Young Adults vs Cultural Panopticon: A Study of Salma's *The Hour Past Midnight*

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Abstract

Young adult fiction has drastically altered notions of what it means to be a young adult and, more importantly, reveals YA's self-perception and cognitive construction of the world around them. Indian YA fiction explores the challenges faced by Indian YAs within the intricate matrix of the nation's socioeconomic, cultural and political milieu. Salma's *The Hour Past Midnight* (2009) exposes the complicated life of young Muslim women dwelling in a conservative village in Tamil Nadu. This paper attempts to analyse the young adult characters in *The Hour Past Midnight* (2009), for the text depicts the perplexities, struggles and anxieties of young adults caught in an orthodox society that is highly conservative. This study probes into how the novel portrays the myriad experiences of young adults in a stringent, conservative society that works like a cultural panopticon by extending Foucault's panopticon into the cultural domain.

Keywords: Cultural panopticon; Cultural rebels; Personified panopticon; Unconscious dissenter; Young adults.

Introduction

Young adulthood is often characterised as a transitional juncture that bridges childhood and adulthood. Steinberg asserts that this critical phase of development is conventionally understood as the period between the onset of puberty and the establishment of social independence (5-6). The identity formation process of a young adult neither starts nor ends right in the adolescent stage alone. During this phase, "... the physical development, cognitive skills, and social expectations coincide that enable young persons to sort through and synthesize their childhood identifications in order to construct a viable pathway towards their adulthood" (Marcia 160). Throughout this stage, social connections, particularly those with

family and peers, are crucial for young people's development of autonomy and well-being. The mere inclusion of young adults in a book does not categorise a work as young adult fiction. Young Adult fiction is a category of fiction that deals with such transformations, the complex problems of identity formation, as well as the crisis an individual YA undergoes during that phase. It is impossible to adhere to a specific criterion and categorise a particular age group as young adults while classifying others as children or adults as generally accepted. In his article "From Insider to Outsider: The Evolution of Young Adult Literature", Micheal Cart states that traditional definitions of young adults place them between the ages of 12 to 18 and from the mid-'90s, the upper parameter is pushed beyond the age of 25 (95). Building upon Cart's proposition, which provides a framework for defining the age group of Young Adults, this study progresses with the premise that Young Adults are those who fall between the ages of 11 and 25.

Michel Foucault developed the theory of panopticism based on the architectural design of a prison by Jeremy Bentham. According to this, "… at the periphery, an annular building; at the centre, a tower; this tower is pierced with wide windows that open onto the inner side of the ring; the peripheric building is divided into cells, each of which extends the whole width of the building" (Foucault 5). The prison guard should be placed in the tower, and the prisoners should be isolated in the cells. The tower is designed to make the guards inside the tower invisible from the cells, using screens and light as devices. The principle is that the prisoners do not know whether they are being watched, and they must presume that they are being watched all the time and thus behave accordingly. Panopticon has the capacity to "… induce in the inmate a state of conscious and permanent visibility that assures the automatic functioning of power" (Foucault 6). The concept of the panopticon should be viewed not as a utopian architectural vision but as a means of conceptualizing power dynamics within the context of everyday human existence (Foucault 9). Based on Foucault's panopticon, Ahmet Samet Tuncabayin's essay "Cultural Panopticon" says there are significant similarities between how disciplinary power works and how culture 'works.' Power produces subjects, social relationships and knowledge. Culture also produces subjects and social relationships within its own structure. For that reason, he calls it 'cultural power' and extends the Panopticon analogy as 'cultural panopticon' (Tuncabayin).

The acceptance and defiance of panoptic society are pervasive in modern YA novels, and this leads to the creation of adolescent rebel figures in YA

literature. Clarissa Elizabeth Allen, in her work *The Adolescent Rebellion Against Panoptic Society: A Foucauldian Analysis of Adolescent Development in Contemporary Young Adult Novels,* defines three character roles in a panoptic society that appears in YA fiction: the adolescent rebel, the unconscious dissenter and the personified panopticon. The adolescent rebel is represented as a typical "adolescent" who abides by the rules yet yearns to break away and establish his/her own separate identity from the society that constantly monitors his/her behaviour. The rebel is torn between the world of unconscious dissenter and personified panopticon and defies the panoptic society through his/her small acts of rebellion. The unconscious dissenter openly defies the norms of the society, but the actions of the dissenter are unconscious expressions and not a choice. The personified panopticon is represented by characters, who are closely related to the adolescent rebel characters and thereby manifest the stringent expectations of the society. They implement the duty of observing others as well as being observed by the society (9-13).

