to abandon school to go and take care of her sick father and siblings because her mother has run away from home. Although the story brings out her ambition of becoming a nurse, the circumstances are such that she cannot pursue her dream without a lot of struggle. She is confronted by the father's sickness from AIDS and the obligation to care for her siblings even as her dream of becoming a nurse is paramount in her mind. She has no say in the decisions made about her quitting school and the role she has to assume as a caregiver. Her autonomy is usurped as soon as her father becomes bedridden and her paternal aunt Naka, who is ready to take over the brother's property does not make matters any easier. Nanfuka amidst this emotional maze is depicted as a YAC whose power is controlled by adults.

Trites (1998) using Robert Cormier's *The Chocolate War* (1974) describes the denial of power and autonomy by authors as authorial construction. By using their autonomy, authors manipulate, marginalise, empower, and oppress young adult characters in as much the same way

as it is done by other adults in real life. The construction of YACs as obedient and compliant to adult dictates is almost always justified by the stories' thematic inclinations. Authors, sometimes to preach or to be didactic create situations where family, institutional, church, or other powers are portrayed as supreme, and YACs have to comply. Situations, where the institutions take over, are displayed in *Voice of a Dream* when Nanfuka has to drop out of school as demanded by her family and later when she has to obey the dictates of the Local Council Chairman (to accept her aunt's schemes to marry her off and subsequently take control of her father's property) even when she is the one who is being victimised.

Culturally, Nanfuka as a female young adult is ordained to suffer a certain level of oppression not only as a young adult but also as a girl child and one who is culturally inferior to the adult paternal aunt. Her efforts in self-assertion despite the age and cultural handicaps and her frustrations, echo what Karen Coats (quoted in Trites, 1998, p. 6-7) says about Jerry Renault in (Robert Cormier's *The Chocolate War*);

"Jerry Renault is an example of a person who assumes the position of 'other' into which he has been forced. He starts forced into a position that is painful [and the whole story displays him] in a perpetual relationship of force created by the institutions that constitute the social fabric constructing them".

The quotation fits very well in Nanfuka's circumstances and it underscores the view that young adults have to inevitably acknowledge institutional power meted out to them by adults however impressive and intimidating the young adults may be (Knowles, 2003). Despite the power that they exhibit, the forceful arm of the adult is always there to curb that power.

In *Voice of a Dream*, Nanfuka does not only have power as a brilliant good looking girl at school who has won the love of the most sought after and most elegant male young adult, but she also has the psychological power to dream (her great desire to become a nurse). Her powers are however curtailed by forces beyond her control. As a female YAC who has acquired what Trites calls the "dialectic of the visual" (ibid, 4) that is her beauty and sexual appeal, she cannot exercise this power for fear of the looming HIV and AIDS pandemic. The strength of her personality comes out when, despite the great love she feels for Sendi, she keeps hearing her father's voice telling her never to acquire the

disease. Her ability to say 'No' to Sendi's advances portrays her as a person in control of her sexual urges.

Nanfuka's saying 'No' to sex exposes her triumph over victimisation by Sendi who is well known for sleeping around with girls and boasting about it to his friends. Nanfuka is unwilling to go that far with Sendi and this avoiding of the destructive aspect of sex is a mark of empowerment and autonomy. Although she scores in the autonomy goal here, her representation as a young adult capable of refusing sex is used by the author as a lesson to readers not to succumb to pressure from male young adults and have sex for the sake of it. The author links sex with power and maturation and deconstructs the thinking that one has to have sex to attract the opposite sex or to mature. Nanfuka is made to use all the markers of power⁴ (Roberta S Trites 93) to overcome Sendi's sexual advance. She chooses to say, 'No' to Sendi's lures (power of choice making and power to decline). She as a girl controls the act by rejecting even the suggestion of using a condom (power over) and she says 'No' (the power of the word). Namukasa uses her protagonist to portray the power that the female young adult has as far as sex is concerned. The female's control of the situation is connected to the politics of gender where responsibility for sex control largely lies in the hands of the female. This exposes the author's subscription to the patriarchy status quo in the aspect of sex control.

In the text, we see Sendi who has had sex before, portrayed as a Casanova and a sexually immature person when Nanfuka who is a virgin is represented as being more perceptive and more able to discern likely danger associated with and envisage the possible repercussions before taking the plunge. The author uses this event as an ideological device to control the young adult's sexual drive. Through Nanfuka's response to Sendi's sexual advances, the author exposes the strength of sexuality and the fact that it can result in serious repercussions if not properly handled. She also suggests that recognition of one's sexuality and exploitation of sexual power is inevitable for young adult development. She concurs with other theorists like Hall and Trites that recognition of sexuality

⁴Markers of power are; language, that is the ability to say 'Yes' or 'No', ability to make a choice or decision, being enabled to do say or act according to one's will, and finally, having power over others.

by young adults is a rite of passage. The transit from childhood to adulthood and acquisition of their sexuality is considered as the ritualistic that supposedly leads them to acquiring maturity. This idea is further developed in some of the author's short stories. The link of sex to maturity much as it is an eye-opener compounds my view that the YAC is used by the author to promulgate a particular line of thought.

