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Exploring Reader Responses to Young Adult Literature in the Malaysian English Language Classroom

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Abstract

This article presents the results of a study exploring the reader-responses of Malaysian young adults (YAs) to the literature texts used in Malaysian secondary schools, Dear Mr. Kilmer by Anne Schraff, Captain Nobody by Dean Pitchford, and Sing to the Dawn by Minfong Ho. The study aimed to determine the extent to which the YAs found these texts engaging and relevant, and how they identified aspects of their own young adulthood in the novels. The study employed both qualitative and quantitative data collection methods through questionnaires completed by 30 Malaysian YAs, semi-structured qualitative interviews with a sub-group of six participants, and their journal reflections. Using reader-response literary theory as the guiding framework, the data were analysed quantitatively through descriptive statistical analyses, and qualitatively through inductive thematic analysis, in order to examine the extent to which Malaysian YAs could identify with the main characters, themes, issues, or events in the novels and determine the relevance of the novels to their lives. The findings showed that the participants identified with the characters' conflict between being true to one's self and conforming to societal and gender expectations. The themes of standing up for one's beliefs and right to education, combating social inequities, and family relationships were also relevant aspects that surfaced in responses towards the novels. This

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study provides recommendations for the selection of literary texts for the English language classroom that connect to the developmental phase of young adults and allow learners to see themselves reflected in what they read.

Keywords: ESL, Malaysia, reader response, secondary schools, young adult literature.

1. INTRODUCTION

With the introduction of the literature component in the English language curriculum for National Secondary schools in Malaysia in 2000, literary texts became a compulsory part of the English language teaching syllabus. While there had been attempts in the past by the Malaysian Ministry of Education (MOE) to encourage independent reading through the inclusion of class readers and abridged texts of canonical works, the history of literature appreciation in Malaysian schools had thus far been of a sporadic and irregular nature (Subramaniam & Vethamani, 2004). Apart from the literature in English subject which Fifth Form students (or eleventh graders) could take as an elective subject in the high stakes Malaysian Certificate of Education examination, the place of literary texts, either canonical or not, was either missing or insignificant in the Malaysian secondary school. The MOE's move to include literary texts pointed towards an attempt to revive or develop the love for reading and literature among secondary school students. Among the Malaysian MOE's objectives for the inclusion of these texts were to enhance students' proficiency in English, as well as to contribute towards personal development and character building. Time was allotted in the weekly English teaching schedule for the literature component. The responses of Malaysian secondary students towards the poems, short stories, and novels that had been prescribed were, however, not encouraging. Studies revealed that Malaysian secondary school students showed little interest in these prescribed texts. The texts used were found to lack relevance, were considered either too difficult or too easy, boring, and culturally alien to them (Sidhu, 2003; Subramaniam & Vethamani, 2004; Too, 2006).

Thus, a second cycle to the literature component began in 2010 when a new set of texts were introduced to replace the first. In presenting the new texts, the Curriculum Development Division (CDD) stated that teenage issues of relevance and interest to the Malaysian young adult (YA) readers had been taken into account. In studying the response of Malaysian secondary school students towards the novels used in this second cycle of the literature component, Govindarajoo and Mukundan (2013) found that students identified with issues that were familiar to their young adulthood phase and developed a sense of bonding with the YA characters in the novels. In 2013, the MOE revised the cycle again with another new set of texts. Studies on the selected texts so far have been concerned with whether ethnic diversity has been prioritized and their role as a unifying tool in facilitating inter-ethnic engagement and understanding (Kaur & Mahmor, 2014; Pillai et al., 2016; Thoo et al., 2017). One major aspect that has still not been sufficiently dealt with is the reading experience itself of the Malaysian YAs with the prescribed texts in the current (2013) cycle. Thus, the objective of the present study is to explore the reading experience of the Malaysian

YAs with the texts prescribed by MOE in the 3rd cycle of the literature component in order to determine the level of engagement of students with these texts, and whether these texts have the potential to keep them wanting to read independently. A study directed with this focus would require a deeper comprehension of how YA students engage with texts and their personal experiences of the reading, i.e., their thoughts, feelings, and perceptions of how they relate to, interpret, and engage with these texts. In line with the objectives above, the study attempted to answer the following questions:

1. To what extent do Malaysian YAs find novels of the literature component (3rd cycle) prescribed for students in the Malaysian secondary school English language classroom relevant to their lives as YAs?
2. To what extent do they identify with the main characters, themes, issues, or events in the novels?

