

Saskia Hertlein

Tales of Transformation

Emerging Adulthood, Migration, and Ethnicity
in Contemporary American Literature

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Hispanic Research Center
Arizona State University
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Tempe, AZ 85287-5303
<http://www.asu.edu/brp>
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Contents

Acknowledgements	vii
A. Introduction	1
I. Emerging Adulthood and Literature	7
II. Diverse Emerging Adults	26
III. Tales of (Trans)Formation	36
B. Tales of Transformation	54
I. A Chameleon That Tries to Become a Leaf	58
1. Gogol/Nikhil in <i>The Namesake</i>	63
2. Linda/Linh-Dao in <i>Bitter in the Mouth</i>	81
II. Visibly Different Sisters	95
1. Yunah and Inah in <i>Translations of Beauty</i>	98
2. <i>Short Girls</i> Linny and Van	108
III. Mothers and Daughters	132
1. Kiran, Preity, and Rani and <i>The Hindi Bindi Club</i>	136
2. Nadia, Reema, Aliyah, and Hanan in <i>The Inheritance of Exile</i>	151
IV. A World of Difference	168
1. Iliana, Marina, and Rebecca in <i>Geographies of Home</i>	172
2. Hala, Khadija, Soraya, and Mawal in <i>West of the Jordan</i>	187
C. Conclusion	199
D. Works Cited	204

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A. Introduction

The motto of the 2010 European Association for American Studies' Biennial Conference, "'Forever young'?"¹ caused American Studies scholars in Europe and beyond to discuss "[T]he Changing Images of America." These changing images are approached from various perspectives in the conference volume, whose cover displays a U.S. postage stamp called "Saluting Young America" from "Youth Month," September 1948 (cf. Coleman). Considering just the two young people on the stamp, it becomes obvious that despite a potentially prevailing fascination with youthfulness, many changes have taken place. Contemporary images of the young can also include less attractive characteristics, as Jean M. Twenge discusses in her book *Generation Me: Why Today's Young Americans Are More Confident, Assertive, Entitled—and More Miserable than Ever Before*. The title conveys an image of a new, rather self-focused group that has developed. This image does not necessarily explain the fascination with youthfulness, but as negative characteristics exist alongside more positive, attractive ones, 'being young' appears to remain in focus for various points of research. Taking the multifaceted transformations and changes that have marked the turn from the 20th to the 21st century as well as the first years into the 21st century into consideration, 'the young' today are confronted with an ever-changing society reflected in and explored by literature. Among issues of consideration are more general observations towards a destabilization of fixed boundaries of different kinds, in- and exclusions, and an individualization of some aspects that will be explored further below. As a result of these changes, multiple transformations that are somehow connected to growing older take place and are reflected upon and further explored, both in fiction and non-fiction.

Considering 'the young,' developmental science has reconceptualized the idea of becoming an adult since traditional markers of transition are losing ground. As the following study will briefly survey, new notions of distinct times in the life cycle are called for, notions that capture the changing understanding and markers of growing up as well as of adulthood as such. In addition, other aspects that could be subsumed under a broad understanding of diversity mutually influence this development. However, these influences may relate to more than one axis of difference. That is why some of these concepts require a careful investigation and renegotiation. In addition, different text types provide a number of different options to react to or explore these changes, but may require careful attention inasmuch they are still applicable or need to be adapted or replaced for the particular task. Therefore, the first part of the following study will provide a basis for the analyses in the second part, at least concerning those elements that will be needed for all or most analyses. Foci will include a reconceptualization of reaching full adult status, questions of migration, ethnicity, and identity

1 Cf. conferences section of the EAAS Website <<http://www.eaas.eu/conferences/eaas-biennial-conferences>> for further information besides the publication of selected papers from the conference (cf. Coleman).

and their intersections with each other and further elements of diversity, and the categories of fiction that may be related to this type of study.

In the second part, the texts chosen to provide an overview of possible reference points for closer examinations are presented and analyzed according to the context provided in the first part and the other texts in this study. These tales of transformation contain transformations on the fictional content level, but similarly integrate and convey this issue in their structure. Through that, they mirror the complexity and interrelatedness of the topic at hand. This approach provides a chance to regroup texts that formerly had been regarded mostly under certain, limited categories such as ‘immigrant fiction.’ This regrouping allows links between texts to be established that were not there before, while also expanding their underlying concepts. Dynamic negotiation of interwoven tales of transformation on various levels prevents limited or limiting views without diverting attention completely away from the particulars. Such a regrouping challenges essentialized notions of various categories. In order to establish a common frame of reference to start with, developmental science findings will begin to build a background for such reflexive readings of the texts at hand.

The texts that were chosen for this study include Jhumpa Lahiri’s *The Namesake* (2003), Monique Truong’s *Bitter in the Mouth* (2010), Mia Yun’s *Translations of Beauty* (2004), Bich Minh Nguyen’s *Short Girls* (2009), Monica Pradhan’s *The Hindi Bindi Club* (2007), Susan Muaddi Darraj’s *The Inheritance of Exile* (2007), Loida Maritza Pérez’s *Geographies of Home* (1999), and Laila Halaby’s *West of the Jordan* (2003). All texts for this study are written by a female author, and, as the following brief introductions will show, all but one, Gogol in Lahiri’s *The Namesake*, feature female protagonists. Emerging adulthood as a concept, however, is by no means a solely or primarily female phenomenon. One might therefore wonder why there appears to be such a wide representation of female protagonists in such texts, especially if one takes into consideration that some related text types such as the story of initiation, the bildungsroman, the novel of formation, and the coming-of-age story have a long tradition of male protagonists. Nonetheless, this study does not and cannot claim to provide an all-encompassing survey of all potential contemporary texts that feature emerging adulthood in one way or another. Therefore, as the reference to other tales of (trans-)formation will show,² there may be examples of male authors and male protagonists, but for this study, the selected texts include are by female authors and predominantly include female protagonists. Consequently, the aspect of sex and gender is included in the analyses of the axes of difference, but is not contrasted between texts by female and male authors.

Another obvious shared feature of the texts is their publication date; all but one are published in the 21st century, and the exception, Pérez’s *Geographies of Home*, is from 1999. Due to the proximity of the publication to the turn of the century, this text is included into the study of a phenomenon that became more and more mainstream around the turn of the century. Nonetheless, *Geographies of Home* was published

2 Cf. chapter A. III.