When Nanfuka is called home from school, her story starts changing. She immediately starts losing some of the biological imperatives of young adulthood (such as; dependency, schooling, implementing the decisions of other people...). Just sixteen years old and in Senior 3, she takes over the mantle of looking after her sick father, her siblings, and later, after the death of the father, of becoming the household head. She is forced to leave school and let go of adolescent fun, games, sports, and her dream of becoming a nurse. Nanfuka leaves school but refuses to let go of her dream. This is yet another manifestation of the young adult's struggle for power. She has the will to dream and hold onto the dream and continually strive to attain it despite all odds.

The adult author in charge of young adult construction and with a lot of authorial power is shown as what DeLuca and Natov (110-111 quoted in Trites p.8) call; "[author's reliance] on adolescence protagonists who strive to understand their power by struggling with the various institutions in their lives." This quotation brings to light Nanfuka's powerlessness and struggles as depicted in the conflict between her and her aunt Naka who schemes and uses her position as a paternal aunt to control Nanfuka and her siblings especially in as far as their property is concerned.

Naka is ready to marry off Nanfuka in order to remove the hurdle between her (aunt Naka) and her brother's property⁵. Through this conflict, the author depicts the young adult gaining skill

⁵In *Buganda, central Uganda, a paternal aunt is chosen to play the role of a go-between or the link between the groom- to-be and the bride- to-be. This auntie normally referred to as 'Senga' is supposed to be respected by both parties; the groom's relatives and those of the bride and she is responsible for training the bride on marital matters especially the sexual aspect*" Stephen Kaduuli, "Kwandhula-Cultural Engagement and Marriage in Busoga and Buganda," Stephen Kaduuli (2010) *Kwandhula: Cultural Engagement and Marriage in Busoga and Buganda [Paperback]* Lambert Academic Publishing (2006).

at negotiating the different institutions that eventually shape her life. She negotiates her family situation, copes with the Kitara village rumours about her frustrated aspirations of becoming a nurse, and later, she negotiates opportunities with the French tourists to manoeuvre and get back to school. All her negotiations are with adults. Fortunately for Nanfuka, she has Nurse Kina, Sendi, and later on her mother, to help her. Her success in negotiating for power is shown to be only successful when adults get involved in the negotiation.

The reliance on adults for young adult's successful negotiations implies that Namukasa, much as she tries to empower the female young adult in her novel, at the same time acknowledges that the adult holds the power reigns. In the novel, it is clear that Nanfuka's struggles would have been futile were it not to be her mother's return and Nurse Kina's assistance. This encapsulates Foucault's view that sometimes the 'contract-oppression', where the individual acts against repression as a form of empowerment, has to be embraced to survive (Foucault, 1980). (Nanfuka realises that she can only go thus far... especially when the Local Council chairman is given a bribe in favour of aunt Naka. Nanfuka de-evolves by letting go of some of her power to accept the help of the surrogate parent figure (Nurse Kina).

The representation of Nanfuka as one who is ready to resign to her fate of accepting help from the supportive adult is what Nikolajeva calls "... [the] adult experience governing the narrative voice and judgment of the novel" (Nikolajeva "Power, Voice and Subjectivity in literature for young readers"(Nikolajeva, 2009, p. 116) is interpreted to mean that Nanfuka is made other by the author to enable readers to realise that young adult power has limits. The depiction here substantiates Trites' (1998) view on adolescents' power in the literature that:

"Power is a force that operates within the subject and upon the subject in adolescent literature; teenagers are repressed as well as liberated by their power and by the power of the social forces that surround them in these books. [Literature where they are represented] is thus dedicated to how potentially out-of-control adolescents can learn to exist within institutional structures" (p. 7).

Trites' view above reiterates Nikolajeva's view that there is implied tension between the YAC and the institutional power symbols be they family, school, or government. Nanfuka's proactive response to outwit the oppressive adult is a score in the goal of autonomy and her realisation and recognition of institutional power taking the upper hand connotes her wisdom in overpowering circumstances like when in the text, the immorality of the Local Council Chairman takes over. She inevitably relinquishes some of her power to gain it later with the help of the adult/parent figure (Nurse Kina).

Nanfuka, a young ambitious girl forced by circumstances beyond her control has her dream of becoming a nurse threatened though through her resilience and determination, she ends up with a hope of acquiring it through the help of special adult figures who recognise her cause and are willing to help her out.

