

Gender Construction in Contemporary Dystopian Fiction in Young Adult Literature: A South African Example

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Abstract : The purpose of this paper is to discuss the nature of gender construction in modern dystopian fiction, the development of this genre in Young Adult Literature and reasons for the enormous appeal on the adolescent readers. A recent award winning South African text in this genre, *The Mark* by Edith Bullring (2014), will be used as example while also comparing this text to international bestsellers like *Divergent* (Roth:2011), *The Hunger Games* (Collins:2008) and others. Theoretical insights from critics and academics in the field of children's literature, like Ames, Coats, Bradford, Booker, Basu, Green-Barteet, Hintz, McAlear, McCallum, Moylan, Ostry, Ryan, Stephens and Westerfield will be referred to and their insights used as part of the analysis of *The Mark*. The role of relevant and recurring themes in this genre, like global concerns, environmental destruction, liberty, self-determination, social and political critique, surveillance and repression by the state or other institutions will also be referred to. The paper will shortly refer to the history and emergence of dystopian literature as genre in adult and young adult literature as part of the long tradition since the publishing of Orwell's 1984 and Huxley's *Brave New World*. Different factors appeal to adolescent readers in the modern versions of this hybrid genre for young adults: teenage protagonists who are questioning the underlying values of a flawed society like an inhuman or tyrannical government, a growing understanding of the society around them, feelings of isolation and the dynamic of relationships. This unease leads to a growing sense of the potential to act against society (rebellion), and of their role as agents in a larger community and independent decision-making abilities. This awareness also leads to a growing sense of self (identity and agency) and the development of romantic relationships. The specific modern tendency of a female protagonist as leader in the rebellion against state and state apparatus, who gains in agency and independence in this rebellion, an important part of the identification with and construction of gender, while being part of the traditional coming-of-age young adult novel will be emphasized. A comparison between the traditional themes, structures and plots of young adult literature (YAL) with adult dystopian literature and those of recent dystopian YAL will be made while the hybrid nature of this genre and the 'sense of unease' but also of hope, as an essential part of youth literature, in the closure to these novels will be discussed. Important questions about the role of the didactic nature of these texts and the political issues and the importance of the formation of agency and identity for the young adult reader, as well as identification with the protagonists in this genre, are also part of this discussion of *The Mark* and other YAL novels.

Keywords : agency, dystopian literature, gender construction, young adult literature

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