

Syncretism of Body and Sexuality in *The Catcher in the Rye*

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Abstract

The present paper examines the syncretism of body and sexuality and its consequences in *The Catcher in the Rye* written by J.D. Salinger. This paper further discusses how the young adult Holden Caulfield perceives his body and sexuality; and how the body and sexuality work in *The Catcher in the Rye*. Moreover, this paper analyzes body celebration, abuse and sexuality of young adult Holden. This study argues that young adults perceive their body as a means of power, freedom, identity and maturity. Young adults employ their body and sexuality as agencies to be distinct and noticeable in their community and society. For these purposes, this paper primarily employs the ideas of Roberta S. Trites and Judith Butler as theoretical tools. This paper opens an avenue for further research about young adults of Nepal and other topography besides America.

Keywords: abuse, body, celebration, sexuality, young adults

Introduction

The Catcher in The Rye (1951) by J.D. Salinger primarily reveals the themes of angst, alienation, innocence, identity, belongingness, loss, connection, sex and depression of a seventeen year old young adult protagonist Holden Caulfield. In *The Catcher in The Rye*, Holden himself narrates why and how he gets expulsion from Pencey School. He strolls the different places and persons to shelter his innocence from growing up. He encounters various circumstances from school to Edmont hotel and from his apartment to his sister Phoebe. Finally, he realizes growing up as a process of life. After its publication, *The Catcher in The Rye*, a novel of theme breaker after the Second World War, receives multiple reviews. Helen Frangendis argues *The Catcher in The Rye* as a “novel of having unorthodox language and Holden as a confused person” (1998, p. 72). Donald Costello remarks on “the teenage colloquial language of *The Catcher in The Rye*” (1997, p.176). Stephen J. Whitefield argues *The Catcher in The Rye* as “apolitical novel” (1997, p. 587). However, no reviewers have penetrated into the realm of body and sexuality of *The Catcher in The Rye*. Therefore, this paper

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attempts to unearth how the multiple aspects of the body and sexuality work in *The Catcher in the Rye*. This paper further examines how young adults use their body and sexuality and what the young adults achieve from their bodily activities and sexuality. For these purposes, this paper primarily employs the ideas of Roberta S. Trites and Judith Butler as theoretical tools.

While exploring the term ‘young Adult’, this researcher finds that ‘young adult’ term was coined by American Library Association in 1957. American Library Association establishes Young Adult Library Services Association in 1957 to expand libraries to better serve teens of 12-18 age range. Here, body refers to the human body and the sexuality refers to the sexual orientation of any individual. Similarly, syncretism refers to the amalgamation. *The Oxford Dictionary* (Eighth edition, 2010) defines the term syncretism as “the amalgamation or attempted amalgamation of different religions, cultures, or schools of thought” (1570). *The Oxford Dictionary* defines the sexuality as “the feelings and activities connected with a person's sexual desires male/female sexuality” (1402). This dictionary defines the body as “the whole physical structure of a human or an animal” (157). These definitions of above terms facilitate to prove the argument of this paper effectively.

Theoretical Framework

Roberta S. Trites (2000) converses about power and its relation with young adults in her book *Disturbing Universe*. She reveals that power serves as an apt metaphor for what adolescents often seek to know about themselves. They use their body to show power. She emphatically uses ‘social power’ to deliberate the narrative of children and young adults. Children and young adults can gain ‘social power’ by means of their body. The body of the young adults remains as an agency to acquire social power.

Moreover, Trites takes the reference of the definition of power of Judith Butler. In Trites’ opinion, Butler believes that an individual is at once formed and subordinated by power because “power not only acts on a subject but, in a transitive sense, enacts the subjects into living” (p.5). Trites argues that power is the force that allows for subjectivity and consequently, agency. Trites concludes, “Butler thus concurs with Foucault’s analysis that power is a process, but her definition allows for an internally motivated subject who can act proactively rather than solely in terms of taking action to prevent oppression or repression”(ibid). The enthusiasm of body resists the oppression of society or the individual or the social organs. Therefore, various forms of the power embolden young adults to activate ‘proprioceptive awareness’.