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Young Adult Literature

Broadly defined as literature that is written for, published, and marketed to YAs (Cart, 2008), young adult literature (YAL) also goes by different names such as literature for adolescence, adolescent fiction, and teen novels. A defining characteristic of the YAL genre is that it features the issues that mark the young adulthood phase (Cole, 2008; Reed, 1994). This includes the depiction of a YA protagonist at the centre of the plot who is perceptive, sensitive, and intelligent. The conflict between dependence and independence and the journey towards maturity is also featured in YAL. YA novels are usually written from the teenage protagonist's point of view and with themes and issues that are relevant to the period of young adulthood (Brozo & Simpson, 2007; Wolf, 2007). The identifying characteristics of YAL which correspond to the issues faced by YAs, are in line with the developmental tasks of this stage of their lives (Havighurst, 1972; Kohlberg, 1981).

The premise that YAs lean towards YAL as a preferred reading choice is affirmed by studies in this direction. In studying the reading experiences of YAs, Groenke et al. (2015) found that their YA participants looked for their own identities in the texts they read. This in turn motivated them towards further reading. Moeller and Becnel (2014) similarly found their YA respondents admitted to seeing themselves in the characters and situations that they read about in YAL. YAs have also found the issues and themes in YAL to resonate and mirror situations in their own lives and have even formed para-social relationships with YA protagonists (Ivey & Johnston 2013; Kokesh & Sternadori 2015). Through these relationships and by identifying with the YA characters in the novels, there is a strong indication that young people may actually acquire a confidante or friend who understands and empathizes with their times of doubt and uncertainty (Kaplan, 2005; Kaywell, 2000; Proukou, 2005). As the chief characteristics of young adulthood include the search of self and for role models they can identify with, the need to belong, and the development of personal philosophies of being, YAL provides them with this frame of reference (Cart, 2016; Koss & Teale, 2009; Thein & Sulzer, 2015; Wells, 2010).

2.2 Literary Theory: Reader Response

Reader-response theory, which focuses on the reader and their experience of the literary work, proposes that it is the reader who creates the meaning in the text. Reader response theory posits that a text:

...has no real existence until it is read. By completing the meaning, thus actualising or reading it, the reader does not take a passive role, as was traditionally thought, but is an active agent in the creation of meaning. (Gilroy & Parkinson, 1997, p. 215)

By bringing their own physical and psychological conditions into the reading experience, the readers' personal histories become inevitably intertwined into the creation and interpretation of the text (Fish, 1980; Holland, 1968; Rosenblatt, 1976). Reader-response theorists also believe in certain temporary detachment from the real world in order to enter the secondary world mapped out by the literary text (Benton, 1992; Bredella & Delanoy, 1996). This approach is particularly relevant to the exploration of YAs reading experience as it combines elements of their own development stage with their reading experience and helps to reveal the extent of relevance to them.

3. METHODS

3.1 Synopses of the Literature Texts

3.1.1 'Dear Mr. Kilmer' by Anne Schraff

Fifteen-year-old Richard Knight's preference for poetry instead of sports and hunting makes him seem a little strange to his family. When his teacher introduces the class to the poetry of Joyce Kilmer, a well-known poet with *The New York Times*, Richard becomes very interested when he finds out that the poet is a lot like him. World War 1 breaks out and although Kilmer does not believe in war, he volunteers for service in the army to fight for his country. This kind of courage intrigues Richard even more and he begins a correspondence with Kilmer which in time develops into a strong bond of friendship. Through their letters, they exchange thoughts on poetry and what is going on in their lives. As the correspondence carries on, Richard learns about true courage and the evils of discrimination and racism.

3.1.2 'Captain Nobody' by Dean Pitchford

Ten-year-old Newton Newman (or Newt) has never thought of himself as a hero, unlike his much-admired older brother Chris who is a football star. When Chris is knocked into a coma during a football game, Newt's friends decide that taking him out for Halloween would help to get his mind off his brother's condition. They help Newt create a unique costume from Chris's old clothes. The costume gives Newt a new identity – Captain Nobody. Dressed like this, Newt feels strong and confident and soon begins to perform real heroic deeds like helping a confused old man to find his way

home, foiling a jewelry store robbery and clearing a landing path for a plane in distress, climbing a water tower to save another boy, and helping his brother regain consciousness.

3.1.3 *'Sing to the Dawn' by Minfong Ho*

When Dawan, a young Thai village girl, finds out that she has been placed first on a government exam and has won a scholarship, it seems as if her dream of studying in a city school is coming true. However, some obstacles stand in the way of her dream. Her brother, Kwai, is resentful of his sister's success. Dawan's father also disapproves as he does not believe in girls furthering their studies. Dawan is, however, determined to further her studies and seeks support from different people including her mother, a Buddhist monk, Bao the flower girl, a cousin who has lived in the city, and her grandmother. Despite the obstacles in her way, Dawan remains strong and eventually manages to break down her father's resistance and receive her brother's blessing.

3.2 Participants and Data Collection Procedures

The sampling for the study was purposeful with 30 Malaysian young adult students between the ages of 15-18 as participants. All participants were located in the Klang Valley. Participants were briefed about the study and consent was obtained, after which they were supplied with the three novels and a set of guidelines on what was expected from them. The researchers collected both quantitative and qualitative data for the study through a questionnaire, interviews, and reflective journal entries.

