UNIVERSITI PUTRA MALAYSIA

SECONDARY SCHOOL STUDENTS' EXPERIENCE OF YOUNG ADULT LITERATURE
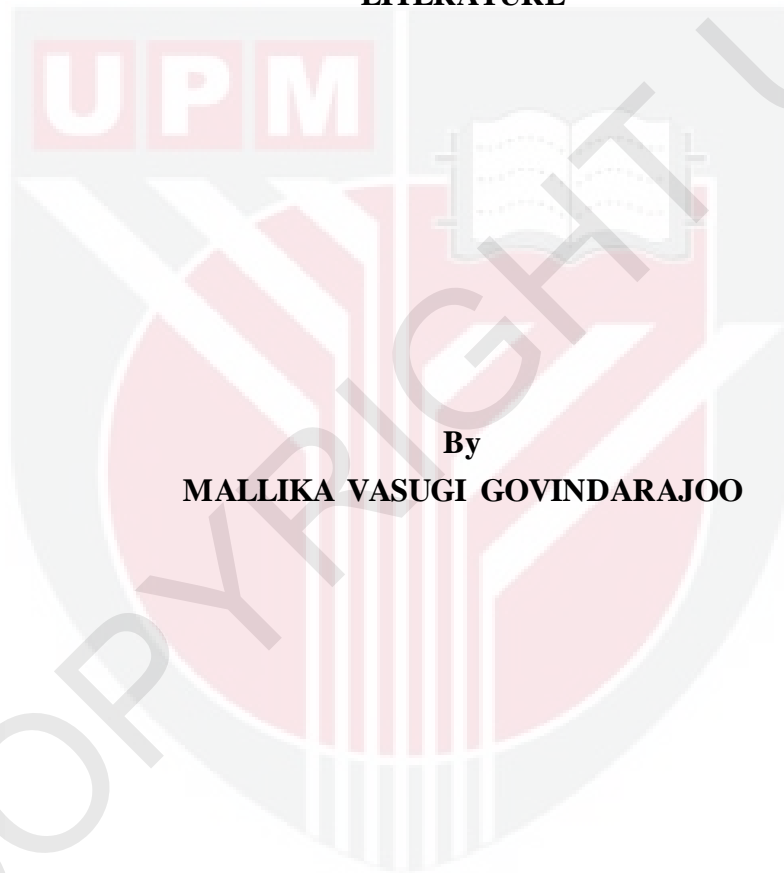
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SECONDARY SCHOOL STUDENTS' EXPERIENCE OF YOUNG ADULT LITERATURE

By

MALLIKA VASUGI GOVINDARAJOO

**Thesis Submitted to the School of Graduate Studies,
Universiti Putra Malaysia, in Fulfillment of the
Requirements for the Degree of
Doctor of Philosophy**

March 2014

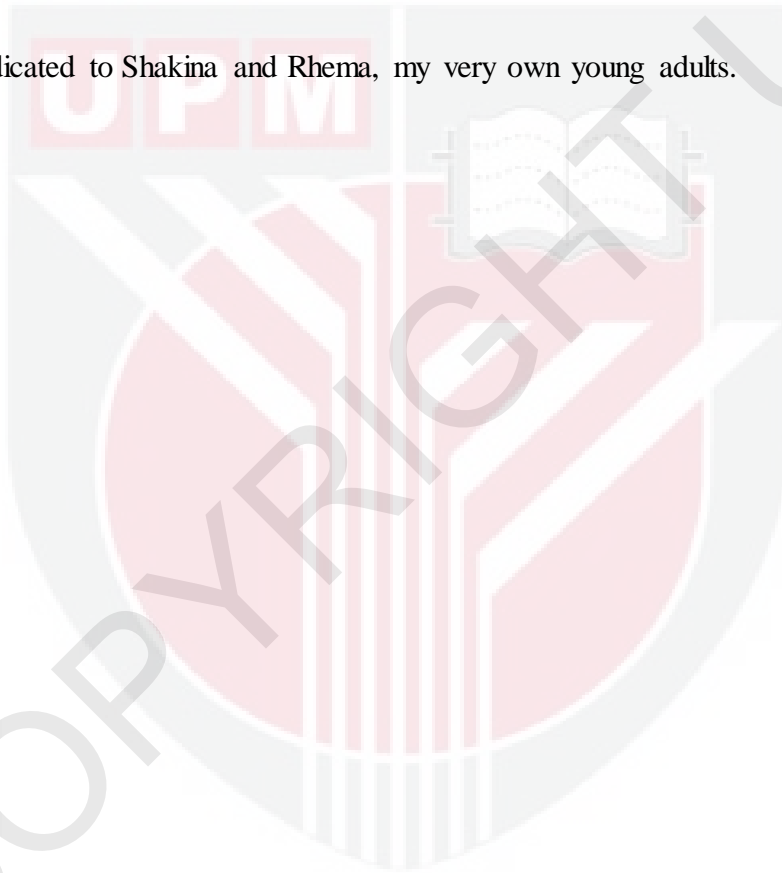# DEDICATION

Dedicated to Shakina and Rhema, my very own young adults.