As a writer from a conservative religious background, Salma faced a number of challenges, such as obscene accusations and death threats for her poems and novels. Her works vocalise women's repressed emotions, desires and struggles to create a dialogue to sensitise women about their rights. *The Hour Past Midnight,* initially published in Tamil as *Irandam Jamangalin Kathai* in 2005, was translated to English by Lakshmi Holmstrom in 2009. The novel, in general, sketches the lives of women and men from a small village in Tamil Nadu. The novel is set in the 1980s and records the events that happened around Salma during her childhood. The novel begins and ends through the eyes of Rabia, a Young Adult who belongs to an affluent Muslim family. The story progresses with the voices of different characters: Rabia, her cousin Wahida, her mother Zohra, Aunts Rahima and Firdaus, her grandmother Amina, their relatives, friends, neighbours and others from their small, close-knit community. *The Hour Past Midnight* portrays the lives of Young Adults from different backgrounds who are controlled by various norms and astute regulations of the adult world.

This paper will examine how the society in the narrative functions like a cultural panopticon that controls the lives of YAs in the novel. This study aims to close read the young adult characters in Salma's *The Hour Past Midnight* in order to attribute the qualities of the characters in the novels to three categories: the adolescent rebel, the unconscious dissenter and the personified panopticon. This classification will provide a comprehensive understanding of the impact of the cultural panopticon and how YAs emerge as rebels against the norms set by the community.

Cultural Panopticon in *The Hour Past Midnight*

Foucault discusses "normation," which arises from the process of discipline. Normation involves establishing routines, customs, and accepted behavioural patterns, which become the expected standards for how people should act. The norm is central in normation, serving as the benchmark for proper conduct and aspiration. Being seen as normal means, adhering to this norm, positioning individuals as standard and free from markers of difference that might be perceived as abnormal. Through the process of disciplining which is particularly related to individual bodies, they become regulated and subjected to normation thus assuming the status of a universal subject (Galič et al. 16-17). An individual born into a specific society inherently absorbs and internalises that society's cultural norms and values, becoming a product of what could be termed a 'cultural panopticon.' This concept draws inspiration from Bauman's insights and suggests that shame functions as a powerful instrument for aligning behaviours with cultural expectations. Much like the way disciplinary power operates, this "cultural power" exerts considerable influence, facilitated by a system of "cultural surveillance" (Tuncabayin)

The author presents a hierarchical society before the digital surveillance era, where power is dispersed, and mass surveillance is used to maintain discipline. In the context of the novel's society, religious norms serve as the foundation for the formation of intricate cultural codes, profoundly influencing the trajectories of characters' lives and identities. Several institutions in society, including the family, resemble the panopticon, where the authority of such institutions enforces norms and cultural codes through surveillance. These codes, acting as guidelines for acceptable conduct, prompt individuals to engage in self-regulation to harmonise with societal standards. The pervasive gaze of the community serves as a constant reminder, compelling individuals to evaluate themselves against the yardstick of normalcy set by their community. Any deviance from the prescribed codes and norms will result in stigmatisation and isolation. For instance, in the novel, Fatima, a young widow, elopes with a Hindu man, Murugan. As a result, Jamat, including the lay leaders, the naattaamai, the mutthavalli and the imam, along with men folk, conducts a meeting and decides to ban Fatima and her family as a punishment. They also decide to control their women to protect the honour of the community. Imam says;

> Do not allow your women folk to go about alone either in our streets or to other towns elsewhere. Not during day, nor at night. Tell the women of our community they must never go to cinema.

Forbid it. Make this an absolute rule (Salma 256).

All the members of the community accept this rule and start to follow it adherently. They even blatantly disagree to take Fatima's dead body back to the village for funeral rites. They all consider it as a punishment for disobeying the norms of society and disregarding God. Fear of punishment and judgement by others, individuals are forced to alter their behaviour to fit in the community. The pressure to conform to such rules enforced by the authorities, characters undergo psychological distress and adopt merciless ways like honour killing to uphold their honour and pride. Along with cultural surveillance, personal panopticons inspect themselves and others, including the YAs in the society, to maintain order and discipline.

