

**RESEARCH PAPER****Traditional Cultural Values in Young Adult Fiction: Cultural Critique  
of *The Secret Garden* and *To Kill a Mockingbird*****<sup>1</sup>Farkhanda Shahid Khan, <sup>2</sup>Namra Najam and <sup>3</sup>Musqan Fatima**

1. Lecturer, Department of English Literature, Government College University Faisalabad, Punjab, Pakistan
2. Lecturer, Department of English Language and Literature, The University of Lahore, Lahore, Punjab, Pakistan
3. Lecturer, Department of English Language and Literature, The University of Lahore, Lahore, Punjab, Pakistan

**\*Corresponding Author:** farkhandashahidkhan@gcuf.edu.pk**ABSTRACT**

This article aims at demonstrating the selected texts as Cultural texts due to their key characteristics comprising, polysemy, cultural materialism, popular culture, discourse representation, hegemony, identity, ideology, subjectivity, and politics. Within this designated objective, the present article argues that *The Secret Garden* by Frances Hodgson Burnett and *To Kill a Mockingbird* by Harper Lee serve as cultural texts rooted in the specific social setups, where textual representations are polysemic. This characteristic brings multiple meanings that are accomplished by actual readers of the text since they create meaning while they engage with the text. The study uses the characteristics of cultural texts given by Chris Barker as lens to analyse the given texts through close reading. This study is pertinent due to its novelty as cultural readings of the texts is not widely read and researched arena. Thus, the article proves that young adult literary texts while serving as zeitgeist of their times can be read as cultural texts due to representation of multiple cultural artefacts. The study suggests that while serving multiple purpose – social, cultural, or religious, young adult texts have a wide scope to be read and researched under diverse theoretical angles.

**KEYWORDS:** Cultural Artefacts, Identity, Ideology, Representation, Subjectivity, Young Adult Literature**Introduction**

Within the Marxist and Poststructuralist approach of Raymond Williams, subject identities and relationship are hold as textual and composed out of any discourse. Cultural Studies believe that a work of fiction cannot only be read as an aesthetic realm, but it must be studied within material and social perspective. Similarly, all time popular Young Adult Literature must also be read not within the generic conventions, their history, and evolutionary process but also in regard with the publishing industry, its profit, reviews, academic criticism, and the politics involved in making it bestselling and awarding it. Moreover, Cultural Studies acknowledge cultural artefact as political sign and part of discourse of a particular country imparting and reinforcing ideologies, values, and hiding manipulative activities of patriarchal impulses developing in the form of national narratives (Barker,2003).

Representation is key concept in Cultural Studies that signifies the language in which objects in a certain relationship – power, class, and ideology, gets a definition while situated within the realm of discourse. If Young Adult writers frame the issue of femininity, it represents a discourse of masculinity also when seen in the larger context of power dynamics of a particular culture. Similarly, for Cultural Studies, identity is formed through experience which further implies representation (Barker, 2003). It is

also significantly known in term of activities that produce any form of social order or relationship which shows that power not only constrains but also enables. Having said that, the field of cultural studies shows a particular concern with subjugated groups – like class, gender, nations, and different age groups.

This study aims at representing the selected texts as Cultural texts due to their key features including active audiences, cultural materialism, popular culture, polysemy, discourse representation, identity, hegemony, ideology, subjectivity, and politics. With the said aim, the study argues that selected young adult fiction serve as social texts embedded in that specific culture, where texts, as subject of portrayal and representation, are polysemic. This feature brings the possibility of bringing different meanings that are realized by actual readers since they give life to images or words. Thus, the process of meaning creation is an interplay between reader and the text. Study becomes significant due to its novelty, as cultural readings of the text is not widely researched phenomenon.

While defining the age group for Young Adult Literature, Crowe wrote, books written for ages 14-21; whereas The Young Adult Library Service Association (YALSA) invented the term in the 1960s, and agreed, that books written for an age group of 12-18 are included in YAF. Yet in another article, Chris Crowe has contributed to explicating the function of Young Adult Fiction as books that “can be used to achieve both English and Language arts objectives as traditional literature; nevertheless, this particular literature has added advantage of being more rigorously appropriate to the lives of youngsters, and thus, more probably overcome the confrontation to “school books” and reading that bothers too many young adults nowadays” (Crowe, 1998, P.1) and thereby he fulfils the purpose of defining the term more generously.