SECONDARY SCHOOL STUDENTS' EXPERIENCE OF YOUNG ADULT LITERATURE

By

MALLIKA VASUGI GOVINDARAJOO

March 2014

Chair : Prof. Jayakaran Mukundan, PhD

Faculty : Educational Studies

Although the characteristics of Young Adult Literature (YAL) relate closely to the issues faced in young adulthood, in Malaysia, where the history of literature learning is still relatively new, the potential of YAL as selected reading material for students in national secondary schools has not yet been given enough consideration. Texts that were used in the newly introduced literature component of the English language in Malaysian secondary schools in 2000 were in fact found to have little relevance or interest to the young adult student. To address this, the texts for the 2nd cycle of the literature component beginning 2010 were projected by the Malaysian Ministry of Education to focus on teenage issues, which is indicative of YAL. However research of an inductive and reflective nature to describe the Malaysian young adult student's experience of YAL has been up to the moment insufficient.

The aim of this study which is reflected in the two research questions were firstly to determine the extent to which the new texts belonged to the genre of YAL and secondly the extent to which they were relevant to the young adult Malaysian student. Sub-questions were guided by the defining criteria of YAL and because the study required in-depth knowledge of young adult students' essence of experience' and engagement with the texts, the method used was phenomenological.

The sampling for the study was purposeful and participants were eight students from the fourth form in a Malaysian national secondary school. Data for the study came from participants' written journal reflections during the reading of the three novels prescribed by the Malaysian Ministry of Education; (*Step by Wicked Step* by Anne Fine, *Catch Us If You Can* by Katherine McPhail and *The Curse* by Lee Su Ann) and from follow-up qualitative interviews. Data analysis in this study included the transcribing and reading of the reflective journals and interviews.

The findings from the study revealed that the presence of YAL elements especially teenage issues was limited in all three novels .Thus the objective of relevance to the young adult Malaysian student as projected by the text selection committee was only partially fulfilled. With the exception of *Step by Wicked Step*, the ages of the protagonists in the novels were on the boundaries rather than the middle range of young adulthood. Descriptions of the young adult protagonists' appearance, speech and mannerisms were found to be minimal and there was little reference to the development of sexual identity and body image. Themes were related to YAL but there were significant differences in terms of believability, portrayal of characters and sense of closure.

In terms of identity and relevance of novels to the young adult participant, the findings revealed that despite the limited presence of young adult issues, participants strove to identify and connect with any parts of the novels that paralleled familiar situations in their lives. A sense of reciprocity, bonding or mediatory role developed at times between participant and characters. The identification of participant with familiar issues and characters were significant not only by their presence but also by their absence. Expectations of participants towards adult characters were higher and attitudes tended to be more judgmental and less forgiving compared to young adult protagonists. Participants' responses also indicated the need for literary texts to provide a realistic portrayal of society.

The study provides valuable information on how young adult students identify with issues and characters that are relevant to them and thus points towards the need for a more definite inclusion of YAL when selection of literary texts for young adults needs to be made.

Abstrak tesis yang dikemukakan kepada Senat Universiti Putra Malaysia
sebagai memenuhi keperluan untuk ijazah Doktor Falsafah

PENGALAMAN PELAJAR SEKOLAH MENENGAH TERHADAP SASTERA DEWASA MUDA

Oleh

MALLIKA VASUGI GOVINDARAJOO

Mac 2014

Pengerusi: Prof. Jayakaran Mukundan , PhD

Fakulti   : Pengajian Pendidikan

Walaupun ciri-ciri Sastera Dewasa Muda (SDM) berhubung rapat dengan isu-isu
yang dihadapi pada peringkat dewasa muda, sejarah pengajian sastera di Malaysia
masih agak baharu, dan potensi SDM sebagai bahan bacaan terpilih untuk pelajar di
sekolah menengah kebangsaan masih belum diberi pertimbangan yang secukupnya.
Teks yang digunakan dalam komponen sastera yang mula diperkenalkan dalam mata
pelajaran Bahasa Inggeris di sekolah menengah di Malaysia pada tahun 2000
didapati kurang relevan atau menarik kepada pelajar remaja. Untuk menangani isu
ini, teks yang digunakan dalam kitaran kedua dalam komponen sastera yang bermula
pada tahun 2010 disasarkan oleh Kementerian Pendidikan Malaysia supaya
menjurus kepada isu-isu remaja yang merupakan ciri-ciri utama dalam SDM.
Walaubagaimanapun, kajian yang bersifat induktif dan reflektif untuk
menggambarkan pengalaman pelajar sekolah menengah di Malaysia terhadap SDM
masih tidak mencukupi.

Tujuan kajian ini yang dicerminkan dalam dua soalan kajian utama adalah pertama,
untuk menentukan sejauh mana teks sastera yang baharu ini memenuhi genre SDM
dan kedua, untuk menentukan sejauh mana teks ini releven kepada pelajar sekolah
menengah yang terdiri daripada golongan dewasa muda di Malaysia. Soalan-soalan
turutan kepada soalan utama berpandukan kepada kriteria yang mentakrifkan SDM
dan oleh kerana kajian ini memerlukan pengetahuan yang mendalam mengenai
perasaan dan pengalaman sebenar pelajar dewasa muda terhadap teks SDM ini,
kaedah yang digunakan adalah bersifat fenomenologi.

Sampel untuk kajian ini merupakan persampelan menurut tujuan dan responden
ialah lapan orang pelajar tingkatan empat daripada sekolah menengah kebangsaan di
Malaysia. Data untuk kajian ini dikutip daripada penulisan responden di dalam
jurnal refleksi mereka apabila mereka membaca tiga buah novel yang telah

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ditetapkan oleh Kementerian Pendidikan Malaysia, iaitu *Step by Wicked Step* (Anne Fine), *Catch Us If You Can* (Katherine McPhail) dan *The Curse* (Lee Su Ann). Data juga dikutip daripada temu bual kualitatif dengan semua responden. Analisis data dalam kajian ini juga meliputi pembacaan jurnal refleksi dan mentranskripsikan temubual.