3.2.1 *Questionnaires*

A questionnaire comprising closed-ended and open-ended questions based on the research questions was constructed and reviewed by peers to ensure they covered the scope of the study and that the items were not ambiguous. The 30 participants were given three duplicate versions of the questionnaire, one for each novel, with a briefing on the guidelines and nature of responses. The questionnaire contained six closed-ended questions and twelve open-ended questions. They were encouraged to write free responses to the open-ended questions (see the Appendix for the questionnaire).

3.2.2 *Semi-structured interviews*

As the information needed in the study required deep insight into the participating YAs' thoughts, feelings, and perceptions, qualitative interviews were used as a method in this study. A sub-group of six participants (three female and three male) were selected for these interviews based on their willingness to participate in this part of the project: Participant 1, Participant 2, Participant 3, Participant 4, Participant 5, and Participant 6. A semi-structured interview protocol including open-ended questions was constructed to cover the required scope of the research questions, and qualitative interviews were then conducted with each participant in the sub-group. Dialogue between the researchers and the sub-group of participants through qualitative interviewing allowed data and knowledge to be co-constructed (Guba & Lincoln, 1985; Mason, 2002; Richards, 2010).

During the interview, the participants were prompted to talk about their perceptions towards the characters in the novel, whether and how they felt the novel was relevant to their own lives, whether anything in the novel was similar to what they or someone else they know had experienced, which parts of the story brought out an emotional reaction, the values in the novel, and so on. All interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim.

3.2.3 Reflective journals

As tools of introspection, reflective journals are particularly well-matched for research that is descriptive and interpretive and for investigating behaviour in its context (Nunan, 1992). Reflective journals also facilitate self-observation and retrospection and personal accounts of feelings, thoughts, values, and reactions are studied systematically over a period of time (Etherington, 2004; Ortlipp, 2008).

To validate the study further and taking into consideration that some participants may prefer to write down particular responses rather than talk about them, the present study also used data gathered from the six focus participants' written reflections during their experience of reading the three novels. Participants were told that they could reflect further on the interview questions in their journals or write any other personal responses they had to the novels.

3.3 Data Analysis

The responses to the close-ended items in the questionnaire were analysed quantitatively, by conducting basic statistical analyses to calculate frequencies and percentages of responses to each item. The purpose of this analysis was to identify general patterns in the data. Inductive thematic analysis (Nowell et al., 2017) was used to identify the key themes from the open-ended questions in the questionnaire, interviews, and journals. This process began with the lead researcher adding analytic notes and reflections throughout the process of conducting and transcribing the interviews as well as reading the reflective journals. The analytic notes were collated to generate a list of preliminary themes and ideas corresponding with each of the research questions. Specific excerpts from the data were identified to serve as illustrative examples of each theme. The researchers then read through the data again several times to identify more examples that corresponded with each theme, and through this process, the list of themes was refined. Based on the themes that emerged, a thick description was then written.

The quantitative and qualitative data from the study were compared to confirm and triangulate the findings before the research questions were answered. Member checks were also conducted with participants, and their feedback was taken into account to ensure the credibility of the findings and to avoid any discrepancies between the findings and the data.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

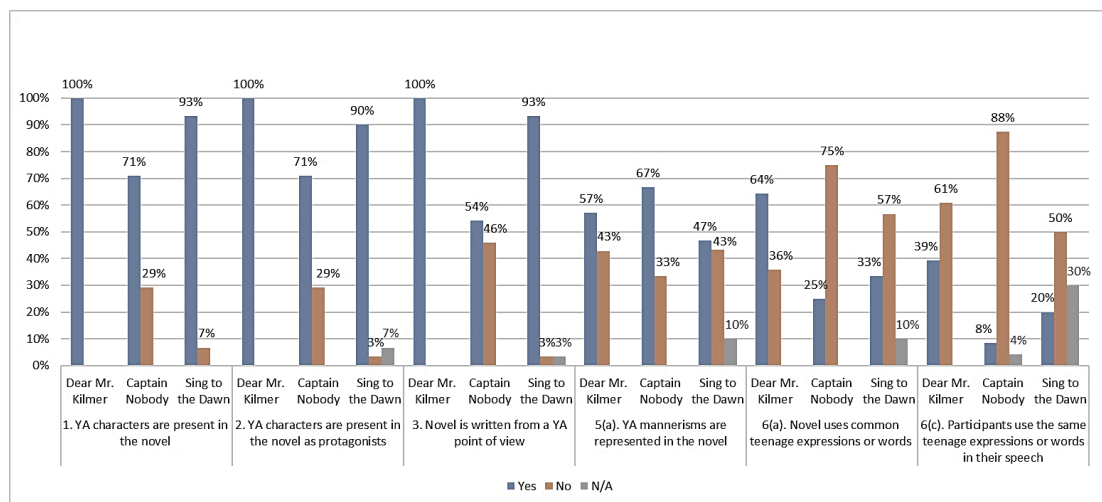
4.1 Presence of YA Protagonists, Mannerisms, and Expressions in the Novels

Table 1 and Figure 1 present the results from the quantitative analysis of the close-ended items in Section A of the questionnaire.

