**In search of self: Navigating subjectivity amidst conflicts in Rainbow Rowell’s *Eleanor & Park (2012)***

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**ABSTRACT**

Entrance into adulthood has often been seen as a phase marked by self-exploration, instability, and struggles to overcome tensions and conflicts. *Eleanor & Park* (2012) is a novel that explores issues of growing up and tells the story of how the two main characters go through the struggles of their adolescent lives. This study analyzes how Eleanor and Park construct and navigate their subjectivities amidst the various conflicts they face. It does so by, first, identifying and classifying the conflicts the characters encounter and then locating their provisional subject positions that draw on how they react to and deal with the conflicts. While the study confirms the dynamic nature of subject positions, both Eleanor and Park tend to bring to the fore their active subject position in dealing with the conflicts. Moreover, their subject positions further indicate that Eleanor and Park are empowered agents who are capable of deliberating thoughts and actions consciously. In navigating their subjectivities, both characters, in the end, are able to achieve personal growth and empowerment.

**Keywords**:Conflicts; subjectivity; young adult literature.

**INTRODUCTION**

Young adult literature is one specific genre that, according to Nikolajeva (2014), possibly has the strongest potential to offer readers somewhat accurate depiction of selfhood. It attempts to express adolescent characters’ struggles to comprehend the world and other people around them, their confusion and anxiety of entering adulthood, the discomfort about the subtle changes in their bodies and mind. Through young adult novels, adolescent readers may view the characters as living and struggling with real problems that speak to their own life experience as teenagers (Bean & Moni, 2003). Indeed, young adult literature (or abbreviated as YA), is a literary genre that is written about and for adolescents (Garcia, 2013), and it has generally been identified as “problem novels”, as these novels present explorations into social issues that affect teenagers such as issues of identity and belong­ing, subjectivity, agency, power relations, surveillance, commodification and consumer culture (Koss & Teale, 2009). These books commonly deal with a signifi­cant event in a young adult’s life that trans­forms one from childhood or adolescence to adulthood.

The central theme of young adults, thus, revolves around making sense of self and one’s place in this transitional stage in life. Many of the books explore how young adult characters grapple with their own developing identities and uncertainties about the future (Burger, 2016; Campbell, 2010; Tiainen, 2013). In the phase of adolescence, teenagers have one main task: establishing their own identities (Adámková, 2011) through self-exploration to answer questions of “Where did I come from?”, “Who am I?”, and “What do I want to become?” Thus, Nikolajeva (2014) called childhood and adolescence as dynamic and turbu­lent phases of human life—periods of identity con­struction.

Understanding one’s sense of self and knowing one’s place in the world are essential for an individual’s existence (Nikolajeva, 2014). According to McCallum (1999), personal identity and selfhood are commonly constructed in the transition stage between child­hood and adulthood and are formed through language in dialogue with other people in the society they live in. In relation to these issues, concepts that often emerge in the discussion are subjectivity and identity. Some­times, these two terms are used interchangeably, but, in theory, they both refer to different entities. As Barker (2000) points out, subjectivity is the condition of being a person and the processes by which an indi­vidual become a person; it explores how individuals develop as subjects and how they experience themselves (Barker, 2000). Identity, on the other hand, refers to concepts about who the individual is and what the individual is like (Baumeister, 1997). Subjectivity can thus be defined as a sense of personal identity, whereas identity can be defined as a sense of belonging.  Furthermore, the formation of subjectivity reflects the social process that constitutes individuals as subjects. Subject with subjectivity is not born as such but is made so by an individual’s absorption into culture (Sheikh, 2017).

Numerous studies have been done with regard to issues surrounding subjectivity and identity. As this study focuses on the concept of subjectivity, a number of current studies are worth highlighting to establish some grounds for the conduct of the present study. Rahma (2015), for example, examined the construction of happiness through female subjectivity in Pensri Kiengsiri’s *Arrival of Dawn*. Employing Judith Butler’s theory of subjectivity and Nicholas White’s concept of happiness, her study shows that the female subjectivity takes place in the negation of mother and daughter’s desires, and this negation constructs the concept of happiness for the main character. In relation to female subjectivity, Wijayanti and Rusdiarti (2018) analyzed Seno Gumira Adjidarma’s *Drupadi* and reconstructed Drupadi through the lens of gender theory proposed by Ann Oakley and R.W. Connel as well as Luce Irigaray’s theory of female subjectivity. The result of this study shows that Drupadi’s subjec­tivity is constructed through the inner aspect and the outward aspect of Drupadi’s character. Javaheri (2018) observed the formation of female characters’ subjectivities in Philip Pullman’s *His Dark Materials* and Marjane Satrapi’s *Persepolis* usingMikhail Bakhtin’s concept of dialogism. The two novels revealed that the female characters’ subjectivities were depicted as fragmented, multiple, and dependent on social discourses and practices.  Meanwhile, employ­ing the concept of Gutierrez’s glocal subjectivity, Nafisah (2020) found that two Indonesian children’s films construct the protagonists to embrace a more global subjectivity than the local one.

