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Youth Culture and Problems in Graphic Novels

Diplomová práce

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Prohlašuji, že jsem tuto diplomovou práci vypracovala samostatně pod odborným dohledem vedoucího práce a uvedla jsem v ní seznam citované a použité literatury.

V Olomouci dne

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1. Introduction

The problem of peer pressure is closely tied to the problem of finding one's identity and it is mostly discussed in novels for young adults. Even though the research focused on young adult literature and coming-of-age books, also its subcategory bildungsroman, has been more widely spread, there is less work done on the comic narrative. It is understandable, because novels such as *Jane Eyre*¹ by Charlotte Brontë, which is a bildungsroman focusing on Jane's growth to adulthood, have had much more time to be discussed in the academic setting as this novel I gave as an example was written in the year 1847. Comic narrative is a more of a novel concept that is being discussed and there is a wide variety of source material yet to be analyzed. Comic books have been put aside a lot as they are not seen as a high-brow literature, however there has been a discussion brought up in the past fifty years to include comic narrative into the academic research. My thesis focuses on two of the main characteristics of young adult literature, used in my three selected works.

This thesis focuses on peer pressure and identity as a plot challenge in three graphic novels. The first graphic novel is *Anya's Ghost*² by Vera Brosgol, Brosgol is a Russian born comic writer, who won the Eisner Award for "Best Publication for Young Adults" and the Harvey Award for "Best Original Graphic Publication for Young Readers." Both of these awards were given to *Anya's Ghost* in the year 2012. The second graphic novel I will be discussing in this thesis is *Awkward*³ by Svetlana Chmakova, who is also a Russian born writer, who now lives in Canada and her graphic novel *Awkward* won the "Dwayne McDuffie Award for Kids' Comics" and the "Dragon Award for Kids Comics" both in the year 2016, and in 2017 *Awkward* won the "Rocky Mountain Book Award." The last graphic novel I will be focusing on in this thesis is *American Born Chinese*⁴

¹ Charlotte Brontë, *Jane Eyre*. London: Smith, Elder & Co., 1847.

² Vera Brosgol, *Anya's Ghost*. Indiana: RR Donnelley & Sons, 2011.

³ Svetlana Chmakova, *Awkward*. New York: Yen Press, LLC, 2015.

⁴ Gene Luen Yang, *American Born Chinese*, New York: First Second, 2006.

by Gene Luen Yang. Yang, for his graphic novel *American Born Chinese*, won the Michael L. Printz Award and the Eisner Award for “Best Graphic Album.”

Peer pressure refers to the social influence that peers have on each other, which often leads to conformity or compliance within group expectations. The pressure conform is especially significant during adolescence and therefore it is an important theme in young adult literature, as it coincides with the theme of identity formation and the challenges of characters choosing their own path. Graphic novels are a unique medium that can offer even better insights into the complexities of peer pressure and identity formation, as it offers a more complex view into the characters’ thoughts through the visual image.

The aim of this thesis is to explore the theme of peer pressure and identity as a plot challenge, how it forces the narrative to go forward and the conflicts it produces. This thesis will analyze sections related to these two main themes in selected graphic novels and by examining them, this research seeks to prove that comic books are an important medium to shed a light on the diverse experiences of young adolescents and contribute to broader discussions about the role of peer pressure and identity in young adult literature.

In the first part, this thesis will define the history of comic books in pedagogy and the definitions of peer pressure and identity as those are the topics that are closely related to my research and it is important to understand them. There is also a section on the value of young adult literature, as it is often taken as a low-brow genre, however I felt the need to highlight its importance as it dominant in the reading lists of younger readers.

In the second part of my thesis I include a close reading of my selected graphic novels, beginning with *Anya’s Ghost*, which starts with introduction and then continues with an analysis of peer pressure and identity in selected excerpts. Similarly to this strategy, I have then analyzed *Awkward* and *American Born Chinese*.

In the final part of this thesis, in the chapter called discussion, I have highlighted the importance of the comic narratives with these themes, as it

pertains to the lives of young readers and I have pointed out the significance of representation in race and gender diversity in the comic books.