Table 1. Quantitative analysis of items in Section A of the questionnaire.

Questionnaire Item	'Dear Mr. Kilmer' (N=30)	'Captain Nobody' (N=30)	'Sing to the Dawn' (N=30)
1. YA characters are present in the novel	Yes – 100% No – 0%	Yes – 71% No – 29%	Yes – 93% No – 7%
2. YA characters are present in the novel as protagonists	Yes – 100% No – 0%	Yes – 71% No – 29%	Yes – 90% No – 3% N/A – 7%
3. Novel is written from a YA point of view	Yes – 100% No – 0%	Yes – 54% No – 46%	Yes – 93% No – 3% N/A – 3%
5(a). YA mannerisms are represented in the novel	Yes – 57% No – 43%	Yes – 67% No – 33%	Yes – 47% No – 43% N/A – 10%
6(a). The novel uses common teenage expressions or words	Yes – 64% No – 36%	Yes – 25% No – 75%	Yes – 33% No – 57% N/A – 10%
6(c). Participants use the same teenage expressions or words in their speech	Yes – 39% No – 61%	Yes – 8% No – 88% N/A – 4%	Yes – 20% No – 50% N/A – 30%

Note. N/A refers to the percentage of participants who did not respond to the item.



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Figure 1. Quantitative analysis of items in Section A of the questionnaire.

As the results in Table 1 and Figure 1 demonstrate, 'Dear Mr. Kilmer' and 'Sing to the Dawn' were considered by most participants to have YA characters and YA protagonists, while fewer participants considered the characters in 'Captain Nobody' to be YAs. Similarly, the majority of participants agreed that 'Dear Mr. Kilmer' and

'Sing to the Dawn' were written from a YA point of view, while the responses to the item on point of view were split almost equally between 'Yes' and 'No' for 'Captain Nobody'. In terms of the use of YA mannerisms in the novels, there were surprisingly more affirmative responses to 'Captain Nobody' than to the other two novels. Examples that participants provided as 'YA mannerisms' in 'Captain Nobody', however, were limited to descriptions of the clothes used by the characters, for example, "silver track shoes" and "Halloween costumes". Finally, in response to the items about the use of common teenage expressions or words in the novels, participants felt that 'Dear Mr. Kilmer' used the most teenage expressions, followed by 'Sing to the Dawn', and then 'Captain Nobody'. Examples of expressions and words from 'Dear Mr. Kilmer' and 'Sing to the Dawn' that participants reported using in their own speech were "What do you mean?", "But what for?", "C'mon, oh yes" and "It's not fair". The following sections discuss the results from the thematic analysis of the open-ended questions in the questionnaire, interviews, and journal entries.

4.2 Identification with the Pursuit of Personal Dreams

All the participants felt a definite sense of kinship with 14-year-old Dawan, the main character in 'Sing to the Dawn'. They could identify with her determination and single-minded perseverance in her struggle to claim the education scholarship that was rightfully hers. Word and phrases that participants used to describe Dawan in response to question 2 of Section B in the questionnaire (Would you consider the young adult characters strong? Why?) included "determined," "believe in herself," "does not give up," "unafraid to be different," "brave," "hold strong to her ideas," "confidence to do what's right," and "overcame discrimination". There was a feeling of admiration for Dawan's single-minded pursuit of her goal despite the obstacles that stood in her way. This admiration was also tinged with some expression of wistfulness among some participants who wished they were more like Dawan and less like the disillusioned older cousin in the book:

- (1) Like Dawan, I had set so many expectations and believed that I had so much potential in me. Sadly, the repercussions of my mistake turned me into Cousin Noi. I became bitter and disappointed by what life (or God) has given me. Despair changes people, kills hope, and shatters dreams. (Participant 1/Journal)

Participant 2, Participant 4, and Participant 6 could also identify with the struggle that Dawan had to go through to pursue her dream and could relate to being in families where it is not considered as important for girls to pursue their education as it is for boys. They talked about having to "fight for their rights" for equal educational opportunities in Malaysian tertiary education, where they felt higher education was sometimes not considered as important for girls as it was for boys. The identification became very personal to Participant 2 who felt a "deep sense of connection" with Dawan having experienced first-hand the perceptions of her own father who could not understand her own study and career goals. In her journal she writes:

- (2) It ends sadly for me because my family is unsupportive and averse to my ideas and worldview. They do not understand my need and drive to study and pursue my career goals. They shun what they don't understand and I feel like an outsider in my own family. (Participant 2/Journal)