Dapatan daripada kajian menunjukkan bahawa kewujudan unsur-unsur SDM, terutamanya isu remaja, adalah terhad dalam ketiga-tiga novel. Oleh itu, objektif kerelevenan teks kepada pelajar dewasa muda di Malaysia seperti yang disasar oleh jawatankuasa pemilihan teks tidak tercapai sepenuhnya. Umur protagonis dalam semua novel, kecuali *Step by Wicked Step*, adalah dalam golongan perantaraan umur dan bukan pada peringkat pertengahan umur golongan dewasa remaja. Gambaran mengenai rupa, percakapan dan gaya protagonis golongan dewasa muda adalah amat sedikit dan rujukan kepada pembentukan identiti seksual dan imej badan juga adalah pada tahap yang minimum. Tema dalam novel adalah berkaitan dengan SDM, namun terdapat perbezaan yang ketara dari segi kebolehpercayaan, penggambaran watak dan pengakhiran cerita.

Dari segi identiti dan kerelevenan novel kepada responden yang dewasa muda, dapatan kajian menunjukan bahawa meskipun isu yang berkaitan dengan golongan dewasa muda yang terdapat dalam novel adalah terhad, responden cuba mengaitkan diri mereka dengan bahagian yang tertentu dalam novel yang selari dengan kehidupan mereka. Sifat timbal balik, ikatan atau peranan sebagai pengantara juga kadang kala terbentuk antara responden dan watak dalam novel. Kaitan yang dibuat oleh responden dengan isu dan watak yang dikenali oleh mereka adalah penting bukan sahaja daripada kewujudannya, malahan juga daripada ketiadaannya. Harapan responden terhadap watak orang dewasa adalah lebih tinggi, dan sikap yang ditunjukkan cenderung bersifat lebih menghukum dan kurang memaafkan berbanding dengan harapan mereka terhadap protagonis yang muda dewasa. Maklum balas daripada responden juga menunjukkan bahawa teks sastera perlu memberikan gambaran masyarakat yang realistik.

Kajian ini memberi maklumat yang penting mengenai bagaimana pelajar yang dewasa muda mengaitkan diri mereka dengan isu dan watak yang relevan kepada diri mereka, justeru menunjukkan pentingnya SDM dimasukkan dalam pemilihan teks sastera untuk golongan dewasa muda.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I am thankful to God first for being with me and making this possible.

I am grateful to Professor Dr. Jayakaran Mukundan, the Chairperson of my supervisory committee, for his guidance, support and constructive suggestions throughout the duration of my study.

I would also like to extend my heartfelt gratitude and appreciation to the other members of the committee Dr. Arbaayah Ali Termizi and Dr. Nooreen Noordin who have aided me along the way.

Thank you Dzeelfa and Norwati for your invaluable support and encouragement; Dr.Vahid, Ali Rezwan and Yu Jin for all your help and Jill for always being there to listen.

Finally, to the ones closest to me, my family, thank you for your patience, love, understanding and all the ways you helped me. It has been a long journey and thank you for being there with me.

I certify that a Thesis Examination Committee has met on 7 March 2014 to conduct the final examination of Mallika Vasugi a/p V. Govindarajoo her thesis entitled "Secondary School Students' Experience of Young Adult Literature" in accordance with the Universities and University Colleges Act 1971 and the Constitution of the Universiti Putra Malaysia [P.U. (A) 106] 15 March 1998. The Committee recommends that the student be awarded the relevant degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

Members of the Thesis Examination Committee were as follows:

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Date: 19 MAY 2014

This thesis submitted to the Senate of Universiti Putra Malaysia has been accepted as fulfillment of the requirement for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy. The members of the Supervisory committee were as follows:

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Professor and Dean
School of Graduate Studies
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Date:

Declaration by Graduate Student

I hereby confirm that:

- this thesis is my original work;

- quotations, illustrations and citations, have been duly referenced;

- this thesis has not been submitted previously or concurrently for any other degree at any other institutions;

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Declaration by Members of Supervisory Committee

This is to confirm that:

- the research conducted and the writing of this thesis was under our supervision;

- supervision responsibilities as stated in the Universiti Putra Malaysia (Graduate Studies) Rules 2003 (Revision 2012-2013) are adhered to.

Signature: _____
Signature:_____

Jayakaran Mukundan, PhD   Arbaayah Ali Termizi, PhD
Chairman of Supervisory Committee   Member of Supervisory Committee

Signature: _____
Nooreen Noordin, PhD
Member of Supervisory Committee

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

YAL	Young Adult Literature
MOE	Ministry of Education
CDD	Curriculum Development Division
RRT	Reader-Response Theory
YALSA	Young Adult Library Services Association
ALA	American Library Association
YA	Young Adult
ELRP	English Language Reading Programme
CRP	Class Readers Programme
SPM	Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia (Malaysian Certificate of Education)
ESL	English as a Second Language
EFL	English as a Foreign language

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

1.1   Background of the Study

In the Malaysian secondary school, literature was incorporated into the English Language subject as a compulsory component in 2000 through the introduction of stipulated literary texts. The literature component, as it was referred to, comprised short stories, poems, and novels and students' understanding of the texts was tested during school and public examinations. Studies on this first cycle of the literature component revealed not only a lack of enthusiasm shown by students towards these texts but also an inadequate pedagogy of literature teaching (Lian 2002; Sidhu, 2003 Vethamani, 2004). The texts were also found to have little relevance to the Malaysian young adult student. In the 2nd cycle of the literature component which began in 2010, the Curriculum Development Department (CDD) of the Malaysian Ministry of Education (MOE) which is in charge of text selection for the literature component, stated that they had taken the issue of relevance and interest into account in their selection of new texts to replace the first set. (Ghani et al. 2007). The new texts were also projected to contain 'teenage issues.' These elements of relevance and interest to the young adult student and the inclusion of 'teenage issues' in texts point towards the genre of Young Adult Literature (YAL) which at the present moment is acknowledged as an established genre of literature going by several other labels including 'adolescent fiction' or 'teen fiction'.