While the above studies focused more on the subjectivity formation of female characters, this paper analyzes the issue of subjectivity of both female and male characters. The construction of subjectivity is analyzed through the relationships between the main characters and other characters in Rainbow Rowell’s *Eleanor & Park* (2012). The novel addresses one of the problems faced by young adults, which is navigating one’s sense of self between peers and family. Hence, this paper focuses on the dialogues between self and others, specifically when the main characters have to deal with tensions and challenges in their lives, such as those related to self-concepts, family matters, bullying and sense of belonging. In examining how their subjectivities are played out amidst these conflicts, Lamb’s (2008) theory of conflict and McCallum’s (1999) notion of subjectivity are drawn on.

**THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

According to McCallum (1999), subjectivity is essen­tial to narratives of maturation, to stories about relation­ships between the self and others, and to explorations of relationships between individuals and the world. Subjectivity is always associated with relationships between individuals—between the self and others—as individuals can never see themselves directly. Instead, they construct a sense of themselves by appropriating the position of the other, which is outside of the self. This idea echoes Bakhtin’s view on the role of the other in completing the self: “I am conscious of myself and become myself only while revealing myself for another, through another, and with the help of another.” (Bakhtin, 1984a, p. 287). Bakhtin (in McCallum, 1999) sees subjectivity as dependent on the recognition of the position of the other and of the distance between self and other. He emphasizes the role of the other in completing the self; an individual’s consciousness occurs in relation with the other. As such, subjectivity necessitates subject positions. A subject or an individual responds to different situation and issues by adopting a position (Foucault, 1989). In their subject positions, individuals, as McCallum points out, can be actively or passively involved in the discourses they inhabit. An active subject position indicates that the individual takes verbal or physical actions, while a passive subject position is shown through the individual’s reluctance to take verbal or physical action. In taking a position, an individual, in fact, exercises his or her agency. McCallum defines agency as the capability of “conscious and deliberate thought and actions” (1999, p. 4). Therefore, any position individuals take indicates some degree of agency. In line with this, the present study analyzes how the characters position themselves to resolve the conflicts they are facing and, in so doing, navigate their subjectivities.

To understand the characters’ actions, this study also draws on a number of theorizations on conflict. In her book *The art and craft of storytelling*, Lamb (2008) explains that things that happen to characters in story—the way they suffer, overcome struggles, and gain redemption—are what constitute the soul of story. Characters have to overcome obstacles in order to achieve their goal. In this sense, conflict is essential to the growth or development of a character over the course of a story, because conflict powers the plot (Lamb, 2008; Littleton & Caldwell, 2011).

In general, conflicts can be divided into internal and external conflicts. Internal or inner conflict involves a character’s emotional and psychological struggles; it forces the character to face their emotional truths, weaknesses, and vulnerabilities (Mortell, 2009). External conflict, on the other hand, is a force on the struggle from outside of one’s self; it occurs between a character with another character (Bahri & Dewi, 2015). Specifically, Lamb (2008) classifies conflicts into four types: (1) man against man, (2) man against nature, (3) man against society, and (4) man against self. However, as this study focuses on how the characters navigate their subjectivities, only the external conflicts are highlighted. This is in line with the premise that subjectivity is always related to relationships between individuals: between the self and others. The analysis of the external conflicts reveals how the main characters react to the conflicts and how they position themselves within those conflicts.

**METHODOLOGY**

This study is qualitative in nature; it specifically employed a textual analysis in which the dialogues and narrations, particularly those pertaining to conflicts, carried out by the main characters and other characters served as textual evidence. As the initial phase of data collection, any conflicts encountered by the main characters were highlighted. Then, drawing on Lamb’s four categorizations of conflict, the study narrowed down the data to ‘man against man’ conflict and ‘man against society.’ Situating Eleanor and Park, the main characters of Rainbow Rowell’s *Eleanor & Park* (2012), within these external conflicts, how they reacted and responded to these situations were scrutinized, highlighting their subject positions: active or passive.

**FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION**

Data analysis revealed that Eleanor and Park’s subject positions shifted from conflict to conflict. Their shifting subject positions appeared to be dependent on two major factors: (1) with whom the main characters interacted in the dialogue, and (2) in what situations or contexts they were in. As for the external conflicts, the analysis pointed to four major themes: (1) external conflicts related to *sense of self*, (2) external conflicts related to *parents or adults’ domination*, (3) external conflicts related to *maintaining relationship*, and (4) external conflicts related to *decision-making*. The main characters were perceived as having an active subject position when they took an action in dealing with the conflict; when they did nothing about the conflict, they were then seen as showing a passive subject position.

**External Conflicts Related to Sense of Self**

According to Nilsen and Donelson (2009), one of characteristics of young adult fiction is it must have a strong relation with emotional and intellectual development. The concept of subjectivity is closely related to adolescents, because at this time adolescents are still in a period of self-development. Adolescents frequently confront the issue of being ‘different’, and they try to find their place in a confusing and diverse world.  In their struggle for making sense of themselves, young adults are constantly searching for a place to belong to while wanting to appear normal in front of others (Millet, 2015).

*Eleanor and Park* (2012) centers on two high school students who are considered as outsiders in their community. Eleanor is seen as different because of her status as a newcomer and also her unusual physi­cal appearance, while Park is seen as different because of his mixed race and his Asian looks. In addition, they are perceived as not conforming to the societal norms because their behavior is quite different from their peers. Unlike other girls, Eleanor opts to wear men clothes; while Park puts on eyeliner, which is not normally practiced by boys of his age. As is told in the novel, Eleanor actually wears men clothes to feel ‘protected’ and ‘secure’, while Park chooses to put on eyeliner to gain self-confidence. Their different looks and attitudes spark some degree of conflicts as they have to negotiate and decide whether to stay different or conform to the social expectations in expressing ‘who they are’.

In dealing with conflicts related to sense of self, Eleanor tends to show more active subject positions than Park.  For example, Eleanor shows active subject positions as she struggles to adapt to a new environ­ment. As a newcomer, Eleanor knows that people do not like her mainly because of her striking appearance (big body, red curly hair, men clothes, and odd accessories). However, Eleanor continues to be herself and does not intend to change herself for the sake of meeting other people’s expectations. For instance, in the gym incident where she just finds out that the gym suit exposes her body to its most disadvantage, Eleanor decides to go with it. Instead of letting the bullies -Tina and the gang- win, Eleanor braves herself to walk in school with her gym suit. She motivates herself, “*Okay*, she told herself, taking a deep breath, *get it together. Don’t let them get to you*.” (p. 247). Here, the text reveals Eleanor’s thought refusing to be belittled. This proves that Eleanor shows a very strong active subject position. In contrast, Eleanor would be considered passive if she did nothing and let those bullies continue to oppress her. Eleanor’s ability to express her opinion and to take actions on her own show her active subject position in defining her sense of self.

Park, on the other hand, occupies more passive subject positions related to his sense of self in comparison to Eleanor. In the beginning of the story, Park feels burdened with his status as a half-Korean. He feels alienated from the others mainly because of his Asian looks.  Park realizes that other teenagers like to mistreat him because he is different, as can be seen in this excerpt:

‘What the fuck does Sheridan know about kung fu?’ Mikey said.

‘Are you retarded?’ Steve said. ‘His mom’s Chinese.’

Mikey looked at Park carefully, Park smiled and narrowed his eyes. ‘Yeah, I guess I see it,’ Mikey said. ‘I always thought you were Mexican.’

‘Shit, Mikey,’ Steve said, ‘you’re such a fucking racist.’

‘She’s not Chinese,’ Tina said. ‘She’s Korean.’

‘Who is?’ Steve asked.

‘Park’s mom.’

Park’s mom had been cutting Tina’s hair since grade school. They both had the exact same hairstyle, long spiral perms with tall, feathered bangs.

‘She’s fucking hot is what she is,’ Steve said, cracking himself up. ‘No offense, Park.’

Park managed another smile and slunk back into his seat, putting his headphones back on and cranking up the volume. He could still hear Steve and Mikey, four seats behind him. (pp. 6-7)

The dialogue shows that Park gets racial prejudice from Steve and Mikey regarding his Asian looks. They go to the same school and are basically neighbors, but Steve and Mikey still ignore the fact that Park is half-Korean. Park’s subject position in this dialogue is passive as he is being indifferent to Steve and Mikey: “Park managed another smile and slunk back into his seat, putting his headphones back on and cranking up the volume” (p. 7). Park is considered passive because he does not do anything about Steve and Mikey’s behavior. He hides his anger by listening to music on his Walkman. This further shows Park’s passive subject position because he does nothing to change the treatment of his peers towards him; he is letting them mistreat him. Otherwise, Park would be considered active if he did not hide his annoyance with Steve and Mikey, or if he corrected their presumptions about his race.