"The power of the personified panopticon is always prevalent through this system of extended observation, even if this role is represented in characters who are themselves under the observation of the panopticon" (Allen 13). In this novel, the adult society that uses religious and cultural norms to maintain traditional gender roles followed by austerity works like a personified panopticon. The novel portrays how the adult world interferes, subjugates and disrupts the YAs physically, psychologically, emotionally and culturally, curbs individuality and their right to freedom of thought, life and expression.

Suleiman, Madina's brother, is one of the most dominating male characters who vanquishes the entire YA world and holds back their reigns to freedom. He upholds patriarchal norms based on what he claims to be written in the Holy Book and the Hadiths. He believes the body of women should be controlled by covering them, confining them to their homes and getting them married to men who adhere to Islam religiously. Besides controlling and monitoring others' lives, he is aware of a constant gaze upon him and self-polices himself to live according to the norms of his religion.

Yet another character that acts as a personified panopticon is Karim. Karim is Rabia's father, who represents a typical masculine character who considers himself superior to women. He strongly condemns women who have extramarital affairs and considers them an abomination while maintaining double standards, hiding his clandestine affairs with the servant maid, Mariyayi and Rahima, his sister-in-law. He considers that it is a social norm that men can do anything. He does not find fault in his actions as he adheres to the norms. Another similar character is Abdullah, an old rich man who marries four times. He becomes a patriarch who defends

his actions by saying, "According to Shariat, men can marry four wives, it isn't wrong" (Salma 234). Similarly, Sayyed, Wahida's father-in-law, appears as a sex offender who nags Wahida with sexual advances and stories of sexual encounters and is not apologetic about them.

The women in the novel act as personified panopticons who observe and exercise their power over YAs. For instance, Rabia's mother, Zohra, appears as a dominant figure who controls Rabia and Wahida. She quotes religion to validate the idea that women should be inferior to men and that it is the duty of women to preserve the purity of their bodies. She controls every aspect of their lives. Similarly, Rahima, Wahida's mother, dictates to her daughter, an epitome of female conventionalities, urging her to watch porn to stimulate her passion to satisfy Wahida's unsatisfied husband, Sikander. Similarly, Sainu, Madina's mother and Saura, Sherifa's mother, observe others and adherently police themselves.

Amina is Zohra's mother, who strictly follows all religious and societal norms to accommodate herself into the system. She considers women as an "honour" to society and moves to the extent of removing anyone or anything deviant from society. Maimoon is Amina's sister, a YA who rejects her marriage yet becomes pregnant. Amina forces her sister to abort her pregnancy without her consent, resulting in Maimoon's death. Likewise, her divorced daughter, Firdaus, secretly has an extramarital affair with Siva, a Hindu man. Amina finds this out, and she forces her daughter to drink poison and die, which, according to her, is the only way to eliminate the aberrant. All of them work as "psychological or mental instruments of control by a heightened sense of self-awareness" (Mungwini 345).

Just as the panoptic tower's invisible overseer maintains control through its all-seeing gaze, the society in the novel achieves control through a cultural panopticon-like mechanism. In essence, the society in the novel functions as a cultural panopticon with its personified panopticons, where individuals internalise cultural norms and surveillance, leading to self-regulation and alignment with communal expectations to escape from punishment and isolation. This parallels the dynamics of the Panopticon, where the awareness of being watched fosters self-discipline.

Young Adults and Panoptic Society

The lives of Young Adults are fairly unperturbed and balanced compared to that of the adult world as the Young Adult world is yet at its prime and needs to wean themselves off, initially, from parental nurturing,

which alone would enable them to remain self-reliant and individuated. Their confusions often begin only when their parents or adults become over-imposing and deliberately over-demanding. Contrary to adult perceptions, YAs have their own ideals and values, which they believe in with self-righteous confidence. When the adult world disrupts those set convictions, the YA becomes defensive and wishes to assert themselves inevitably. A YA is in a crucial stage of identity formation, which will easily be jeopardised if such interventions overpower them. In the context of the novel, YAs placed in a cultural panopticon can be categorised into unconscious dissenters and adolescent rebels.