The evolutionary path of YAL which spans several centuries, has not always been smooth and the place that YAL has today among other older and more conventional literary genres is partly due to the young adult developmental theories in the past century and to studies that have revealed YAL as favored reading material by young adults (Erikson 1968; Havighurst, 1972; Kohlberg, 1976; Reed, 1994). The very characteristics of YAL that relate so closely to the issues faced in young adulthood have made YAL highly relevant to the young adult thus making it favored as selected reading material for young adult students in many countries. In Malaysia however, where the history of literature learning is still relatively new, the popularity of YAL has not yet caught on as selected reading material for students in national secondary schools.

It is therefore uncertain whether the CDD considered the genre of YAL in their selection of texts for the second cycle of the literature component despite their stated intention to include 'teenage issues'. Studies on the texts used for the 2nd cycle of the literature component in the Malaysian secondary school have not yet been conducted to ascertain the presence of YAL elements or the extent of relevance these texts have to the young adult Malaysian student who will be reading them.

Another important fact that has to be taken into consideration is that the reading itself is an event between the young adult and the text and the very experience of reading makes them active participants who not only make meaning from the pages but whose personal histories get embedded in the creation and interpretation of the text (Fish, S, 1967; Holland, 1968; Rosenblatt, 1976). Thus any attempt to discover the extent of relevance and interest shown by Malaysian secondary school students towards these new texts would have to take into account the reality of the young adulthood phase with the issues that come with it and the reality that is constructed during the reading experience. A study in this direction would require in-depth knowledge of students' engagement with the texts and their personal experiences of the reading. The present study therefore, aims to explore the presence of these elements and the perceptions and experiences of young adults as they read these texts.

This chapter will trace the development of literature learning in Malaysia beginning with the introduction of the literature component and its objectives as stated by the Malaysian MOE. A brief description of pedagogical practice and the models for teaching literature used in the Malaysian English language classroom will be given. Studies done on students' responses towards the texts used during the first cycle will be discussed and the lack of relevance will be addressed by presenting the option of using literary texts that have elements of YAL. The need for further studies in this field which are of an in-depth and exploratory nature will also be highlighted.

This will lead to the statement of the problem and the purpose of the study. The significance of the study in being able to provide valuable feedback to curriculum developers, implementers and the participants themselves will be shown together with the delimitations set for the study. The chapter will end with the operational definition of all key words and phrases in the study.

1.2   Literature in the Malaysian English Language classroom

1.2.1   Introduction of the Literature Component

Although the role of literature in the English Language classroom in Malaysian secondary schools has had a sporadic and intermittent history, the incorporation of Literature in English as a taught and tested component in 2000 was an indication that finally a formal appreciation of the role of literature in English Language Teaching in Malaysia was acknowledged (Curriculum Development Department, (CDD) Ministry of Education, (MOE), Malaysia). The prescribed texts for this component combined poems, short stories and novels, and one out of five English teaching periods a week was allotted to teaching the literature component. Among the objectives of this move were the desire to increase students' proficiency in English, as well as to contribute towards personal development and character building (MOE document 1999). These stipulated objectives in fact reflect a fusion of the language, cultural and personal growth models for teaching literature as

outlined by Carter and Long (1992) who addressed what they considered the often disregarded reasons for teaching literature in the first place.

While the cultural model aims to facilitate student understanding and appreciation of diverse traditions of thought, feeling and artistic form in varied cultures and ideologies, the language model promotes the teaching of literature for language development.

The personal growth model, which seems to provide the strongest argument for the incorporation of YAL in the language classroom, is committed to the goal of students' personal growth as they engage with the literary texts in a manner that is meaningful to them as individuals and to where they are in relation to society. This engagement is also hoped to bring an appreciation and love for literature and to encourage independent reading even outside the classroom.

Based on the MOE's objectives for the literature component with the desired outcomes of facilitating language development and the emphasis placed on personal development and character building, it is therefore very obvious that although all three models are involved, a teaching and learning experience based on the personal growth model would fulfil the greater part of these objectives.

It thus follows that the intended 'audience' or readership of these texts whose personal growth is focal to the desired outcomes, would be a major consideration in the selection of texts. In this case, it would have been students in Malaysian secondary schools between the ages of 12 to 18 in age and who could therefore be considered young adults. As such, they are subject to the various issues which are common to young adults at this stage of their lives. As previous reading programmes (English Language Reading Programme, 1979; Class Readers' Programme, 1990) in Malaysian English language classrooms had proven ineffective due to students finding the texts 'uninteresting and irrelevant, (Vethamani, 2004) it would have been reasonable to assume that texts selected for the newly introduced literature component, and the novels in particular, should have been able to sustain the attention of the Malaysian young adult student enough to keep him interested. The novels in fact form a major part of the literature syllabus and students in the fifth form in particular would have to read one of the three novels during the English Language classroom learning and teaching period and also prepare to be evaluated on it in their SPM examination (Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia or Malaysian Certificate of Examination) at the end of the academic year.