The body of the young adults remains at the center to carry out the interior and exterior power forces for the formation of their identity. YA literature has close association with sex and power. Sexual potency is a common metaphor for empowerment in adolescent literature. The issues of sexual orientation like birth control and responsibility, unwanted pregnancies, masturbation, orgasms, nocturnal emissions, sexually transmitted diseases, pornography and prostitution portray an important role in YA literature. Concerning with this issue, Trites states as:

Typically, sexuality as a rite of passage is linked with romance in YA literature. As a result, adolescent literature is as often an ideological tool used to curb Teenagers' libido as it is some sort of depiction of what adolescents' sexuality Actually is. (p. 85)

Sexuality stands as a ritual connected to the romantic activities of adolescents in literature. These romantic activities presented in the literature support to unfold adolescents' interest indirectly and it assists them to control their sexual inclination within the boundary of society. She clarifies that sexuality links with the power as well as sanctity. Sexuality of the character becomes a locus of power and romance. The society perceives an individual by means of her or his sexuality or bodily functions. YA literature remains as a tool to guide teenagers by depicting the interest of the teenagers.

Sexuality and language are associated closely. The language enhances as well as diminishes the sense of sexuality. In this regard, Trites elucidates, "Sexuality is influenced by and even constructed by the words that people think and say" (p. 86). The language influences the context of sexuality massively. The language constructs the framework of sexuality. Trites further simplifies that language used by the society and individual sharpens the concept of sexuality of young adults. Sexuality in this genre is discursive and ideological. Language used by adults and young adults themselves and their body matter more for the sexuality.

Further, Trites uses Foucault's concept of sexuality to clarify the relation between body and sexuality. Foucault avers that sex is the biological and sexuality is a social and discursive construct. He thinks that sexuality depends on a power. Power constructs the sexuality. The western culture develops a concept of relationship between discourse and knowledge to increase the forbidden pleasure of sexuality. Harmonizing with the above concept, Trites clarifies, "This relationship between power and knowledge is grounded in discourse" (cited, p. 87). Power forms the knowledge and sexuality of particular society. Trites also uses the terms 'queer discourse' of Judith Butler to broaden the concept of sexuality. According to Trites, queer discourse in Young Adult literature creates contradictory discourses because of the way sexuality

is defined by the relationship between power, knowledge and pleasure. Then Trites claims sexuality of adolescents as:

Adolescents use their sexuality to attract other people, to dominate other people, to submit to other people, to communicate with other people- in short, sexuality is a way for them to engage the other. Discovering their sexuality is powerful to adolescents because it represents a new forum in which to interact with the other. (p. 115)

The others stay as the means of attraction for adolescents. The adolescents are interested more to the sexuality of the others. The adolescents demonstrate their curiosity to identify the body of the others. Trites agrees with Butler and elucidates that sexuality is a source of power and pleasure for many adolescents in YA novels. The sexuality remains as a source of identity for third gender people. The bodily activities vitalize the recognition of hetero sexuality and queer in the society. They can use their body to vitalize sexuality and also against normativity. Their body expedites to link with the multiple genders. So, the sexuality and body construct disparity among people.

The sexuality and body connect with the history of Young Adult literature. The history of young adult literature delivers manifold values to know the prominence of body. The body has been ubiquitous in the YA literature ever since this category became popular in America. Trites argues that history of adolescence makes easier to know the development of young adult novels. Trites says that the word, ‘adolescent’ was in common usage in postbellum America when the writers like Mark Twain and Louisa May were writing. She further states that adolescence did not gain wide-spread attention of the American public as a social concept until the publication of G. Stanley Hall’s *adolescence* in 1904. So, Trites records, “Adolescence as such did not become institutionalized in America until the twentieth century, so it stands to reason those books marketed specifically to this demographic arose as a product of the twentieth-century” (p. 8). The twentieth- century institutionalizes the Young Adult literature in essence. Then the American Library Association and the National Council of Teachers of English provide attention for the development of Young Adult literature by calling the need for better reading materials for teenagers.