### **Literature Review**

Since there does not exist any literature already researched out in this dimension, literature review section deals with the context, thematic concerns and trends in Young Adult Literature. In the beginning, stories were of individual interest with a single dominant theme like the issue of divorce, the story of love, or drug abuse, to which adults grew tired. The 70s was the period when these novels were called ‘problem novels. It was in the 1980s that more genres started adding to young adult fiction, including horror, whereas the 90s were the peak for the literature of the grown-ups (Bacheldor, 1980). Books for teens bloomed in the 70s due to the low birth rate, while 1992’s baby boom brought a renaissance for teen readers (Davis, 1997, P. 97), and hence, the second decisive age began in 2000. The novels highlight societal problems, including issues such as gender stereotypes, identity crises, mental health, racism, depression, broken families, dealing with death and loss of loved ones, etc. (Dean, 2017, P. 17).

However, the debate goes on about who is a young adult, as different age groups are being taken by different psychologists, health professionals, and educationists since there has yet to be a final consensus about this phase. In the same way, there is hardly any harmony between librarians, teachers, publishers, and reviewers about what exactly young adult literature is (Aronson, 2001, P. 09), yet it needs to accomplish specific goals. With contemporary narrative innovations, these works have a first-person perspective, androgynous female characters, and vernacular speech. Moreover, this literature is aimed at emerging readers, and educational urge is at the heart of this fiction. It provides quality knowledge through thought-provoking and age-appropriate books. Young adult literature is laced with literary investigation, teaching, and appreciation of information.

Further, it must be innovative, challenging, experimental, and exceptional. It must be concise for its full read (Aronson, 2001, P. 35). Furthermore, the plot must have content that deals with the subject matter of diverse interests and give value to it. It is

compulsory to recognize and respect growing diversity at the school level. As Evans remarked, this fiction, like other good books, should tear the barriers and contest prejudices while bringing unanimity and exchanging stories (Evans, 2010). Further, he noted that information flow should be natural, and the subject matter must be respectable and acceptable to both the cultural groups represented and the readers (Evans, 2010, P. 10). Moreover, this literature should be with multicultural representations, gender, and sexual orientation and explore diverse students' ability of tolerance, acceptance, etc... Books help young people to be empowered through literature, e.g., when books talk about protagonists' growth in character and self-esteem, like *Balm in Gilead* and *There is a Girl in Hammerlock*. Transformation is the trademark of young adult literature, varying from the factual details of adults to the weird change of a teenager. Jennifer Barnes remarks that genre mirrors the mentality of becoming caught between two worlds of childhood and adulthood (see Aronson, 2001, P. 12). Similarly, Cart Michael considers the genre more critical than other literary genres. As he remarks:

These books display not only the variances but the shared aims, which consist of humanity. It familiarizes readers with the impressive mixture of human experiences and invests their minds and hearts with patience, tolerance, empathy, compassion, acceptance, kindness, and understanding (see Strickland, 2015, P.14).

Further, it has a linear plot with explicit language and a proper beginning, middle, and end. Moreover, issues are coming-of-age like sexuality, love, relationship, and maturity (Cauti, 2004). Parents are often absent or at odds with the protagonist and the rest of the characters.

### **Material and Methods**

While using theoretical framework from cultural theories, the article employs textual analysis as the method for this research. Cultural studies focus on culture as Stuart Hall puts, "by culture, it means an actual grounded series of practices, customs, representations, and languages (Hall, 1996, P. 439). Different ways in which we interpret the world, or share social meanings, are the focus of culture. Meanings, however, are not just "out there"; rather, they are created through signs, most notably language. Language, according to cultural studies, is not a neutral medium for the creation of meanings or knowledge about an autonomous object world that is said to "exist" outside of language. On the contrary, it is part of those very meanings and understandings. In other words, language provides meaning to the material things and social practices that it highlights and renders understandable to us in terms that it defines. These are signifying practices and processes of producing meaning. We must investigate how language functions as a "signifying system" to produce meaning to comprehend culture.