In view of the incidences above, as experienced by Eleanor and Park, their responses indicated by these two characters show that they both have agency but use it differently. While Eleanor takes an active subject position by refusing to conform to the ‘norms’ and bracing the consequence, Park takes a passive one by hiding his annoyance. It can be inferred that Eleanor feels comfortable with her own skin from the very beginning. On the other hand, Park seems to lack confidence, and even indicated embarrassment, in revealing his own mixed-race origin by pretending to not care about it.

**External Conflicts Related to Parents or Adult’s Domination**

One of the issues that young adults have to deal with during adolescence is trying to come to terms with parents’ absence or parents’ presence in their lives. In their transition period, young adults need to separate from their parents in order to become adults. However, parents or adults play an important role in developing adolescents’ sense of identity and self-esteem. On the contrary, parents’ absence during this period could affect adolescents’ emotional condition (Trupe, 2006).

Eleanor lacks reliable adult role models in her life. She has a stepfather who is very controlling and a mother who cannot support her. Eleanor’s parents divorced and she has to live with her mother and her stepfather, who is very mean to her. Along with that, her mother does not care about her and her siblings are sided with her stepfather. In his relationship with her mother, Eleanor can take up active subject position as she can express her opinion and take actions to her mother’s differing view on things. However, Eleanor cannot defy her stepfather for some reasons: (1) she has just returned home, and the house belongs to her stepfather, (2) her stepfather will torture her mother if she causes any trouble, and (3) she does not want to part with her siblings and mother again. With these conditions, she chooses to take up a passive subject position with her stepfather. It is only after his stepfather threats her badly, does Eleanor realize she has to leave the house. Her decision to leave the house shows Eleanor’s stronger agency to think and act for her own safety and good, which shifts her subject position from passive to active.

Similarly, Park also encounters problems with his parents.  Although Park’s home situation is more stable and happier compared to Eleanor’s, there are things that make him feel alienated from his father and younger brother Josh. To begin with, Park believes that his father is disappointed in him. Park thinks his father does not like his slender appearance compared to his father’s manly look. Park assumes that his Asian face is one of the reasons why his father, a white American man, cannot accept him wholly. Besides, his father often compares him to his Josh and wants Park to be manlier and to do the stereotypical ‘man stuff’.

In dealing with conflicts related to parents or adults’ domination, Park, however, shows to occupy more active subject positions than Eleanor. Through the conflicts with his parents, Park shows that he can stand up for himself. For example, in the incident of Park’s argument with his mother regarding Eleanor here:

‘No,’ she said, ‘*no*. No weird white girl in my house.’

‘I don’t know if you’ve noticed, but weird white girls are my only option,’ Park said as loudly as he could. Even this angry, he couldn’t yell at his mother.

‘There are other girls,’ his mother said.

‘Good girls.’

‘She *is* a good girl,’ Park said. ‘You don’t even know her.’ (p. 145-146)

Park’s mother forbids him to get close with Eleanor; she thinks Eleanor is a troubled and weird white girl who brings bad influence. From the excerpt above, it can be seen that Park is furious that his mother could judge Eleanor so easily. Park shows an active subject position as he confronts her mother to defend Eleanor. He would be considered passive if he does nothing when her mother belittles Eleanor.

Likewise, Park takes active subject position when confronting his father’s disagreement with his choices. When his father forces him to drive manual trans­mission truck although he is not used to it, Park argues verbally before refusing to do it. He also takes an active subject position as he defends his fashion style, which his father does not approve of. Park’s conflict with his father is also indicated as he says:

‘I said, *what else is new*? Isn’t that what you think?’

Park felt tears on his cheeks, but he didn’t want to touch his eyes. (p. 224)

Park knows what his father thinks of him, and he is hurt by his father’s assumption. Yet, by refraining himself from shedding tears, Park shows that he is refusing to let his father think that he is like a girl.

At other times, when Park has differing views with his parents, both parties, however, are open to discussion. Although their opinions are sometimes conflicting, Park’s parents give him space to voice his thoughts and to make his own decisions.  As a matter of fact, Park’s family relationship is more stable than Eleanor’s. This favorable circumstance appears to have enabled him to take up a more active subject position. In other words, a more open and stable family provides better oppor­tunities for young people to exercise their agency and be heard.