While there are certainly many articles and essays focusing on youth problems in comics, such as the collection of critical essays *Graphic Novels for Children and Young Adults*⁵ edited by Michelle Ann Abate and Gwen Athene Tarbox, the focus is usually not on peer pressure, which in my opinion is a pivotal part of any student's life, unless they are homeschooled. Peer pressure and its importance in forming one's identity, is the main focus of my work, as from my perspective should be analyzed more. Especially now, when the popularity of young adult literature and comic books is very high, the importance of research on the themes prevalent in said mediums needs to be highlighted.

This thesis is built on the understanding that graphic novels are taken as any other piece of literature that is researched in the academic setting, with the support of authors such as Hillary Chute and her article "Comic as Literature? Reading Graphic Narrative,"⁶ where she dismisses the notion that comic should be taken as anything else than literature. With that being said, the themes I am analyzing in the three selected comic books are of high importance in young adult literature, because they pertain to young readers all around the world.

⁵ Michelle Ann Abate and Gwen Athene Tarbox, eds., *Graphic Novels for Children and Young Adults*, Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2017.

⁶ Hillary Chute, "Comic as Literature? Reading Graphic Novels" *PMLA* 123, no.2 (March, 2008).

2. Comic books

2.2 History of comic books in pedagogy

In this section, I am going to provide more information about the history of comic books in the field of pedagogy and how the opinion of including comic books in our classrooms has changed throughout the time from the 1950s to the present time. I will only focus on the use of comic books in pedagogy in North America, as many other countries, such as France or Britain, have begun earlier with the usage of comics as a teaching tool. This section will describe the beginnings with the first tentative trials of using comics in the classrooms and then it will describe the obstacles in their way, mainly focusing on Frederic Wertham, a psychiatrist in the 1950s who opposed comic narrative and helped to remove this medium from the school environment. The final part of this section focuses on the return of comic books to the American classrooms and the wide variety of comic books that could be used to teach younger generations.

Certain scholars such as Hillary Chute, Dale Jacobs and Rocco Versaci disagree with the notion that the comic narrative is a low-brow medium only read by children for fun and they see the potential that comic narrative has, especially in the field of pedagogy, comic narrative is looked at as a successful teaching method, as it teaches multiple literacies as Dale Jacobs points out in his article “More than Words: Comics as a Means of Teaching Multiple Literacies”⁷ After comics stopped being predominantly seen only as a form of entertainment for younger children, educators and psychologists began to fully appreciate their potential as a teaching tool. As Gary Wright mentions in his article “The Comic Book: A Forgotten Medium in the Classroom”⁸ in the late 1940s and 1950s subjects such as history, science and literature began using this valuable tool to make their contents more interesting and accessible to the students.

⁷ Dale Jacobs, “More than Words: Comics as a Means of Teaching Multiple Literacies,” *The English Journal* 96, no. 3 (January, 2007).

⁸ Gary Wright, “The Comic Book: A Forgotten Medium in the Classroom,” *The Reading Teacher* 33, no. 2 (November, 1979).

The creation of educational comics such as *Classics Illustrated*, which was an American comic book, which featured many adaptations of literary classics such as *Hamlet*, *The Last of the Mohicans*, *The Count of Monte Cristo* and many more. This magazine first appeared in the year 1941 and was appreciated by teachers and students alike as it was a more palatable way for younger students to be introduced to more complex topics.⁹

However, not everyone saw comic books in the positive light. Since there was such a boom in the spread of comic books in America, children began bringing their favorite comic books to the school environment, mostly the non-educational ones and read them whenever possible. Larry D. Dorrell, Dan B. Curtis, and Kuldip R. Rampal point out in their article “Book-Worms Without Books? Students Reading Comic Books in the School House”¹⁰ how one principal from Nebraska presented comic books as a “menace which included: The reading of comics destroyed reading comprehension, imagination and caused eyestrain.”¹¹

The vilification of comic books continued in the 1950s with the help of the psychiatrist Frederic Wertham and his book *Seduction of the Innocent* aiming to warn parents about their children’s favorite pastime. The whole book could be countered with the saying: correlation does not imply causation. To quote Wertham he wrote in his book *Seduction of the Innocent* “All child drug addicts, and all children drawn into the narcotics traffic as messengers, with whom we have had contact were inveterate comic-book readers.”¹² Wertham’s book and his research helped the censorship of comic books in the 1950s.