The novels that were actually selected as literary texts in this first cycle (1999) were abridged texts of John Steinback's classic *The Pearl* (1945), *The Return* by K.S.Maniam (2000) and the English translation of the novel *Rimba Harapan* by Keris Mas (1998) which was translated from the Malay language by Adibah Amin (1990). With the possible exception of *The Return* none of the novels belonged to the YAL genre and studies found that the presence of YAL elements in the novels was

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scarce without any distinct voice of young adults or issues related to them (Lian, 2002, Vethamani 2004). Even though *The Return*, included young adult issues, it was more a recollection of the middle-aged protagonist Ravi's youth and thus was not written from a young adult's point of view. Without the voice of the young adult the classification of the novel as being Young Adult was questionable (Too, 2004).

Studies on the responses of Malaysian secondary school students towards these texts however, revealed little interest shown by the Malaysian secondary school student towards reading the prescribed texts of the literature component in the English Language syllabus (Lian 2002, Sidhu, 2003). Apart from the irrelevance of the themes to the Malaysian adolescent, the texts used were found to be unsuitable to students' interests, either too difficult or too easy, boring and culturally alien with little relevance to young adults (Vethamani, 2004). The results of an analysis of needs and the study on the suitability and impact of texts used in the first cycle of the literature component for secondary schools by the CDD confirmed this when findings revealed that the chosen texts were uninteresting, incompatible, and depressing, and did not 'appeal to the targeted students' (Ghani et al 2007). Given the scarcity of elements of YAL the texts lacked relevance to the issues faced by young adults and their developmental needs and thus the lack of enthusiasm and interest shown by Malaysian young adult students towards these texts was hardly surprising.

Apart from the lack of success of the texts themselves to sustain student interest, studies also revealed an inadequate knowledge about the literature component or literature teaching methodology among Malaysian English language teachers (Subramaniam, Hamdan and Koo, 2003). Pedagogical practice suggested a greater leaning towards the language model rather than the personal growth model (Carter and Long, 2003) with teachers admitting that they would use the literature component examination paper as a benchmark of what and how to teach it. Besides being in sharp contrast to the objectives set by the MOE, and pointing to a lack of emphasis on the young adult students' personal growth, this quite clearly shows that students' engagement and experience of the texts especially on a personal level has not been considered important. It also implies that little attention has been paid to both the reading and developmental stages of the young adult reader.

1.2.2 The Second Cycle of the Literature Component

As a result of their findings, the CDD which is in charge of the text selection for the literature component stated that the new cycle of the Literature Component for English beginning in 2010 would include the following considerations in their criteria for text selection; texts that students could identify with and respond to emotionally; and texts that would consider the needs and abilities of students. The next cycle was also projected to be 'more appealing, exciting and fun' in the classroom (Ghani et al 2007).

The genre of literature that would have seemed most likely to fulfill the MOE's own objectives of future selected literary texts being relevant and identifiable to the Malaysian young adult student and consider their developmental needs, strongly suggests YAL which by its very definition is literature both written for the young adult and that which the young adult chooses to read independently.

Compared to the time the selection of the first set of novels was made (1999) which was a decade before this, YAL had by this time (2009) already been firmly established as a literary genre in its own right and Young Adult Fiction sections were common in all major book stores in the country.) More than 1000 books for young adults were being published each year (Nilsen and Donelson 2009) with multicultural settings and authors from around the world. Translations of YA novels from other languages to English were also more readily available. By this time also YAL had already made huge inroads as chosen prescribed literature in language classrooms around the world even in countries where English was spoken as a second or foreign language because educators had realized the need for literature to be relevant to the young adult students' developmental needs if it were to keep them interested (Wu, 2008).

The MOE then proceeded with the selection of new texts for the literature component and these have been incorporated into the curriculum in stages beginning with the texts for Form 1 and Form 4 in 2010 and Form 2 and Form 5 in 2011.

The novels for students in the Fifth Form that have been selected according to the different zones or states are as follows:
- *Step by Wicked Step* by Anne Fine (in the states of Selangor ,Kuala Lumpur, Putrajaya, Negeri Sembilan and Malacca)
- *Catch us If you Can* by Catherine McPhail (in the states of Perlis, Kelantan, Kedah, Penang and Perak)
- *The Curse* by Lee Su Ann (in the states of Pahang, Terengganu, Johor, Sabah, Sarawak and Labuan)

The novels were purportedly chosen as prescribed texts based on criteria such as authenticity, aesthetic values, moral values, humour, teenage issues, length and language with the guiding factors of relevance, interest, identification, and emotional response (CDD, MOE 2009). The actual checklist of criteria for text selection by the Malaysia MOE for the new cycle of the literature component was however not made available to the public particularly to the teachers of Malaysian secondary schools. The importance placed on the presence of YAL elements and the developmental needs of young adults is also not clear. There is also a lack of transparency on how novels for the cycle were selected, and titles of novels which had been long-listed or short listed novels are also not revealed to the public. There is also no documented justification by the CDD of reasons that the three chosen novels were selected over others that may have been short listed.