The sense of struggle for identity and pursuing one's dreams was also immediately identifiable and relevant to participants in the YA protagonist of 'Dear Mr. Kilmer', 15-year-old, Richard. Almost all the participants felt they could relate to Richard's feeling of being like an outsider in their own families as they had felt the same 'disconnection' with their family at some time or other. In response to question 1 in Section B of the questionnaire (Is the young adult character(s) (the main character) believable and realistic? Elaborate with examples), one participant noted that "him [Richard] being a teenager, I can relate to him," while another remarked that he could connect with Richard "because Richard faces all the same challenges we face in our real-life". During the interviews, Participant 3, Participant 4, and Participant 6 went on to say that the feeling of not really belonging that Richard experienced was a common feeling among YAs like them. The search for identity has been identified as one of the characteristics of young adulthood, and the YA participants not only recognized this in the protagonists, Dawan and Richard, but went on to connect this to themselves, such as said by Participant 2 in (3):

- (3) I relate to a lot of the characters, but mostly Richard. I feel out of place often, even with my own family. (Participant 2/Interview)

Participant 3 and Participant 4 also recognised similar connections as Participant 2, and this is revealed in their journals:

- (4) Richard on the other hand was quite easy to relate to. Feeling isolated and alienated for his own beliefs and stance, I think, is something a lot of YAs relate to. (Participant 3/Journal)
- (5) I feel like I can relate to Richard in certain areas. Sometimes I do feel like I don't really connect with my other family members...Constantly feeling out of place, unsure of what the world has to offer, the bullying, being an outsider, and many more. People feel more connected when they feel like they know someone, somewhere, in the world who understands what they are going through. (Participant 4/Journal)

4.3 Identification with Societal Expectations and Gender Roles

One of the main issues that were discussed more than others was the gender roles especially in 'Sing to the Dawn'. In response to question 5 in Section C of the questionnaire (What do you think of the values in the novel? Are the values in the novel consistent with Malaysian society?), several participants were skeptical that gender discrimination could still be true in present-day Malaysia. These participants remarked that "we are all taught not to discriminate against women," "Malaysia society not gender bias," and "Malaysian government gives a lot of opportunities to study". However, a few other participants believed that the same privileged priorities for boys to pursue higher education compared to girls in 'Sing to the Dawn' still existed in modern 21st-century families in urban Malaysia. In the questionnaires, the participants remarked that Malaysian teenage girls still had to "fight for their rights" and face "gender inequality in Malaysia". The right to education and living in a patriarchal society were often repeated themes throughout the journal responses and during the interviews. In her journal, Participant 2 felt the necessity to speak out against social injustices including those which were gender-based.

- (6) I grew up in a very patriarchal and capitalistic society, and it was harder being a woman, who believes in socialism and is a feminist. I was very timid as a child, and I learned very quickly that

silence is often better. Somehow, as I grew up, I start to realise that the consequences of speaking up for myself and for what's right are more important than pleasing others. Be it moderate or radical, I quickly learned that it's a must to fight injustice, no matter how badly things end for me if I were to do so. (Participant 2/Journal)

When speaking about the rights to education, all the female participants expressed their feelings with added conviction. In her journal, Participant 1 writes about:

- (7) ...[the] constant need to remind themselves that as girls they deserve education and they deserve to be as successful, if not more successful than men. It's not just to create an equal society but in order to create a better society in Malaysia. (Participant 1/Journal)

4.4 Fear of Being Judged and the Need to Present a Façade

The fear of being judged for who you really are was another theme that surfaced in the journals, especially as they related to Richard in 'Dear Mr. Kilmer'. The participants while championing and empathising with Richard's "secret" passion for poetry understood at a personal level the need to "keep things private":

- (8) I think a lot of people are going through this. There are a lot of things that they keep to themselves because they're afraid of criticism and people are so easily judgmental nowadays. Therefore, I could relate to that. I am afraid to share a lot of my work because I'm scared that they wouldn't accept it. It's not the norm, perhaps. (Participant 3/Interview)

While most participants indicated in the questionnaire that they could not relate to Newt in 'Captain Nobody' with comments like "corny, awkward and not to mention very lame" used to describe him, one participant responded to item 1 in Section C (Is there anything in the novel that is similar to what you or have experienced or similar to what someone else is going through?) by writing that "Peer pressure can affect one's life drastically. Sometimes some changes must be made for us to fit in the society". Upon further probing during interviews, a few participants revealed that they could identify with the sense of "irrelevance" felt by Newt and the longing to be more well-liked than his brother. Participant 5, in particular, could relate to the idea of presenting a false front or façade to the public to avoid being judged. He drew parallels between Newt's dressing up in a superhero costume and the presentation of online personas:

- (9) It's very much like how some people are comfortable interacting with other people online. The other party does not know who you are; they cannot see your flaws and insecurities, and so you are able to express yourself without the fear of being judged. On the other hand, this can go wrong as some people tend to be so brazen and rude to the point of taking other people down online when in reality they're just cowards who can only hide behind a virtual façade. (Participant 5/Interview)

However, most participants recognized that taking on another identity or persona would not solve any problems they had. In response to item 2 in Section C of the questionnaire, "Can you relate to any of the young adult characters in any way?", one participant wrote that they learned not to be "always afraid to face our own problems", while another participant remarked that "No one will ever simply undergo any changes in personality just by wearing a simply made-up superhero suit".