Judith Butler (1993) in her book entitled *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of ‘Sex’* deals with the body in details. Butler explicates, “The body is not merely the source from which projection issues but is also always a phenomenon in the world” (Introduction, p. 17). Butler hints that body is a kind of trend. The body rules the world. The body is a necessary mirror to the world. People can gaze the

different things through body. Further, Butler explicates, “The materiality of the body is not taken for granted, for in some sense it is acquired, constituted, through the development of morphology” (p. 69). Butler clarifies that morphology supports for the contours of body. Language stands as an agent for the expansion of the meaning of body.

Textual Analysis

The Catcher in the Rye creates a significant impression in the young adult fictions. This young adult fiction sets a remarkable thrust to scrutinize the young adult body and sexuality. *The Catcher in the Rye* has been analyzed from multiple angles. However, this paper has analyzed it how young adult protagonists employ their body and sexuality to expand their social horizon and to gain their power, freedom, maturity and identity. This paper mainly discusses the novel how the young adults celebrate and abuse the body. Moreover, this paper analyzes the role of sexuality for the young adults in the novel.

Salinger presents his young adult protagonist Holden in *The Catcher in the Rye* using the body to celebrate own happiness, confidence and revolt by means of attire. Holden wears the red hunting hat in the most of the events. The red hunting hat for him stands as a symbol of individuality, youthfulness, revolt and confidence. Robert M. Slabey (1963) states, “Red Hunting Hat is an important symbol. Its redness and Holden’s wearing it backward symbolize his rebellion against society” (p. 174). The wearing red hat does not only body celebration marker but also the symbol of revolt against the existing norms to establish himself in the phony world. However, Holden often avoids wearing the hat in public, demonstrating his fear of being condemned for his individuality. As Holden sets to leave for New York, he is with his friends. Then Holden reveals, “I put my red hunting hat on, turned the peak around to the back, the way I liked it” (p. 52). This situation elucidates his intention to celebrate his body to impress others. Holden uses a red hunting hat as a means of power. Wearing the clothes contrarily by young adult reflects their desire to celebrate the body to look different and to establish their position in the society.

Fighting, disbelieving and abuse of body stand common issues in the life of young adults. They intend to be different from others by using or misusing their body. Jonathan Herring (2018) supplies the concepts of controlling and coercive behavior demonstrated by young adults to establish their authority. Herring visualizes, “Young adults involve in assault, threats, humiliation and intimidation or abuse to harm, punish or frighten their victims” (p. 39) in his article “The Severity Domestic Abuse”. Holden, after the expulsion from the school, aims to establish his position in the

society and the family. He expects that he could defeat the abjection from the power of body. So he involves in violence or in abusing the body. Caulfield is obsessed from coercive behavior of Ward Stradlater. He does not like Stradlater's dating with Jane Gallagher whom he intends to have relationship. Holden argues with Stradlater on the matter of dating between Jane and Stradlater. Stradlater leaves the room, then Holden in thought of confusion and assault. Holden reveals, "I kept thinking about Jane, and about Stradlater, having a date with her and all. It made me so nervous I nearly went crazy" (p. 34). Holden expresses the patterns of acts of assault, threats, humiliation and intimidation or other abuse he faced from his roommate.

Holden in *The Catcher in the Rye* grapples with the Pencey school administration. The school abuses his emotion and body by restricting his presence at the school. Susan Mizruchi believes, "Holden is extremely aware of bodies and bodily functions" (p. 25). Holden illustrates his readiness for violent confrontation. Holden also tries to disregard the abuse of the school. The school Principal Thurmer asks Holden to follow the rubrics of the game. Thurmer states, "Life is a game that one plays according to the rules" (p. 8). Thurmer believes the life moves in a certain order. Principles and values guide the movement of life. However, Holden disagrees with the instructions of the game by terming the game as, "Game, my ass. Some game. If you get on the side where all the hot-shots are, then it's A Game, all-right- I will admit that. But if you get on the other side, where there are not any Hot-shots, then what's a game about it? Nothing. No game" (p. 8). Holden dismisses the rules of the game. He raises questions over the similarities between game and life. He disobeys the order of school Principal Thurmer and teachers. He intends to establish his identity. He considers all adults as frauds and their instructions are as a "phony" (p. 9). Holden anticipates to stand on his feet.