1.3   Statement of the Problem

Although the objectives stipulated by the CDD (MOE document 2009) for the literature component incorporate elements of all three literature learning models; language, cultural and personal growth models (Carter and Long, 1991) previous studies indicate that classroom practice in the English language classroom in Malaysia has concentrated on language models with little emphasis on personal growth (Subramaniam 2003, Sidhu 2003). This indicates a mismatch between CDD objectives and practice for the literature component. Apart from the emphasis on examinations, backwash effect and lack of effective teacher pedagogy, another reason for this may be the ineffectiveness of previous texts in maintaining student interest. The texts that had been chosen in the first cycle were found to lack teenage issues and were irrelevant to the Malaysian young adult student whom they were intended for. To address the lack of suitability and appeal of texts in the first cycle of the Literature Component for English to its targeted students in secondary schools, (Ghani et al. 2007) the CDD of the Malaysian MOE stated that the new cycle of the Literature Component for English beginning in 2010 would consider the need for students to be able to identify with and respond emotionally to the selected texts. The next cycle was also projected to 'contain teenage issues' (CDD, MOE 2007). The criteria of relevance, interest, identification, and teenage issues stated by the MOE point towards the elements of YAL and suggest that elements of YAL would be significantly featured in the new texts. The texts that have subsequently been selected for the 2nd cycle has according to the MOE, been done by a panel comprising Ministry of Education officers, academic lecturers from universities and teacher training institutions, teachers and pupils from around the country .The MOE has however not yet established the presence or extent of elements of YAL in these texts nor the relevance of the texts to the Malaysian young adult readers. There have as yet been no studies on the extent of YAL elements present in the texts and how the Malaysian young adult relates to these texts.

 The MOE has also not disclosed further information on the actual text selection process and whether the developmental needs of young adults had been taken into account. Although adolescent literature is closely connected to adolescent psychology (Nilsen and Donelson, 2009) there has been no reference to this in the impact study by the MOE on novels in the first cycle (Ghani et al 2007) or in the criteria on which the selection of novels for the second cycle was done. As yet, no studies have been done on the novels in the 2nd cycle to explore or ascertain their relevance to Malaysian students, the ability to sustain their interest and the extent to which students identify with and respond to them as young adults. Literature on the response of the Malaysian student towards YAL is also presently insufficient. While YA novels have been successfully incorporated as reading texts in classrooms in many countries including those where English is a second language (Wu, 2008) in Malaysia this possibility has not been given sufficient consideration by the curriculum planners. More significantly there has been insufficient research of an in-depth and reflective nature to describe the Malaysian young adult student's 'essence of experience' (Jasper, 1994) with YAL. Previous studies on the first cycle have lacked the inductive and interpretive approach which explores students' perceptions

and personal experience with the texts particularly from the young adult perspective (Lian, 2002, Sidhu, 2003, Subramaniam 2003, Vethamani, 2004).

While studies with adolescents responding to YAL have been extensively done in native speakers' context and setting, the impact of YAL on ESL learners has not yet been thoroughly researched in countries like Malaysia where English is a second language. Apart from the relatively recent infiltration of YAL into the Malaysian adolescent reading market, it is also possible that insufficient research in this field particularly pertaining to the Malaysian secondary school student, is due to lack of identification of YAL that is deemed appropriate or suitable, especially where there needs to be a balance between realism, authenticity and appreciation of cultural diversities without a compromise of the essence of YAL itself. In short, the current literature on Malaysian students responding as young adults to prescribed literary texts in the language classroom is insufficient. Missing also is research in the Malaysian context of the understanding of the experience of the Malaysian young adult student with YAL which is of an in-depth and reflective nature.

These gaps therefore need to be bridged in order to provide an insight of how students actually respond to the texts at a deeper level and how it relates to their own development phase as young adults. This in turn would provide feedback on the question of relevance of literary text to the Malaysian young adult in its ability to hold his interest, identify with characters, elicit emotional responses, and draw parallels with what is going on in his own life.

This study will address all these gaps and provide the information needed on how Malaysian students as young adults themselves, relate to, interpret and identify with the elements of YAL in the prescribed novels of the literature component. This information is crucial as it allows all concerned parties access to information about their reading experience at a deeper level through responses which are not superficial or merely cognitive.

1.4   Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study therefore is to:
i.   determine the extent to which YAL elements are present in the three novels of the literature component
ii.   determine the extent to which Malaysian students find these novels relevant to their lives as young adults by providing an in-depth exploration on how the Malaysian secondary school student relates to and responds towards these novels
iii. determine the extent to which the stipulated objective of the CDD with the desired outcome for students to be able 'to identify with and respond to the texts' has been achieved through the three novels.

iv.   The findings from the study are also hoped to enable a more comprehensive list of criteria to be drawn up which focuses on elements of YAL suitable for Malaysian students from which future text selections can be based.

1.5   Research Questions

The study is guided by the following questions:

Research Question 1 (RQ 1)
1) To what extent do the novels of the literature component (2nd cycle) prescribed for students in the Malaysian secondary school English Language classroom belong to the genre of YAL?
   a) To what extent are the themes and events contemporary and meaningful to young adults?
   b) How are the young adult characters in the novels portrayed?

Research Question 2 (RQ 2)
2) To what extent do Malaysian students find these novels relevant to their lives as young adults?
   a) To what extent do they identify with the young adult characters in the novels?
   b) To what extent do they identify with the issues in the novels?

The guiding sub questions of the main research question 1 are also based on the criteria of YAL according to the operational definitions and although the study may be considered as beginning with the assumption that YAL elements are indeed present in the texts, the justification for this is based on the CDD's statement that text selection for this cycle will include teenage issues. The researcher's overview of the novels at the beginning of the study also shows the categorizing of the novels by the publishers : *The Curse* is classified as a Young Adult Novel ; *Step by Wicked Step* as Junior Teen and being for readers aged 11 and above and *Catch us if You Can* as Juvenile Fiction and multigenerational. Furthermore, the MOE's own objectives of future selected literary texts being relevant and identifiable to the Malaysian young adult student also points towards characteristics of YAL. It would be useful to remember also that the objective of the study and especially RQ 1 was not so much to establish the novels under the YAL genre but to explore the extent to which these elements are present in the novel. Thus it was not so much the question of whether these novels belong to the YAL genre but rather the depth to which they belong. Also as Woolcott (1982) in Miles and Huberman, states, 'it is impossible to embark upon research without some idea of what one is looking for and foolish not to make that question explicit'. The analysis here will only be for YAL elements as this is what is required within the scope of the study. This will be based upon the operational definition of YAL provided.