According to Allen, an unconscious dissenter is a character who openly defies adult society, adolescent society or both. He/ she defies society simply by being who she is. This is not the same as a rebellion, in which a choice has been made. Unlike the adolescent rebel who struggles to fit in society by conforming to the norms, the unconscious dissenter never attempts to conform to any norms and reverts to their rebellious nature (Allen 11). Ahmad, a twelve-year-old boy, appears as the unconscious dissenter in the novel by defying all the rules. He indulges in activities like stealing and tricks Rabia and her friends into watching an adult film in a theatre. He is not afraid of expressing his opinions out loud. When Rabia reminds him of the repercussions of his behaviour, he says, "That's fine if I go to hell. What if I get into heaven? What will be the use of all beatings I get here?" (Salma 13). Though he faces punishments for his actions, he reverts to his defiant nature. For him, societal monitoring is negligible. He does not consider the panoptic society as authoritative or the experience of living there as suffocating. This distinguishes him from the adolescent rebels.

All the characters are constantly surveilled, and within the panoptic paradigm, their subjectivity is shaped by a "pervasive fear of permanent surveillance". The adolescent rebel acknowledges the presence of the panoptic gaze through direct or indirect interaction with it, self-polices their behaviour and longs to break away from it (Allen 13). The rebel wants to follow the crowd in order not to be shunned by society. They defy the personified panopticon, which can be considered as a defiance of the Panoptic society.

Rabia, the protagonist through whom the novel unravels, is a twelve-year-old girl and her best friend, Madina, are aware of this monitoring by the adult world and constantly show their discomfort in following the rules set by them. For instance, they both start plucking fruits without per-

mission from the owner, and Rabia warns Madina, "Have you forgotten about the Malaks who sit on your two shoulders and keep watch all the time?" (Salma 214). They belong to a highly religious community and believe that all their actions and behaviours are watched by an omnipresent, omnipotent figure, God, along with the members of the society.

Rabia is curious about why norms vary according to gender and is annoyed with the answers provided by the adults. For Rabia, her mother, Zohra, is a figure of authority who controls everything about Rabia's life, quoting religious norms. She constantly warns Rabia about the development of her body and the need to dress modestly. Rabia, in disgust, says, "Why on earth do I have to grow up? Why can't I be a little girl, always?" (Salma 37). Though Rabia feels that she has no choice in making decisions about her life, she subtly resists Zohra's authority by defying the boundaries set by her mother. She develops a romantic interest towards Ahmad. For Rabia, Ahamad represents freedom and happiness. He possesses everything that she cannot have and does whatever he likes. Rabia enjoys a strange sense of happiness and joy in challenging her mother's warnings and instructions, thus establishing her individuality. Being consciously aware of adults' surveillance of their behaviours, Rabia moves away from the established ideals and expresses her own will, opinions and choices and emerges as an adolescent rebel.

Madina expresses her angst about her brother revisiting their village, which will limit her freedom. The fear of punishment makes her conform to the norms of her family. According to the norms, the knowledge of sex is forbidden to YAs. They are expected not to look at obscene scenes or materials and not even at their own body. Madina hides an adult magazine from her sister-in-law, Mumtaz and shows it to Rabia. All of these curiosities result in a slight sexual experimentation between them. In the case of Madina, she expresses her angst and defiance of the adult society that works as a panopticon by indulging in unsanctioned activities with her close friend, Rabia, that are considered to be a sin.

Wahida is a fifteen-year-old girl who is forced to marry a thirty-year-old man, Sikander. She is portrayed as a character who internalises that it is her liability to conform to the normalities prescribed by society to constitute herself as a member of the community. Though she religiously follows all the prescribed norms, she internally dissents and is confused about it. She asks her mother, "If there had to be an Allah to create all this, then did there not have to be someone to create that Allah in the first place?" (Salma 294). Her mother replies angrily, which eventually

scares her from asking anything further. When her parents force her to marry, she is never vocal about her dissent because of the fear of being ostracised and criticised by others. The YAs are living in a system that demands them to consider early marriage (especially in South India). At the same time, their exposure to much liberal thinking and narrow ideas urge them to take life as it comes without serious thought to commitments and the consequences or repercussions in the conduciveness of such an unrestrained condition. (Beytia 12). Being educated in the city, she fantasises about having a husband like the ones in movies who care for their wives. Contrary to this, Sikander appears to be a person who does not care about her emotions. She struggles to fit into the new household. The fear of loneliness and separation from her mother is manifested as a nightmare in which she appears as a child who plays in Kakkali Street, which stank because of the open drains. She searches for her mother among a group of unknown women by desperately crying out, "Amma, Amma" (Salma 295). Unable to bear the burden of marriage, painful intercourse with her husband and the behaviour of her lecherous father-in-law, she chooses to go against the restrictive societal norms and break free from this suffocating circumstance. Thus, she emerges as an adolescent rebel who challenges the panoptic society by disregarding dominant discourses on marriage, expressing her choice to be in a comfortable space, her home.