### **Representation**

The focus of a large portion of cultural studies is representation, or how the world is meaningfully constructed and portrayed to and by humans in society. In fact, the study of culture as the symbolic acts of representation can be viewed as the main focus of cultural studies. This calls for an investigation into how meaning is generated within texts. It necessitates an examination of the processes that generate meaning in diverse settings. Additionally, cultural meanings and representations have a certain materiality. In other words, they are incorporated into words, sounds, items, pictures, publications, television shows, and magazines. Within particular social contexts, they are created, enacted, used, and understood (Barker, 2003).

## **Materialism and non-reductionism**

The majority of cultural studies has focused on contemporary industrialized economies and media cultures that are structured according to capitalist principles. In this case, representations are created by profit-driven corporations. Within this framework, the field of cultural studies has evolved a type of cultural materialism that focuses on investigating the process and motivations behind the inking of meanings during the production process. That is to say, cultural studies not only focus on practices that have symbolic meaning, but also makes an effort to link them to political economy. This field of study looks at power dynamics and the allocation of social and financial resources. Cultural studies have therefore focused on the following issues: who owns and controls cultural production; how cultural products are distributed; and how ownership and control patterns affect the shape of the cultural landscape. That being said, non-reductionism is a fundamental tenet of cultural studies. It is believed that culture has distinct meanings, laws, and customs of its own that cannot be reduced to or fully explained in terms of another category or level of social formation. Cultural studies have specifically fought against economic reductionism, which is the idea that a cultural text's meaning can be determined by its position in the production process. The meanings of texts and how audiences appropriate them are not determined by political economy processes in the context of cultural studies, instead, political ecology (Barker, 2003).

## **Power**

Most authors on cultural studies concur that the idea of power is essential to the field. Most of the authors on cultural studies believe that power permeates all spheres of social interaction. Though it undoubtedly is, power is more than just the cohesive element of society or the force that subjugates one group of people to another. It can also refer to the mechanisms that give rise to and facilitate social relationships, orders, and actions of any kind. Power is therefore both enabling and constraining at the same time (Barker, 2003). Having said that, cultural studies has demonstrated a particular interest in oppressed groups, including those based on race, gender, nation, age, and class at first.

## **Texts and readers**

The creation of consent denotes a general acceptance of the cultural meanings produced by the hegemonic texts' signifying practices. While written language is one sense of the term "text," its meaning encompasses all practices that have symbolic meaning. This covers the process of creating meaning via visuals, sounds, materials (like clothing), and actions (like dancing and sports). We can refer to sounds, pictures, things, and behaviours as cultural texts since they are sign systems that denote in the same way as languages (Barker, 2003) That being said, the interpretations that critics make of cultural texts are not always the same as those that readers or audiences who are actively involved create. It is true that readers will not always understand the same things from one another. To put it another way, critics are just a specific kind of reader.

## **Polysemy**

Texts are polysemic forms of representation. They have the potential to have several meanings, all of which actual readers must discover in order to give words and images to life. We can look at how texts function, but we cannot just "read off" the meaning that audiences produce based just on textual analysis. Meaning is created, at minimum, through the interaction between the reader and the text (Barker, 2003). As such, the instant of consumption coincides with the moment of meaningful production.

## **Subjectivity and identity**

One process by which we are shaped as individuals is the moment of consumption. Definition of personhood, i.e. subjectivity and our mutual self-descriptions, i.e. in cultural studies during the 1990s, identity emerged as a major topic of study (Barker, 2003). Put differently, the study of culture examines how we become the people we are, how we are created as subjects, and how we relate to (or feel emotionally invested in) media.

## **Results and Discussion**

### ***The Secret Garden by Frances Hodgson Burnett***

Issued in 1911, this novel was included in children's literature, but the reading of the novel shows several markers to putting it into the domain of Young Adult Literature. The heroine is 9, who is ugly and living in India, a stereotypical representation of the colonized land, which in Western thoughts, is a place of disease and ugliness. Her parents, especially her mother, are incurably ill. An Indian native ayah attends her, whom she calls pig, pig, and daughter of a pig since she knows it is the worst insult. She is stupid enough due to the desertion of her parents; and, therefore becomes a dictator, terribly spoiled, and selfish under the surveillance of servants. In mentioning this, the text represents the ongoing practices rooted in diverse cultures and serves as a social text, where textual representations are polysemic.