In order to explore the extent to which the novels belong to the YAL genre, which was the objective of the first research question, two sub-questions were asked. The first sub-question (RQ 1a) dealt with the subject of themes and events in the novels and the extent to which these were relevant and meaningful to young adults. Responses for RQ 1a could be both objective and subjective in nature as the kinds of themes, events, problems and the extent of meaningfulness could vary from one young adult to another.

The second sub-question (RQ 1b) focused on how the young adult characters in the novels have been portrayed. In answering RQ 1 (b) the portrayal of young adult characters would firstly deal with the question of whether they are protagonist/s or at the centre of the plot, the manner in which they are depicted (i.e. strong, perceptive, intelligent, etc.) and their conflict between dependence and independence. The extent to which their actions and decisions become major factors in the outcome of the conflict is also considered significant. The presence of teenage slang and/or expressions and the extent of description of young adult characters appearances and mannerisms will also be explored. The portrayal of the young adult protagonists in the novels would also be determined by the intensity of their 'voice'; whether their voice could be heard throughout the story. This could to a measure be determined by the point of view from which the novels have been written. The portrayal of the young adult characters' personalities whether strong, intelligent, perceptive which are the usual hallmarks of YAL were also to be studied as were their actions and role in the final outcome. As the conflict between dependence and independence, the period of uncertainty and fluctuations between childlike and adult-like behaviour is another significant characteristic of young adulthood, often accompanied by a maturing or a change, evidence of this would also add to the realistic portrayal of the young adult protagonist and the study purposed to look for signs of all these as well. The extent to which their actions and decisions become major factors in the outcome of the conflict is also considered significant. As one of the identifying characteristics of YAL include a sense of closure or and ending on a positive note, this will also be investigated in the study.

Unlike the first research question which is primarily concerned with determining the presence of elements of YAL which have been operationally defined in the three novels Research Question 2 (RQ2) in comparison moves completely into subjectivity as it deals with the young adults' perceptions of the novels as it relates to them on a personal level and requires introspective responses from young adults themselves.

Because RQ2 deals with the subject of relevance of the novels to the lives of the young adult, the expected responses and consequent findings will be from personal perspectives of the young adult reader. This relevance can be approached by the degree with which the young adult student is seen to identify with the young adult characters in the novels either personally or vicariously and the familiarity of situations, problems or issues in the novels to them individually. The extent to which the young adult reader understands and empathizes with the actions and decisions made by the young adult characters in the novels is also significant towards answering RQ 2. Finally, the study will also seek the Malaysian young adult's

perspectives on the suitability of the novels in the context of their own Malaysian society.

Although there are no definite boundaries placing each research question in a specific category, RQ 1 leans towards the definition of YAL by content whereas RQ 2 would be more connected to the effect and readership of YAL.

1.6 Significance of the Study

The study is significant in being able to provide information on the relevance of the novels in the literature component in the lives of the Malaysian young adult student. Students' responses to these novels in this study would indicate their potential to hold the interest of Malaysian young adult students, elicit emotional responses, enable them to identify with the characters and draw parallels with what is going on in their own lives. The findings from these would also help to determine the extent to which the lack of relevance of literary text to the young adult Malaysian secondary school student in the first cycle has been addressed in the second cycle of text selection.

The findings will also be of significance to the curriculum developers in the Malaysian Ministry of Education as it will provide valuable feedback on future choices of literature texts to be used in the English language classroom. It will also help teachers who are concerned with developing the reading habit among their students, to provide advice or point their students to the books that they would enjoy reading. Thus useful information would be provided to the pedagogical practice and issues in the country especially where the teaching of the English Language is concerned. The study would also explore teenage students' response to the texts and attempt to establish the elements of the texts that have been most enjoyed. This could subsequently guide text selection in future cycles. Another considerable impact would be on the participants who launch into a journey of self-discovery through interaction with the texts and the responses they give may reflect deeper issues they face and provide themselves with personal feedback on how they feel, think, react or relate to characters in the text.

The study is also concurrent with the introduction of the 2nd cycle of literature texts into the Malaysian secondary school English Language syllabus. It will therefore be the first time that these texts are studied together for the extent of YAL elements present which in turn points towards the relevance of the texts to the lives of the students who read them. This would also indirectly show how the average Malaysian secondary school student   as an ESL student would respond to YAL if the settings are culturally different with the possibility of teenage expressions, language and behavior not being immediately familiar. The findings from the study would thus indicate whether it is necessary to make YAL compatible to the Malaysian secondary school student and if any aspects of YAL need to be reviewed in which case a 'customized' list of YAL criteria could be drawn up and used as a reference when

selecting appropriate reading material for the Malaysian secondary school student. Whatever factors that may have led to students' enjoyment of the texts and encouragement for independent reading or had positive impacts on students' self-image can also be used as a basis for future text selection in schools, resource centres or the classroom.

1.7   Delimitations

Miles and Huberman (1994) refer to the importance of setting boundaries in qualitative studies in order to define the aspects of the research that can be studied within the limits of the researcher's time and means. It is also important to set boundaries so that only that which connects directly to the research questions is studied.