Sherifa is yet another character- a young widow who is entangled in this fear of ridicule and rejection by others. With the sudden death of her husband and the inability to reveal her emotions of hopelessness, anger, desires and sadness, she isolates herself from everyone, like Wahida, to negotiate with her condition, which heightens her depression and anxiety about the future. Though an adherent follower of moral codes, she reasons all norms and says, "This town was a terrible space" (Salma 317). She defies the social norm that a young widow should be remarried to get the support and protection of a man and transcends the fear of ridicule by adamantly holding on to her opinion that she will not remarry anyone. Sherifa's case is yet another choice of liberalism, where she asserts her individuality against the cultural norms. Sherifa rises as an adolescent rebel by articulating her choice to remain a widow rather than being a wife to another man.

In the case of Maimoon, the defiance of the panopticon is explicit. The overladen cultural extravagance from the adult world is suffocating and strenuous to the YA psyche. It curbs the free will and independence of the YA. There is every reason to think their choice is more because of the stringency with which they are monitored and seized from being them-

selves. Sex, in the case of Maimoon, could have probably been a YA exper-
imentation that facilitates her to assert her individuation from the parental
bonding. It needs to be seen as a declaration of "the desire to feel grown
up, a lot of solitude and also [a willful expression of] affection" (Beytia 15)
that acts as a self-allowance to Maimoon who suffers a sense of rejection or
deprivation from a broken marriage. Her pregnancy seems to be more of a
YA response to a situation as that which is a fulfilling moment of self-con-
solation (however accidental or dishonourable, pre-marital pregnancy is
seen as in South India).

All the YA girls in the novel are advised to read The Quran and are not
allowed to read any other book, even during leisure. Farida is an eighteen-
year-old girl who is restricted from going out after her first menstruation.
Confined to the four walls of her house, Wahida and Farida are not al-
lowed to play or do anything they desire. So, books help them to battle
loneliness. They instruct other girls to get novels from the library, and,
hiding these novels, read them at leisure. Though minor or negligible, this
act shows a resistance to the norm that YA girls should only pray and read
religious books.

Although this role as an adolescent rebel might only be temporary, the
rebel resists the Panoptic society and faces retribution for their actions.
Moreover, none of these YAs are successful in remaining as a rebel for a
long time or escaping this panopticon completely.

Conclusion

Culture and religion are interwoven in the society where the novel takes
place. Religious beliefs shape the cultural codes of the society. These patri-
archal cultural codes control the hopes, dreams, bodies and lives of women
and YAs in particular to sustain the dominance of men and keep it active
and functional throughout the novel. In the novel, the adults strictly sur-
veil the YAs to ensure that they conform to the dominant norms through
the "gaze" that regulates bodies in accordance to norms and standards.
Gaze operates by instilling the fear of the repercussions of non-conformity
(Mungwini 346). Here, the adults operate as the individuals who regulate
the YAs by instilling the fear of punishment from God and the commu-
nity. YAs who have attained puberty are barred from getting educated,
the austerity with which they are compelled to "Never ever come before
men who are other than . . . family" (Salma112). The adults conduct early
marriages for them and maltreat their bodies as something that should be
hidden from their own gaze. These norms and rules restrict the smooth

transition of the YAs to adulthood, resulting in profound psychological distress. The YAs struggle between the unconscious dissenter and the personified panopticon, thus forcing them to turn out to be Adolescent rebels. The society works like a cultural panopticon, and YAs' freedom is punctuated by cultural stringency that provokes them to rebel against the cultural panopticon and adolescent rebels in this particular novel can be called 'Cultural Rebels'. They resist the conventional norms and standards of the community and challenge the status quo. The author renders a balanced picture of the young adult world that illustrates the physical, psychological-emotional changes that are combined with cultural nuances and the shocks and phobias along with identity formation and confusion that occur during this phase of YA lives who are trapped in a panoptic society.

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