Moreover, the diseased land has made her thin, feeble, and stiff; cholera spreads in the community, and everyone tries to escape. It is a time when no one cares about anyone. In this way, the writing has some prejudices against Asians, yet the novel depicts social ills. It indicates how the power and propaganda are conveyed with the responsibility to the ill-informed young adults as cultural theorists also believe that a work of fiction cannot only be read as an aesthetic realm, but it must be considered within material and social perspectives. The protagonist's character has been developed on the same material and social bases on which west dichotomized the east making it a cultural text. Mary is odious, unattractive, and repulsive and has already neglected to suffer more. She is defiant, repulsive, and stubborn to the adults of their commanding behavior. Her ayah dies, and the same happens to her parents, who die or flee, leaving Mary alone.

During the confusion and bewilderment on the second day, Mary hid in the nursery and was forgotten by everyone. Nobody thought of her, nobody wanted her, and strange things happened of which she recognized nothing. Mary alternately cried and slept through the hours. She only knew that people were ill and that she heard enigmatic and frightening sounds (Burnett, 1911, P. 11).

Later on, Mary is transported to Misselthwaite Manor to live with Archibald, her uncle. Mrs. Madlock, the head housekeeper, shuts Mary in a room. Master Craven Archibald has been suffering from inconsolable grief ever since the loss of his wife, who died while childbirth and was locked up to die. Mary, nickname from Martha, also listens about the secret garden, which belonged to Mrs. Craven. After her wife's death, Archibald sealed the orchard entrance and buried the key under the earth. Secret Garden's old gardeners bring a positive change in Mary, who is now more engaged with the world. Her curiosity to unlock this garden increases when she hears a far-off cry from one of the Manor's rooms. Her mystery is solved when she finds the key with the help of a servant, Robin. With the help of Dickon, Mary invigorates the secret garden and calls Dickon 'A Yorkshire Angel' due to his wisdom (Burnett, 1911, P. 87). This shows how, based on power dynamics among individuals, different cultures remain in flux (Barker, 2003). Following the cries, Mary finds Colin Craven, a cripple child, yet her cousin, in a room,

hallucinating about his hunchback. Mary discovers that the boy has a psychological illness that can be recovered only if he thinks of himself well (Stanley, 1897).

Then, Colin becomes part of that secret garden and invigorates in the same way Mary and the garden itself have become (Boyle, 2012, P. 12). The three children, Dickon, Mary, Colin, and Ben, spend their summer in that garden. Susan writes to Mr. Craven about his early return to see his son. Craven comes back and opens the door of the secret garden. Colin rushes toward his father, and they reconcile. The “miracle of Colin’s recovery is told to everyone now” (Burnett, 1911, P. 191).

Practical issues like the unavoidability of death and the pain of losing loved ones have become more byzantine, gloomier, and torturous in young adult fiction. Though from the beginning of the novel, Mary’s suffering and becoming a stubborn and commanding child make it a children’s book (Grenby, 2017, P. 17), nonetheless, her compassion and evolving of a humane soul turn the book into something different (Madsen, 2000). Moreover, Mary’s escapades and god-gifted wisdom, her curiosity in gardening and weeding the area (close to nature), her transformation from a stupid character to a helping one, aspect of gender discrimination in the novel in the form of ignoring a female child, the sorrow of the loved ones, in the form of Mrs. Craven’s death, and, finally, happy ending and leitmotif of friendship are the aspects, according to the selected scholarship, therefore, putting novel in the stream of the young adult genre. Also, it represents a culture where gender discrimination and power dynamism are embedded in its roots and as social and cultural phenomena and is represented in texts like *The Secret Garden*. In the last, Chris Crowe’s remarks that people are not clear about what to add and what not in the genre of a young adult further intersect the boundaries. Though the themes overlap, and some texts may be taken for adults directly and others just for children, these novels convey many instructions for young adults (Crowe, 2001, P. 1).