4.5 Relationships and Communication with Siblings and Parents

The lack of communication between parents and their children was highlighted by the participants in their responses to all three novels. In ‘Sing to the Dawn’, they talked about the relationship or lack of it between Dawan and her father, and how it was not until the end that the father realized what was in his daughter’s heart. The same theme surfaced in ‘Dear Mr. Kilmer’ where it took a lot to happen before Richard’s father began to understand his son’s love for writing poetry. On a different scale, the participants talked about how 10-year-old Newt in ‘Captain Nobody’ was almost always left to fend for himself due to the busyness of both his parents. Speaking about this and relating it to her own life, Participant 2 says:

- (10) I find that it’s very relatable in the sense that a lot of fathers, Western or Eastern, they don’t know how to talk to their children, especially daughters. It’s like they don’t know what to say. They don’t know what to talk about, how to talk to their children. But I think they should. I think they forget that they should just talk. Period. They should just talk. But they don’t. So, they prefer to just ignore, say ‘hi’, ‘bye’, and then ‘okay, how are your studies?’ that’s it. (Participant 2/Interview)

The bond between siblings was also mentioned by the majority of participants in responding to all three novels. All participants stated that they could relate to the bond of love struggling with rivalry in the relationship between Dawan and her brother, Kwai, in ‘Sing to the Dawn’, and they could identify with the feeling of being overshadowed like Newt in ‘Captain Nobody’ and Richard in ‘Dear Mr. Kilmer’. This was more evident in participants who felt that their sibling was in some way more exceptional than them. The responses, however, came out more as statements of fact rather than complaints with little or no traces of resentment. In her journal, one of the participants, Participant 1 writes:

- (11) Dawan and Kwai’s relationship reminds me of me and my own brother. However, in my case, I’m the less smart one and he is obviously the brilliant one. (Participant 1/Journal)

Another participant, Participant 3, talked without any expression of rancour about how her sister seemed to get preferential treatment from parents when it came to education:

- (12) They weren’t even happy at the thought of me pursuing my studies in a private university, much more wanting to go abroad. Somehow like Dawan, I believe that my younger sibling got special treatment because of the mistakes my parents had made with me and learned from their decisions with me and they had encouraged my sister to further her studies overseas. So, I guess, in some ways, I could really relate to how Dawan feels; to be overshadowed by the younger sibling. I feel like I was more Dawan than Kwai in the book. (Participant 3/Interview)

4.6 Identification with Emotions

4.6.1 Identification with emotions in ‘Sing to the Dawn’

The reaction that stood out most significantly in all three parts of the study was a feeling of anger and indignation of gender discrimination and the double standards when it came to education opportunities for girls compared to boys. In response to item number 3 in Section C of the questionnaire (Do any parts of the story bring out a strong

emotional reaction in you?), the words and phrases that were most frequently used were “angry,” “sympathy,” and “gender discrimination”. Most participants felt empathy for Dawan and were “touched at [her] grandmother’s support” for her. Journal reflections revealed a deep sense of empathy towards the YA protagonist and evocation of strong emotional reactions towards the struggles she had to endure in pursuing her dreams. Participant 3 writes about the mixture of emotions she felt reading the novel:

- (13) The sadness, desperation, and excitement, all can be heard from Dawan’s point of view, and though it may not be relatable, it was understandable to me. Participant 1 mentions the ambiguity, stark difference between hope and despair’ which she goes on to say is interwoven in all parts of life including her own. (Participant 3/Journal)

In their interviews, Participant 2 and Participant 4 similarly expressed a strong sense of emotional connection to Dawan:

- (14) It was actually very touching. I’ve never cried reading a book before, but I did reading this one. Because the ending was like, after all her hard work, suddenly she doubts herself, again, which is very realistic because you’re going to embark on a huge journey to somewhere that you’ve never been to. You’ve never even been outside the village and suddenly you go on a bus to the city and with no one there. So, she doubted herself...I think her voice really reached out to me among all the other novels. That’s why the strong emotional reaction was there. (Participant 2/Interview)

Although most responses indicated that they found large parts of the novel “sad”, they were happy with the positive resolution at the end and the hopeful note that the novel ends on.