Another important condition for maltreating the body is sexual abuse. Mostly young adults involve in the sexual abuse. Through the sexual activities, young adults abuse their and others' body immensely. In this context, Heather Y. Swanton et al (2003) in "Juvenile Crime: Aggression and Delinquency after Sexual Abuse: a Longitudinal Study" claim, "In sexual abuse, however, there may be other criminogenic factors at work. Sexual abuse is associated with increased risk of hard drug use" (p. 731). Here, the use of hard drug instigates the abuse of body through sexual assault. There are four categories of sexual abuse: sexual assault, attempted sexual assault, indecent assault and attempted indecent sexual assault. These assaults are responsible for abusing the body. Similarly, Dennis Carlson discusses how to construct the adolescent body through sexual activities in "Constructing the Adolescent Body: Cultural Studies and Sexuality Education". Carlson remarks, "Sexuality is expressed through the body and

is related to gender, along with race, class, and sexual orientation among other things” (p. 3). The body stands as a means to express sexuality. Besides this, gender, race, class and sexual orientation bring differences in the bodily activities. Body as a primary site of sexuality shapes youth and popular culture.

Harmonizing with the sexual abuse concept, Salinger projects many instances of involvement of his young adult protagonist Holden in sexual activities where Holden abuses his and others' body sexually. He confronts with Ward Stradlater, roommate when Holden knows that Stradlater has on date with Jane. Holden remembers the event how he had spent his time with Jane. Holden reveals, “I could not get her off my mind. I really could not” (p. 32). Holden exposes that he could not forget Jane. It means that Holden uses or misuses Jane intentionally. He involves in sexual abuse. He remembers his “attempted sexual assault” with Jane. Holden further restates that the dating of Stradlater with Jane makes him so nervous. He becomes crazy. And he calls Stradlater a sexy bastard. Later Holden involves in fighting with Stradlater and he “had blood all over his mouth and chin and even on his pajamas. All that blood make him look tough” (p. 45). Holden fights with Stradlater to pacify his sexual desire and body. The instinct of sexual abuse of Holden stimulates him to involve in the violence. His scuffle with Stradlater does not discourage him to give up his intention to be different. All these confrontations make him stronger and support him to find his own stand in the society and in the community of his friends. So, the sexual abuse and maltreatment to the body do not only surround around the circle of young adults fiction but also girdle in the real life ground. Many adults and young adults from the varied lives of society one or another way engage in sexual abuse scandal. Young adults demonstrate their monstrous behavior if their sexual activities are not accepted by the adults or society. Young adults take their sexual activities as a matter of prestige and identity.

Similarly, young adults involve to abuse the body indiscriminately. They abuse the body in the multiple ranges from minor to serious. Margaret Steward et al analyze how abusive conduct ranges in the young adults on their write up “Interviewing Young Children about Body Touch and Handling”. Margaret Steward et al claim, “Abusive conduct ranges from gentle fondling to brutal anal or vaginal penetration with resulting injuries” (p. 1). Young adults engage in the violent activities regularly. They involve in minor manhandling to sexual abuse. Holden abuses his body in sexual activities at Edmont hotel. Firstly, he engages with Sunny, a prostitute sent by Maurice, an elevator operator but he denies to have sex by saying that he had a recent surgical operation because he finds her a little bit nervous and he does not notice her grownup than himself. He intends to do “attempted sexual assault” to abuse the body of Sunny. When he denies to have sexual relationship then Sunny and Maurice abuse his body. Holden enlightens the abuse of body as:

What the heck did you tell that crazy Maurice you wanted a girl for you then?

If you:

Just had a goddam operation on your goddam? She was sore as hell, but she got up off my goddam lap so that I could go over and get my wallet off the chiffonier. I took out a five dollar bill and handed it to her. "Thanks a lot," I told her. Thanks a million. This is five. It costs ten. (p. 97)

Sunny and Maurice tag him as a weak fellow by questioning why he calls her if he has an operation. Sunny demands more money five dollars. Both Sunny and Maurice abuse the body of Holden. She robs more five dollars from the pocket of Holden. Maurice manhandles him. Holden gets "indecent assault" from Sunny and Maurice.