### ***To Kill a Mockingbird* by Harper Lee**

Published in 1960, just before Civil Rights Movement, by a bright, ardent, and Pulitzer Prize winner, Harper Lee, the novel is about racial prejudices common in the period in which Harper Lee lived and experienced in South America. It is indispensable on the American high school reading list. It narrates the sensitive treatment of a child, also taken as a common theme in Young Adult Literature, the theme of racial prejudice. Set in Macomb, a fictional town of Alabama during the Great Depression, it is the story of a widowed lawyer’s brilliant daughter of 6 to 9 years, Jean Louise (Scout) Finch, and his son Jeremy Atticus (Jem). Atticus Finch defends Tom Robinson in a false accusation of raping a white girl attacked by her father, Bob. Later Bob tries to attack Finch’s children, who are saved by Arthur (Boo), who kills Bob and shows his death as an accident. The narrative’s opening supports the idea of social justice, racial discrimination as signifying cultural practices of representation (Barker, 2003, P. 23). It also shows that cultural representations within the texts are always associated with materiality, produced, and understood with explicit social context. Since 1930s Alabama, the setting of the select novel was racist time in the Southern states and black people were considered second class citizens (Stevenson, 1997). Distribution of social and economic resources among black people was also unjust. This shows how the novel’s text functions as a non-reductionist text while not reducing the cultural happenings to one angle. It is through cultural studies that the issues of subordinated groups are easily highlighted, and they can be interpreted on multiple levels.

Autobiographical in nature, her character of Finch, the lawyer, is based on Leto specific meanings or e’s father and his unsuccessful defense of two black men’s suspect of executing a white storekeeper. Moreover, Charles Baker (Dill) Haris, children’s friend, is based on Truman Capote, another author, neighbour, and Lee’s best friend, who notes that “Boo was a real man and he lived just down the road from us.... Everything Lee wrote

about is true" (Fine & Foca, 2020, P. 20). A sequel named *Go Set a Watchman* was written before this novel but published in 2015 and has its setting 20 years later than the events of *To Kill a Mockingbird*. Scout is grown up here, living in New York, and visits Alabama to see her father, who is old now with racist views of the Whites. Her narrative technique gives the reader an empathetic look at the Scout. Telling her coming-of-age story, Lee's novels are a great success (Lee, 1960, P. 196).

Blackford and Siedal's point of view puts the novel in the stream of Young Adult Literature when Blackford states that Scout's voice is significant in terms of themes that the novel puts forward and the white eye defies (Blackford, 2010, P. 10). In comparison, Seidel Lee notes that Scout takes a journey of moral development from 'partiality to tolerance,' from unawareness to sagacity, from ferocity to a controlled self, from intolerance to compassion, and from honor to acceptance of law (Siedal, 2007, P. 07). This shift indicates the writer's burden towards fulfilling social responsibility towards a society lacking social justice. So, the social problem is responsibly addressed by Young Adults. Crespino notes that

Lee's characters and selection of narrative approaches in *To Kill a Mockingbird* reflect the moral tension that all liberals faced in the Jim Crow South. They combine the passion and inconsistent characteristics of the Southern drawn to the South's agrarian tradition and heritage but are frustrated by the South's ugly racial history (Crespino, 2002, P. 20).

Instead, Lee educates how teens can absorb the element of compassion and courage from history. They can improve their worldview to shape their traits and personalities, where they accept others who are not like them, what Lee calls "to climb in other's skin", and what Atticus tells Scout, "You never really understand a person until you consider things from his point of view (Lee, 1960, P. 30). This clearly represents how the text serves as a cultural text accomplishing the phenomenon of imparting values. It also exhibits the idea of identity as non-essential since identity does not have any essential or universal quality rather it is a discursive composition (Russel, 2005). Hence, the narration given from a child's perspective, autobiographical elements (Bildungsroman), racial prejudice experienced by children, social conflicts bringing otherness, development, and conforming to societal norms, and children's encountering and rejection of those norms, and above all compassion are the markers that align with young adult literature highlighting Lee's brilliant addition towards cultural representation.