- (15) I felt sad that she had to fight so very hard for something that I think everyone deserves. So, throughout the whole novel, I think sadness was a huge part of it. And in the end, I was glad that she got a happy ending. (Participant 4/Interview)

4.6.2 Identification with emotions in ‘Captain Nobody’

Despite responses that indicated the participants’ lack of identification with the protagonist, a significant number of responses stated that they could feel the emotions in the story. For example, there was evident sympathy for Newt living in the shadow of his brother and having to take on adult responsibilities at his age. In response to item number 3 in Section C of the questionnaire, one participant wrote “It makes me feel sympathy to Newt as he was being ignored by everyone in school. People see through him, and even the newspaper stated that his brother is the only child of the family,” while another participant felt sorry that “He lives in the shadows of his brother who was a famous football star. Both of his parents were too busy with their job until they ignored the efforts made by Newt, cooking breakfast for them”.

There was also an expression of annoyance and sadness at the way the character of Reggie Ratner was treated and the seemingly flippant way his attempted suicide was portrayed.

- (16) I do feel annoyed by how the book ended. Newt is more famous than his brother for doing helpful but reckless things. Is it a good message to send to impressionable teenagers who already think popularity equals survival? Extreme sadness for Reggie, who was wrongfully accused by people who did not witness the event. (Participant 5/Interview)

4.6.3 Identification with emotions in 'Dear Mr. Kilmer'

Most of the responses indicated there was a definite evocation of emotions and bonding with the events and issues in the novel. The words "sadness," "grief," "sympathy," and "empathy" featured prominently in responses to item number 3 in Section C of the questionnaire (Do any parts of the story bring out a strong emotional reaction in you?). The participants felt Richard's pain as he struggled between the need to be himself and conform to expectations of family and society. They admired his courage in standing up for what he believed was right despite the possibility of being mocked or ridiculed. It also became a point of self-reflection for some of the participants as reflected in their journals.

- (17) Let this be a reminder for me to stop being a people pleaser. One of the reasons why I tend to do this is because of the fear of being hated by anyone, even if I'm not close to them at all. I wish I was better at handling people. Instead, I always say and do the wrong things which end up in many fights, misunderstandings, and tears. (Participant 1/Journal)

Although the participants described the book as being somewhat of a tear-jerker, they felt that similarly to 'Sing to the Dawn', this novel also ended on an optimistic note.

5. DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

The objective of the study was to explore the responses of Malaysian YAs towards the novels used as texts in Malaysian secondary schools. Specifically, the study sought to explore whether Malaysian YAs found the novels relevant to their lives and the extent to which they identified with the main characters, themes, issues, and events in the novels. The findings of the study indicated that YAs could identify with the characters and issues in the novels but varying degrees. The participants could identify with the determination and perseverance of the YA protagonists in pursuing their personal dreams in 'Sing to the Dawn' and 'Dear Mr. Kilmer'. To different extents, they could feel the struggles that these characters went through in trying to achieve their personal goals, and they related it to some of their own situations.

The YAs also demonstrated critical literacy in recognizing inequities in terms of societal expectations and the portrayal of gender roles (Wu, 2014). There was a definite sense of admiration for the strength of character shown by the protagonists in these two novels, a longing to be more like these characters, and a wish for role models they could emulate. In both these novels, the participants could also relate to the situation where some things needed to be kept secret or private for fear of being judged or not getting the desired responses from others who mattered in their lives. In 'Captain Nobody', they could relate to the need to hide "behind a mask" for the same reason. The conflict between having to live up to societal and parental expectations and being true to one's dreams was another issue that the YA participants could identify with. Family relationships were also highlighted in their responses, especially the lack of communication between parents and children in all three novels. This was seen as a reflection of what went on in some of their own families. Sibling rivalry, however, was treated in a very matter-of-fact way with no feelings of resentment expressed about the preferential treatment received by some of their siblings.

There were significant instances of strong emotional reactions towards ‘Sing to the Dawn’ and ‘Dear Mr. Kilmer’ compared to ‘Captain Nobody’. The participants felt anger, empathy, and indignation during the different parts of their reading. They could identify with the sadness, desperation, and frustration of the YA protagonists, Dawan and Richard in these two novels and felt the same note of hopefulness at the ending of the stories. Compared to the other two novels, the participants could not identify on the same level with ‘Captain Nobody’ stating the reason as the age of the ten-year-old protagonist and a storyline that they found unbelievable. Nevertheless, the fact that all three novels ended on a hopeful note received a positive response from all the participants.

The responses of the YA participants point towards a strong identification with the issues that are relevant to them in this stage of young adulthood and these correspond closely to the developmental tasks previously identified by YA developmental theorists (Erikson, 1968; Havighurst, 1972; Kohlberg, 1981) These include the YA’s search for self-identity, the seeking for emotional independence from parents and other adults and the beginning of an acquisition of a personal ideology. The responses from the study also correspond with previous studies on YAL which point towards the YA reader seeking to find themselves in the pages they read (Groenke et al., 2015; Spring, 2016; Stephens, 2007).

