

# The Impact And Carnavalesque Possibilities of Adult Normativity In Select Dystopian Young Adult Fiction

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## Abstract

*Coming – of – age stories have always been treated in its essential curiosity and requisite recklessness in literature. The ineludible impact of science and technology gradually necessitated a shift from age – old norms of thoroughly Utopian Children’ s Literature to a protruding new trend, especially in Young Adult Fiction of 21<sup>st</sup> century, namely, an indispensably Dystopian divergence. Most of the prominent Dystopian Young Adult Books seem to question dubious and unreasonable adult norms from an adolescent perspective which can be justified predominantly as an instigation of Carnavalesque possibilities of those books as a work of art. The paper attempts to dissociate such factors that frame Carnival and seeks to delineate the extent to which they impact and interrogate Aetonormativity in Select Dystopian Young Adult Fiction.*

**Keywords :** *Aetonormativity, Young Adult Fiction, Dystopia, Children’ s Literature*

## 1. Introduction

Apprehensions on an apocalyptic dystopia is an age old ideal, especially when it comes to competent furthering of a plot, both from the point of view of writers and readers, in literature. Nevertheless, it has always been its antithesis that ruled Children’ s Literature or the Young Adult literary world, that is, an essential Utopian trend, as the adult sphere necessarily wanted it to be optimistic with a staunch credence in future. The vigorous demand and consistent occurrence of Utopian Children’ s Literature is probably the outcome of the perennial myth of a jovial incorrupt childhood. The adult writer’ s nostalgic reminiscences of his early days and embittered visions about the unlikelihood of returning to the childhood Utopia also plays a significant part in it

In spite of that, from 1990’ s, an opposite dystopian trend seems to be proliferating in Children’ s and juvenile literature where the adult realm is questioned as it is the adults who have fashioned the disciplined, stratified, but dumb population that serves as a background for a Dystopian storyline. This has very much to do with Maria Nikolajeva’ s concept of Aetonormativity that highlights the supremacy of adult norm in conventional literature where the child is treated as an other. In such plots, a child or an adolescent interrogates the unfairness of society and the adult world in turn attempts to subdue this riot dubbing it as immaturity and lack of experience.

In *Power, Voice and Subjectivity in Literature for Young Readers* Maria Nikolajeva elucidates:

“ While feminist theory has made us aware of male authors creating women characters as the Other, and while postcolonial theory reveals alterity in the images of ethnicity, a heterological approach to juvenile literature will examine power tension between the adult author and the implied young audience. Thus, we are dealing with the imbalance, inequality, asymmetry between children and adults, the way it is presented and assessed in children’ s books, books intended for the young audience. On analogy with the central concept of queer theory, heteronormativity, I propose the concept of *aetonormativity* ( Lat. Aeto-, pertaining to age), adult normativity that governs the way children’ s literature has been patterned from its emergence until the present day.” (8)

## Methods and Materials

The intention is to endeavour a Conceptual Qualitative Research involving an in – depth and detailed analysis of M.T. Anderson’ s *Feed*, Neal Shusterman’ s *Unwind*, Ernest Cline’ s *Ready*

*Player One* and S.J.Kincaid’ s *Insignia*. As Nikolajeva explains further, “ Dystopia is built around the double estrangement effect: while the reader is not familiar with the rules of the society presented in a novel, the characters are not aware of the normal world. Already this makes dystopian fiction an excellent strategy for subverting normativity” (74)

The carnivalesque possibilities and impact of the following dystopian features in interrogating Aetonormativity are considered in detail:

- Totalitarianism
- Ecological Problems
- Alienation

An investigation on the prominence of these features in effectuating appropriate carnival is also carried out simultaneously.

### Results and Discussion

PROMINENT FEATURE	<i>FEED</i>	<i>UNWIND</i>	<i>READY PLAYER ONE</i>	<i>INSIGNIA</i>
Totalitarianism	Yes	Yes	No	Yes
Ecological Problems	No	No	Yes	Yes
Alienation	Yes	No	Yes	Yes

M T Anderson’ s *Feed* skilfully portrays that bizarre totalitarian happiness where basic amenities are provided only for a happy lot. In the novel, food is made in home synthesizers. Even disposable plates, cutting utensils and dinner tables are featured. The portrait of consumerism, for instance, Titus’ s insistent desire to buy new expensive clothes, deserves special mention. Absence of unemployment is a related phenomenon where consumer – centric corporations “ keep...everyone in the world employed” (49). Steve, Titus’ s father is involved in “ some kind of a banking thing” and his mother is “ in design “ (65). In contrast, Violet’ s father, though under very poor circumstances, is a University Professor. Apparently perfect families, that are flawed and hypocritical in essence, can also be perceived in this totalitarian prejudice. Titus was produced in a conceptionarium by genetic engineers as per the concept of his parents.