## **Conclusion**

This research has concluded that the selected texts of *The Secret Garden* and *To Kill a Mockingbird* serve as cultural texts while showing the key characteristics, including representation, identity, hegemony, polysemy, and cultural materialism as laid down by Chris Barker. Both these texts are embedded in particular cultures where texts are polysemic or with multiple layers of meaning. It has shown its significance in its novelty to its approach and interpretation of the selected texts. The article has proven that young adult literary texts also serve as cultural texts due to their representation of multiple cultural artefacts, and by shaping the attitudes, perceptions and values of young adults. Furthermore, while highlighting these texts as multi-purpose texts, the research has unveiled its scope to be read under various social, cultural and religious frameworks.

## References

- Aronson, M (2001). *Exploding the myths: The truth about teenagers and reading*. Lanham, MD: Scarecrow.
- Blackford, H. (2010). Uncle Tom Melodrama with a Modern Point of View: Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird*. In *Telling Children's Stories: Narrative Theory and Children's Literature*. Mike Caden (ed.). The University of Nebraska Press
- Boyle, A. (2012). Christian YA Fiction: Coming into Full Bloom. *Publishers Weekly*
- Blackmore, E.A. (2015). *Brief History of Young Adult Fiction*. 2015. Retrieved from <http://JStordaily.html>.
- Bachelder, et.al. (1980). *Looking Backward: Trying to Find Classics Young Adult Novel*: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/816800>.
- Burnett, H. (1911). *The Secret Garden*. HarperClassics. Retrieved from <http://www.girlebooks.com>.
- Barker, C. (2003). *Cultural studies: Theory and practice*. SAGE Publications.
- Cauti, C. (2004). "Introduction" *Little Women*. New York: Barnes & Noble Classics, xvi. Print.
- Crowe, C. (2001). Young Adults- The Problem with YA Literature. *The English Journal*. 90 (3), 146-150.
- Crespino, J. (2002). "The Strange Career of Atticus Finch". *Southern Cultures*, 6(2), 9-30.
- Davis, T. (1997). On the Question of Integrating Young Adult Literature into the Mainstream. *ALAN Review*. 24 (6), 5-8.
- Dean, Z. (21 April 2017). *Diversity in Young Adult Literature*, Publishers Weekly
- Evans, S. (2010). The Role of Multicultural Literature Interactive Read-Aloud on Student Perspectives Towards Diversity. *Journal of Research in Innovative Teaching*. 3(1), 88-100.
- Grenby, M. O. (2017). *Children's Literature*. Edinburgh University Press.
- Hall, S. (1996). Questions of cultural identity: SAGE publications. SAGE.
- Madsen, D. (2000). *Feminist Theory and Literary Practice*. London: Pluto, Printed.
- Fine, L, and Foca, A. (Feb 11, 2024). edi. *To Kill a Mockingbird*. Lee, H. (1960). *To Kill a Mockingbird*. New York, HarperCollins Publishers.
- Montgomery, L.M. (1908). *Anne of Green Gables*. New York: Simon & Schuster.
- Rioux, B.A. (14 April 2020). Little Women. <https://www.neh.gov/humanities/2018/summer/feature/taking-little-women-seriously>.
- Russel, D. (2005). *Literature for Children*. 5<sup>th</sup> ed. Boston: Pearson.



Strickland, A. (15 April 2015). *A Brief History of Young Adult Literature*. CNN. Cable News Network.

Stanley, G H. (1897). A Study of Fears. *The American Journal of Psychology*, 8 (2), 147-249. <https://doi.org/10.2307/1410940>.

Stevenson, D. (1997). Sentiment and Significance: The Impossibility of Recovery in the Children's Literature Canon or the Drowning of Water-Babies. *The Lion and the Unicorn*. 21(1), 112-30.

Seidel, Kathryn L. (2007), "Growing Up Southern: Resisting the Code for Southerners in *To Kill a Mockingbird*". *Essays and Reflections on Harper Lee*, edited by Alice Hall Petry, The Tennessee: The University of Tennessee Press