It is also interesting to note that the YA participants did not highlight some of the other themes depicted in the novels like the exploitation of farmers in ‘Sing to the Dawn’, racial prejudice in ‘Dear Mr. Kilmer’ and coping with the tragedy of a loved one in a coma. While these were significant themes in the novels as well, they may not have had the same relevance to the YA participants as other parts of the novels did. This brings the question of how much relevance is needed to the YA when texts are being selected. Is it enough to provide texts which relate to them completely in the present, or should they include other issues which although not immediately relatable to them would be something that prepares them for the future? These would be things they need to know and to be aware of and to possibly give attention to when they journey on towards adulthood. But for the present time as Participant 2 writes in her journal:

To read books that one can relate to is what makes people fall in love with books in the first place. It’s hard to ignore something when you see yourself on those pages. (Participant 2)

6. CONCLUSION

In summary, the findings from the study suggest that YA readers prefer books they can connect with in terms of the relevance of the characters and issues and that they identify with characters who model traits such as perseverance, the strength of character, and loyalty. This is consistent with the results of other studies (e.g. Corrigan & Chiad, 2014; Fogal, 2010) which have shown that students prefer a reader-response approach that allows them to move beyond a focus on developing language skills, to developing a personal relationship with a text that allows them to learn about the world, to discover their own beliefs, values, and world views, and to empathize and connect with the characters in the text. An implication of this is that in order to keep YA readers engaged with literary texts and have the desire to continue reading, the texts that are used in language classrooms should allow learners to see themselves in what they read,

and speak to their own developmental phase. The texts that are selected for the English language classroom should also be more representative of the linguistic and cultural diversity of students in multicultural societies.

A limitation of this study was that it was conducted among YAs from a similar age group, socioeconomic background, and geographical location. Another limitation is that the study only reported on students' perspectives. Future research could be conducted with groups of respondents coming from different ends of the young adulthood boundaries and different linguistic and socio-cultural settings, to look at how learners' background and lived experiences can impact their interpretation of and responses to YAL. In addition, it would be beneficial to conduct classroom observations on how these texts are taught and to obtain the perspectives of teachers and other stakeholders involved in the selection and implementation of the English literature component in schools. The findings from additional research can provide an additional source of direction to curriculum developers when the selection of future texts for YAs needs to be made in other educational contexts.

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APPENDIX

Thank you for agreeing to respond to this questionnaire which is part of a research project undertaken by UNITAR International University, Petaling Jaya. We want to reassure you that your responses to the questions here will be completely confidential. The general purpose of this questionnaire is to find out your response to the novel that you have read and the extent to which it is relevant to you.

This questionnaire consists of 3 sections; Section A, Section B, and Section C. Please answer the questions in the spaces provided.

If you require more space to answer the questions, you may write on another sheet of paper and attach it with this questionnaire.

SECTION A

1. Are there young adult (age 11-20) character(s) in the novel? (Yes/No)
If your answer to (1) is 'Yes,' then is/are the young adult character(s) the main protagonist(s)? (Yes/No)
2. Is the novel written from a young adult's point of view? (Yes/No)
3. Whose 'voice' do you hear most in the novel?
 - a) Does the novel match the descriptions of young adults' (11-20) mannerisms? (Yes/No)
 - b) If your answer to (a) is 'Yes', please provide two examples.
(Sentence/Page/Chapter)
- a) Are there expressions or words that teenagers commonly use? (Yes/No)
4. If your answer to (a) is 'Yes,' please provide two examples.
(Sentence/Page/Chapter)
5. Do you also use the same expressions when you speak? (Yes/No)
If your answer to Question 1 in SECTION A is 'Yes' then please continue to answer questions in SECTION B followed by SECTION C
If your answer to Question 1 is 'No' then go straight to SECTION C

SECTION B

1. Is the young adult character(s) (the main character) believable and realistic?
Elaborate with examples.
2. Would you consider the young adult characters strong? Why?
3. Do they undergo any kind of changes in the course of the story? Elaborate with examples.
4. Are there instances where the young adult characters have a kind of conflict within themselves? Elaborate with examples.

SECTION C

1. Is there anything in the novel that is similar to what you have experienced or similar to what someone else is going through?
2. Can you relate to any of the young adult characters in any way?
3. Do any parts of the story bring out a strong emotional reaction in you (anger, sadness, sympathy, empathy, etc.)? Please provide examples.
4. How does the novel end? Is there a happy ending and/or some form of resolution or closure?
5. What do you think of the values in the novel? Are the values in the novel consistent with Malaysian society?
6. Do you think the novel is suitable for you as a Malaysian secondary school student? Why?

End of questionnaire.