Decades later, Carol L. Tilley examined Wertham’s work and his documentation and found discrepancies between the actual research and what was

⁹ “Classics Illustrated.” Accessed April 15, 2023.
www.classicsillustratedbooks.com/new-page

¹⁰ Larry D. Dorrell, Dan B. Curtis and Kuldip R. Rampal, “Book-Worms Without Books? Students Reading Comic Books in the School House,” *Journal of Popular Culture*, Vol. 29, (1995).

¹¹ Dorrell, Curtis and Rampal, “Book-Worms Without Books? Students Reading Comic Books in the School House,” p. 225.

¹² Frederic Wertham, *Seduction of the Innocent*. New York: Rinehart & Company, 1954, p. 26.

presented. Tilley argues in her article “Seducing the Innocent: Fredric Wertham and the Falsifications That Helped Condemn Comics”¹³ that Wertham’s research on the negative effects of comic books on children was filled with biased data and selective evidence. Tilley proves through her intensive research that Wertham manipulated data to support his own agenda and ignored the contradictory evidence. Tilley also argues that many of the concerns raised by Wertham and others about the harmful effects were mostly driven by moral panic and unfounded assumptions about the link between media and behaviour and the resulting censorship - Comics Magazine Association of America and its restrictive editorial code, was misguided and unjustified.

Even though there are arguments for both sides of the debate if comics are truly a useful tool for younger minds, Karl Koenke took the middle ground approach and in his article “The Careful Use of Comic Books”¹⁴ in 1981 discusses potential benefits and drawbacks of using comic books in the classroom. Koenke approaches the topic carefully, with previous demonization of said topic, he argues that comic books are a useful tool, however one should not rely too heavily on them, but they can be a stepping stone for more difficult literature.¹⁵ The particular problem he emphasizes is the importance of selecting appropriate materials age wise and complexity wise. However, according to Koenke, when used with caution and in moderation, comic books could be a useful tool in the classroom.¹⁶

During the last thirty years however, comic books are viewed as a more of a positive and useful medium to push students to read more. After Art Spiegelman’s *Maus*¹⁷ won the Pulitzer Prize in 1992 as a first comic book that ever had this high of an approval, comic books were discussed in a whole new

¹³ Carol L. Tilley, “Seducing the Innocent: Fredric Wertham and the Falsifications That Helped Condemn Comics,” *Information & Culture* 47, no. 4 (2012).

¹⁴ Karl Koenke, “The Careful Use of Comic Books,” *The Reading Teacher* 34, no. 5 (February, 1981).

¹⁵ Koenke, “The Careful Use of Comic Books,” 592-593.

¹⁶ Koenke, “The Careful Use of Comic Books,” 594.

¹⁷ Art Spiegelman, *Maus*. New York: Pantheon Books, 1991.

light. *Maus* discusses very serious and mature topics of surviving Holocaust, but through a comic narrative which was something still viewed as a medium for children. *Maus* brought wider topics to be discussed in the comic narrative, more psychological and social issues and helped pave the way for comic books to be perceived more seriously.

Later on, many more articles came out supporting comic books as a useful instrument in the school environment for children to help their reading comprehension, one of the supporters of such teaching is Rocco Versaci. Versaci in his article “How Comic Books Can Change the Way Our Students See Literature: One Teacher’s Perspective” presents a compelling argument for the pedagogical benefits of comic books into the classroom. Versaci claims that students “are able to sympathize and empathize with comic book characters in unique ways.”¹⁸ Versaci also points out how reading comic books seem more enjoyable for students and they continued on reading it voluntarily with passion. I wholeheartedly agree with Versaci’s whole point, as he wants to help his students see literature as something enjoyable and help them develop analytical and critical thinking skills.

The last article and also the most recent of all the presented articles, written in 2007, I want to mention concerning history of comic books in pedagogy, is “More than Words: Comics as a Means of Teaching Multiple Literacies” by Dale Jacobs. In this article, Jacobs explains the ways in which comic books can be used to teach a broader range of literacies. Unlike Wertham, who argued that comics are the death for literature, Jacobs proposes that it is actually the other way around. Not only are comic books good for teaching reading only, but also they are good for teaching visual and textual literacy combined with cultural and critical literacy. He provides examples of how teachers can educate students by analyzing the visual and textual elements, including exploring issues of race, gender or identity. Jacobs also emphasizes that we should not take comics as an “intermediary step to more complex word-based

¹⁸ Rocco Versaci, “How Comic Books Can Change the Way Our Students See Literature: One Teacher’s Perspective,” *The English Journal* 91, no. 2 (November, 2001): p. 63.

literacy”¹⁹ and rather help students to learn how to properly read the comic narrative, including the visual aspects and therefore teaching them not only text based literacy but also visual literacy.