Although the texts for the 2nd cycle of the literature component include short stories and poems, this study will only focus on the novels which are introduced to the students in the fifth form of their secondary schooling. This is primarily due to the purpose of the research which requires an in- depth exploration on the Malaysian YA's reading experience and their responses towards YAL. Novels being extended fictional narratives provide the best medium for this.

The researcher has striven for a degree of homogeneity among the participants. All participants are in the same age group (15, 16) and are Malaysian Secondary School students in the Fourth Form. This student level has been chosen because they match the intended age-group for readership set by the MOE during text selection. Being in the fourth form, the participants will not yet be exposed to the teaching and learning of these novels in the English language classroom and thus their responses during the course of the study will not be influenced by this. As generalization to a population is not the main intent of the study, the participants were also chosen from those who had adequate English proficiency as it was important for them to be able to read, understand and describe their reading experiences in keeping with the need for in-depth exploration of the central phenomenon.

The site selection for the study was based on availability and accessibility (Patton, 2002) The participants for the study were selected through purposeful sampling according to the required criteria from a national type secondary school in Malaysia which the researcher in her position as English language teacher had full access to.

Although the researcher has striven for a degree of homogeneity among the participants in terms of age, educational background, and English proficiency, their personal reading preferences and genres of novels they would choose to independently read are not taken into consideration for the study. The participants' family background and personality types are also out of the boundaries in the study. As the study is qualitative and requires human response, a complexity of personality

types, character differences and perspectives would in fact be beneficial in expanding the findings and make the data richer. Also, as the study would relate to unique and personal issues and situations in the participants' lives, attempting to homogenize the participants' family, socio-economic background and personality types would in fact not help the study but narrow it down. Furthermore, in qualitative research of this kind as stated by Cohen, Manion and Morrison (2000) it is the particularities that will produce the generalities and not the reverse.

1.8   Operational Definitions

1.8.1 Young Adult

Age boundaries of young adulthood have been flexible and varied since young adults were first recognized as a distinct group as those between the ages of 14 and 21 (Trimmer, 1802). Joan F Kaywell (2002), after a survey on members of the Conference on English Education Commission on the Study and Teaching of Young Adult Literature reports varied definitions given of young adults which included the following; 'an age group roughly between 11 and 16' or 'between the ages of 12 and 22.' The Young Adult Service Division of the American Library Association (YALSA) refers to young adults as within an age range of 12 to 18 (1999). The Educational Resources Information Clearinghouse (ERIC) defines young adults as those between the ages of 18 and 22. The Michael L. Printz award for Young Adult Literature is for books whose readers are described as between the ages of 12 and 18.

Based on the lack of rigidity of age boundaries for the young adult, for the purpose of this study 'young adults' will be defined as individuals between the ages of 11-22. This age range is chosen as it is a sub-set of all previous definitions and also subsumes the ages of the Malaysian secondary school young adult students who will be participants in the study.

1.8.2 Elements of Young Adult Literature

Although Nilsen and Donelson (2005) defined YAL as 'anything that readers between the approximate ages of 12 to 18 would choose to read', for the purpose of this study the elements of YAL are operationally defined according to the following list which is a compilation of standard defining features of YAL by Small (1992), Brozo and Simpson (1995), Wolf (2005) and Nilsen and Donelson (2009):

- Young adult protagonists at centre of plot
- Themes meaningful to young adults with events or problems relevant to young adults
- Young Adult's point of view and interpretation of events and people and 'Voice' of the young adult projected.

- Depiction of young adult protagonists as perceptive and intelligent,
- Depiction of young adult's conflict between independence and dependence
- Detailed description of young adult characters' appearances and mannerisms
- Dialogue reflects teenage speech and expressions
- Positive resolution .The actions and decisions of the main young adult characters are major factors in the outcome of the conflict.
- A limited number of characters with adult characters in the background

1.8.3 Malaysian Secondary School Students

'Malaysian secondary school students' refers to students in national secondary schools throughout the country who have completed six years of primary education. Students in the Lower Secondary (Form 1, 2, 3) have an age range from 12 to 15. The student level relevant for the study is the Upper Secondary (Form 4, 5) which consists of students who are between 15-18 years of age.

1.8.4 Experience

Morse and Richards (2000) define experience as an individual's perception of his or her presence in the world at the moment when things truths or values are constituted and an interpretation of their own reality. In the present study the phenomenological approach is used to explore the 'essence of lived experience' of the young adult with the elements in the literary text that relate to him personally. This would include the participants' expressions of their feelings, reflections, opinions, thoughts, emotions, and responses evoked during the reading of the novels. It would also include the participants' perception of their own lives and an interpretation of their own reality in relation to the novels.

1.8.5 Literary Texts

Literary texts in the present study refer to the collection of short stories, poems, plays and novels which have been prescribed by the MOE as texts to be included in the English language subject in Malaysian secondary schools and which collectively are known as the literature component. However the present study will only focus on the novels used by students in the fifth form of the Malaysian secondary school.

1.8.6 Novels

A novel is an extended work of prose fiction that is typically written in a narrative style and describes fictional characters and events, usually in the form of a sequential story. There is no universally established guideline for a novel's length, point-of-view or philosophical point. The number of central characters in a novel is usually

small and novels usually have a single plot, although this may be at times fragmented or tangential. The storyline in a novel is usually somewhat complex, and there must be several angles to the narrative.

The novels referred to in the present study are:

- *Step by Wicked Step* by Anne Fine
- *Catch Us If You Can* by Catherine McPhail
- *The Curse* by Lee Su Ann

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