Even though, a reaction against the so called totalitarian policy of government to shut down schools and other services for children named as The Teen Uprising occurs as a crucial incident in Neal Shusterman’ s *Unwind*, government and its actions are portrayed in a positive light, purely as attempts to end the war, just as the set of amendments labelled The Bill of Life. But such revisions are democratic more in the eyes of adults, as towards the end, Young Adult Protagonists and the benevolent adult figure who is “ portrayed as if in self – defence” ( Nikolajeva,79) of the adult community end up rejecting the chance to be unwound. The totalitarian stance of Aetonormativity is predominant in S J Kincaid’ s *Insignia*. In the midst of Third World War, teenagers are recruited and trained as members of elite combat corps, The Intrapolar Forces. They are supposed to fight for the depleting planet and wage war against those who fight to control the assets of the solar system. The

young cadets have to brawl beyond adult supervision and find their life unpredictably changing without a knowledge about the price to be paid by the end.

Ernest Cline's debut novel *Ready Player One* rigorously discusses the risk of ecological problems on a prophetic note. The setting is 2040's, where the world is clutched by an energy crisis from the diminution of fossil fuels and the aftereffects of overpopulation and global warming. In order to escape this dystopian reality, people resort to the OASIS which functions both as a massive multi player online role – playing game and a virtual world, the currency of which is the most stable entity in the physical world. Kincaid also attempts an outcry on ecological issues in his *Insignia* in which the central concern is that of a war and its aftermath, the major factor that stands as a reason for the same is depletion of planet's natural resources. Thus it underlines the increasing curiosity on the about – to – be worsened threatening relationship between man and nature. In Anderson's *Feed*, nature is marred, oceans contaminated and forests trimmed to pave way for artificial air factories and beef farms, where cloned filet mignon is grown. People go out wearing protective suits and helmets. Everyone suffers from lesions which are later commercialized and become a fashion statement.

The time space of dystopia is detached from the reader. To quote Nikolajeva, “ This temporal and spatial isolation is already a powerful factor to create alienation. However, novels which have a stronger impact on the reader, describe a future so near that it is almost perceived as the present, something that can happen any moment, anywhere and with anyone, and may be is happening already” (74). The chronotope in *Feed* is a distant future which can be deduced by the level of advancement in technology. The narrator, Titus has no clue on when the feeds were found: “ fifty or a hundred years ago. Before that, they had to use their hands and their eyes. Computers were all outside the body” (47). This dystopian enclave is located in North America and is far – flung from the rest of the world, known as Global Alliance. The characters are disconnected from the outer world, either happily negligent of that far off geography or happily assured that it is wicked. Another related attribute is the disparate division of materialistic facilities. In other words, luxury is offered for some while the others undergo absolute misfortune. For instance, the striking contrast in the life style of Titus who has private climate control, a posh aircraft etc. while Violet is poor enough not to afford proper medical care.

The quintessence of character delineation in Ernest Cline's *Ready Player One* is this unassailable alienation. James Donovan Hallivay leaves his entire fortune unoccupied and surprisingly left it on a lucky draw that of an online game. Every main character is isolated or alienated in one way or the other including the protagonist Wade Watts, who has an aunt with whom the novel claims no noticeable emotional bonding or his love interest Art3mis, who as the story progresses abandons Wade at a crucial stage as the competition is more personal to her. All egg hunters and the related characters seem to be living in an alienated closed cell, absorbed in their own personal whims and desires. A parallel can be traced in Kincaid's *Insignia* where Young Adults are an alienated lot who work under adult norm, suffering its physical, emotional and mental consequences with meagre awareness on the same and also on the exact reason for which they are manipulated to this extent. They are even withdrawn from the necessary idyllic status and opportunity for comprehension of realities around. Tom Raines, the central character, is the one in whom the entire humanity anticipates its salvation. Tom too finds him different and important with new possibilities to confront but ultimately, even with all the friends and advisors around, fighting alone the part assigned upon him without his conscious regard.

## Conclusion

In a broader sense, adult supervision is inevitable in transforming the child from its state of innocence to a functional and socially competent individual. But the question of whether it is satisfactorily implemented with indubitable authenticity is still on debate. With the advent and increasing convenience in handling science and technology, the space intended, in other words, extended to the child or Young Adult by the grown-ups began to exhibit unanticipated transformations which soon came to be utilized as a successful Carnavalesque tool in Young Adult Fiction, especially that of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

As per the study, totalitarianism, ecological problems and alienation have turned out to be recurring archetypes of Young Adult Dystopian Fiction which are capable enough to illustrate artistic and creative possibilities of Aetonormativity as a concept to be explored in this genre. At the very same time, the inferences serve as a cautionary tale in propagating the need to curb and question groundless Aetonormativity that can endanger the natural physical and psychological growth of children and adolescents.

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