**External Conflicts Related to Maintaining Relationship**

Developing special relationships with peers is a major aspect of adolescents’ lives. It plays an important role in fiction for young adults, as it does in literature for adults (Trupe, 2006).  However, to be in a relationship can be challenging for young adults at they are in a transitional phase. Yet, showing an interest in a romantic relationship can be considered as a criti­cal indication that marks an adolescent’s entry into adulthood (Conger, Cui, Bryant, & Elder, 2000; Rauer, Pettit, Lansford, Bates, & Dodge, 2013). Both Park and Eleanor explore their subjectivity through such a relationship.

Besides the conflicts discussed above, both Eleanor and Park also experience conflicts in maintaining their relationship. In this romantic relationship, Park shows a more active subject position than Eleanor. His active subject positions are evident in his actions trying to protect Eleanor from the bullies and from his own parents. Meanwhile, Eleanor’s active subject position emerges in the relationship as she starts to open up herself and put her trust in Park.  However, at the end of the story her subject position changes to a passive one, as she begins to feel pessimistic about the continuity of her relationship with Park. Park, however, still takes the active position by saying, “‘But it’s up to us…’ he said softly. ‘It’s up to us not to lose this.’” (p. 307). In contrast, Eleanor shows a passive subject position by saying:

‘Do you really believe that?’

‘That... we’ll have other chances? That we have any chance at all?’ (p. 306)

Eleanor is considered passive because she seems unwilling to maintain this relationship. This is further strengthened by her not replying to any of the letters from Park. Unlike Park’s more stable life, Eleanor still needs time to heal herself from an abusive family.

Even though the romantic relationship does not last, Eleanor and Park have shown character development through this relationship. Both start as the misfits, but as they rely on and protect each other they end as characters who are more mature and able to make the right decision for themselves. In so doing, they express their thoughts and take actions, which implies their stronger agency.

**Discussion**

The above analysis confirms the dynamic nature of subject positions individuals occupy. In the story, the shifts occur in relation to two factors: the people with whom the main characters interact, and the situations that they are in. The characters take more active than passive subject positions when facing the conflicts. The active subject positions often occur in dealing with choices that concern their looks, opinions and the people they care. When the people they interact with are more ‘powerful’, the main characters choose to take passive subject position. In so saying, however, it needs to be highlighted that the choice of showing passiveness indicate, at the same time, a certain degree of agency within them; it indicates that the choice they take is a ‘calculated decision’. They choose to be passive as the situation may harm them. In other words, their choice of subject position is based on their understanding that they are subject to external forces such as family and peers; yet, at the same time, the evidence shows that they deliberately empower their agency depending on the situations or the relations. Regardless of whether their subject positions are active or passive, external conflicts have stimulated the main characters to construct and navigate their subjectivities.

The analysis thus emphasizes the process of Eleanor and Park’s maturity as seen from their ability to make decisions. Adolescence is often considered a phase of heightened risk-taking, a unique period in life characterized by greater freedom to make autonomous and meaningful decisions compared to childhood (Paulsen, Platt, Huettel & Brannon, 2011). Actions such as planning, decision-making, and synthesis of information are being developed at this phase in life (Nikolajeva, 2014).  Furthermore, this study is in line with Stephens’ (2013) notion that generally YA literature is about subjectivity, the nature and develop­ment of agency, and the situation which describes a character’s decisions and capacities to make choices and act upon them. Subjectivity with its sense of being a person focuses on the process how individuals become subjects and how they experience themselves (Barker, 2000). In this novel, Eleanor and Park—as conscious subjects—actively make efforts to construct and navigate their subjectivities, which, in turn, enable them to understand themselves and to develop their selfhood.

**CONCLUSION**

To sum up, Rowell’s *Eleanor & Park* (2012) succeeds in portraying the lives of adolescents who struggle in the transition phase to become adults. As two young adults who are trying to constitute their selfhood, they are faced with conflicting situations that force them to construct and navigate their subjectivities. In their choice of occupying certain subject positions, it is evident that the role of the other becomes an important element, as the other has the capacity to influence one’s subject position. In defining their selves and their position with others, Eleanor and Park have shown to fulfill the fundamental component of a character to construct subjectivity: having agency and empowering it.

The analysis implies that YA fiction offers rich data for understanding more about adolescence. While the present study focuses on the construction of selfhood and its relations to others, further studies on YA fiction, such as female subjectivity or patriarchal domination in young adult life, are also worth exploring and will make a worthwhile contribution to the existing literature.

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