Alongside Nanfuka's story is that of Sendi, a male young adult, Nanfuka's schoolmate who comes from a well-to-do family and who subscribes to all the prescripts of male young adulthood until he falls in love with Nanfuka. Before then, Sendi experiences 'storm and stress' (Hall, 1916, p. 5) and is depicted as one who is trying to transit from childhood to adulthood and one whose word is the one that goes, even at home; (he decides to start commuting from home to school and leaves the boarding section). He has fun with his friends as he tries to define his identity (by calling himself popular names such as (Ettienne), participating in sports, speaking French with his friends; reading and enjoying gazing at nude picture magazines, going partying and 'clubbing' and dressing in a teen style with hat and jeans...). He is seen to be at an age where romance is a must experience and he demands and seeks a fair chance and an opportunity to make up with Nanfuka to fill the void in his life; created when she leaves school. Namukasa's portrayal of Sendi brings out all the nuances associated with adolescence. He is allowed to enjoy young adulthood adventures with all their pleasures and consequences (Arnett, 2007).

The male young adult, Sendi, who exercises autonomy is constructed in such a way that he makes mistakes with Nanfuka and other girls at school. Through the same mistakes, Sendi is made to ponder and reconsider his priorities in life. It is through these blunders that we are made to envisage his self-definition and

reformation. He is depicted as struggling to define his values in life especially when he decides to get serious with his studies, helps with chores at home, and asks for forgiveness from Nanfuka and Nurse Kina. When he requires professional assistance, he like Nanfuka goes for counselling at the School Nurse's place. This is yet another instance where the young adult is made to seek adult counsel and wisdom to be able to cope with his/her turbulent emotional and psychological self.

Namukasa uses Sendi to control teenage sexuality by making him so remorseful that he goes to seek pardon from Nurse Kina whom he had tried to sexually harass and by making him realise that escaping from school and seducing Nanfuka is wrong. The positive change in Sendi is a deconstruction of phallogocentrism and a blow to young adult autonomy. A male young adult does not have to have sexual relationships to mature. Instead, Sendi gains his maturity from genuine love, missing, and being nostalgic about Nanfuka. Likewise, Nanfuka gains autonomy from the responsibilities that she is meant to take on despite her age. Her agency and autonomy also stem from her recognition of her powers and from realising that adults are not necessarily people to rebel against. Her conflict with her aunt Naka exposes their dialogic differences and as she struggles to retain her father's land and responsibility for her siblings⁶, she discourses with the people around her and sometimes with her 'dialectic of identity' until she finally gains her position in the family and society (Wall, 1990, p. 23) by overcoming the aunt's pressure and the neighbours' scornful comments.

In the novel, Namukasa uses a highly descriptive language and dialogue to effectively expose the conflicts that make up the story. She also combines other techniques like the use of poetry, imagery, and symbolism to bring out the love theme and to enhance the realistic portrayals of Nanfuka and Sendi. Their portrayals make true Nikolajeva's comment that;

"The adults have unlimited power in our society as compared to [young adults] who lack

⁶*Adolescent behaviour that is characterised by conflict with adult authority be it of parents, guardians or institutional leaders, rebellious and hazardous conduct that often ends in trouble Granville Stanley Hall, Adolescence: Its Psychology and Its Relations to Physiology, Anthropology, Sociology, Sex, Crime, Religion and Education, vol. 2 (D. Appleton, 1916).*

economic resources of their own, lack voice, and are subjected to a large number of laws and rules which adults expect them to obey without interrogation” (2009, p. 9)

Themes of suffering, education, gender relations, betrayal, and materialism are used by the author to comment on the protagonist’s endurance, morality hope, and optimism, qualities that sustain the narrative up to the time when love and friendship lead the narrative structure to its ultimate end. Through Nanfuka’s successful negotiation of her conflicts with aunt Naka, the inevitability of textual death is realised in the text’s resolution. Nanfuka and Sendi are near- achievers in the autonomy struggle though their successes are hinged on reliable adults.

CONCLUSION

The novel offers convincing representations of young adults in secondary school circumstances and also at home and the themes, events, and conflicts that they experience are a manifestation of the truth of what Bushman and Haas say about writing that focuses on young adults that; “Conflicts are often consistent with the young adults’ experience, themes are often of interest to young people, protagonists and most characters are young adults and the language parallels that of young people” (Bushman & Haas, 2006, p. 2). What lacks in the observation is that the young adult characters have to continually struggle for power and autonomy.

In conclusion, we observe that the young adult is in a perpetual struggle for power and autonomy, is marginalised and disempowered by some of the adults in the institutions that s/he operates from, and whatever autonomy s/he enjoys has to be balanced between her/him and the adult authority figure. The article also suggests that the young adult’s power situation can be improved by empowering them through education, strong self-will and being principled and respectful towards helpful adults that act as mentors and role models. Through creative fiction, the young adult can also envisage her/himself in the imagined situations in the fiction that recognises her/him as an entity and that offers her/him an empowering literary environment to fight off marginality and exercise power and agency.

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