Next day he dates with old Sally Hayes actively since he has known her for a long time even though he likes to date with Jane. Holden provides the reasons why he dates with Sally Hayes in this way:

The reason I did was because she knew quite a lot about the theater and plays and literature and all that stuff. If somebody knows quite a lot about those things, it takes you quite a while to find out whether they are really stupid or not. It took me years to find out, in old Sally's case. (p. 105)

The dating and entertainment go in a parallel way. Holden locates the knowledge and intimacy of Sally with the literature and play as a parameter to date with her. Holden makes "an attempted sexual abuse" to satisfy himself. Holden does not have any regret of having these sexual activities. Through these sexual abuses/activities, he intends to develop his maturity, enjoy his freedom and establish his identity. The abuse of body inspires him to develop his confidence and decision-making power.

Correspondingly, young adult novelists often categorize the abuse of body because of power and sexuality. Trites argues that body, sexuality and power are integral components to carry out the concept of abuse of body. She says that body remains at the center between sexuality and power. The stronger body exercises more power and involves more in sexuality than the weaker body. The young adults have strong body than other demography. Trites states, "Power is a force that operates within the subject and upon the subject in adolescent literature; teenagers are repressed as well as liberated by their own power and by the power of the social forces" (p. 7). Trites means that teenagers use their bodily power to gain their freedom and sometimes they are controlled by that power. While exercising the power, adults as well as young adults abuse the body. According to Trites, young adults dare to disturb the universe even if they have to abuse their and adults' body. Adults abuse the body of young adults if the young adults dare to disturb the universe of the adults.

In the same way, in *The Catcher in the Rye*, Holden disturbs the universe of Pencey School. He is ready to be abused but he does not give up disturbing the universe. He does not listen the instructions of the school and its teachers to improve his performance. He considers them “phony” people. He disbelieves them. Holden’s Head teacher Dr. Thurmer and his history teacher Mr. Spencer try to counsel him to follow the rules of life. Dr. Thurmer terms, “Life is a game, boy. Life is a game that one plays according to the rules” (p. 8) but Holden does not take this suggestion seriously. Similarly, Mr. Spencer considers Holden’s parents as “grand people” (p. 9), however, Holden hates the word grand and states, “It’s a phony. I could puke every time I hear it” (p. 9). Holden continuously ignores the recommendations of the adults and does not intend to learn from his mistakes. Even he does not cogitate his parents as grand. He expects to vomit this word every time he hears it. From the disturbing activities, Holden aims to be different and sets to be matured.

Ignoring and disbelieving the adults by Holden persist even at the meeting with his best teacher Antolini. His teacher inquires him about his performance in English and his expulsion from the school. But Holden feels ‘a sort of dizzy and headache’ to listen Antolini. Holden does not show any interest to follow the conversation. Holden demonstrates unsteady physical state. Then Holden reveals, “Digression business got on my nerves. I don’t know. The trouble with me is, I like it when somebody digresses. It’s more interesting and all” (p. 183). The unsteady physical state of Holden reminds the technique of body abuse and disturbing the world as suggested by Trite. Holden enjoys disturbing the world of adults to bring his recognition into notice to the adults. From such activities, Holden attempts to grow himself and intends to develop the sense of freedom and independence.

Conclusion

Thus, body and sexuality in *The Catcher in the Rye* stay as agencies to explore the identity, maturity, freedom, happiness, power and social horizon of the young adults. Holden’s body gets abused from the beginning of the novel by himself and adults. Similarly, he celebrates his body in the multiple ways. Holden’s sexual orientation and drive catch the attention of the readers time and again. His sexuality proves his stand as a teenager boy and a process of maturity. His body demonstrates the qualities of endurance as well as resistance when he encounters abuse. Holden himself celebrates and abuses the body to look different, to be noticeable, to expand the social horizon, and to gain his freedom and maturity. The amalgamation of body and sexuality in *The Catcher in the Rye* brandishes the will and determination of the adolescent to achieve his or her adulthood.

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