This section has focused on the history of comics in pedagogy, and in its final part has highlighted the renewed enthusiasm for bringing comic books back to the classrooms. All three of my selected comic books deal with problems that students in the classrooms deal with in their lives, therefore it is important to note that bringing comic books to students to learn and to make them excited for reading is an important part of my thesis. Comic books and young adult literature books are one of the most popular readings among teen readers, that is why the next section will focus on young adult literature.

¹⁹ Dale Jacobs, “More than Words: Comics as a Means of Teaching Multiple Literacies,” *The English Journal* 96, no. 3 (January, 2007): p. 24.

3. Young adult literature

3.1 Finding the value of young adult literature

In this section, I will focus on the definition and the value of young adult literature, as it closely coincides with the topic of this thesis, because all of my three selected works are comics for young adults and children. Young adult literature is one of the most read literature by teen aged students, so much so that in New York's Public Library list of fifty recommended books for teens for the year 2022, young adult fiction made up ninety percent of that list.²⁰ Similarly to comic books, young adult literature does not have the best reputation among academics, however with the support of such articles as Sean P. Connors "Challenging Perspectives on Young Adult Literature,"²¹ where he suggests that English teachers should use young adult literature to promote close reading²² and defends young adult literature to not only other English teachers, but also to English students, the reputation of young adult literature is slowly changing for the better. Hopefully my thesis will also add into this debate, as this section is written in support of young adult literature.

While young adult literature, is not the main topic of this thesis, it is important to mention certain history of this genre as all of my analyzed works are young adult fiction. As the name suggests, young adult literature is a genre of fiction literature meant for teenagers, mainly for ages between twelve and eighteen. The themes covered in said genre are usually the experiences and concerns teenagers have, such as issues about their identity, family dynamics, friendships and love. As Marci Glaus notes in her article "Text Complexity and Young Adult Literature: Establishing its Place"²³ young adult literature can be

²⁰ New York Public Library, "Best Books for Teens 2022." Accessed April 18, 2023. www.nypl.org/books-more/recommendations/best-books/teens

²¹ Sean P. Connors, "Challenging Perspectives on Young Adult Literature," *National Council of Teachers of English* 102, no. 5 (May, 2013).

²² Connors, "Challenging Perspectives on Young Adult Literature," p.69.

²³ Marci Glaus, "Text Complexity and Young Adult Literature: Establishing its Place," *Journals of Adolescent and Adult Literacy* 57, no. 5 (February, 2014).

described as “texts in which teenagers are the main characters dealing with issues to which teens can relate”²⁴ More often than not, young adult literature has a relatable protagonists who are typically similar in age as the readers who explore the challenges of adolescence and their transition to adulthood.

Similarly to comic books, young adult literature could still be seen as books meant for children, that one outgrows eventually. However, in recent years, many articles and books have been written in support of said genre, as it brings value to the classrooms and engages students much more than certain highbrow genres could. Since young adult literature is such a young genre, there is certainly more empirical research needed about how useful it can be in the classroom, as Judith A. Hayn, Jeffrey S. Kaplan and Amanda Nolen mention in their article “Young Adult Literature Research in the 21st Century” there is only “27 articles that could be labeled scholarly research that have been published”²⁵ as in the year 2011.

In this case however, I would argue, that while scholarly articles are important, the main focus should be on the students voicing their opinions. I know that many students would prefer not reading altogether, but maybe trying to introduce them to literature should start with books and characters the students can emphasize with. One research article that combines empirical data and the opinions of students taking part in this study, the article is called “Engagement With Young Adult Literature: Outcomes and Processes”²⁶ by Gay Ivey and Peter H. Johnston.

The article by Gay Ivey and Peter H. Johnston describes a qualitative study done on seventy one eight-grade students. Unlike other similar studies, the main goal was not “concerned with the link between independent reading and higher reading achievement as a targeted outcome,”²⁷ but rather the study is more

²⁴ Glaus, “Text Complexity and Young Adult Literature: Establishing its Place,” p. 408.

²⁵ Judith A. Hayn, Jeffrey S. Kaplan and Amanda Nolan, “Young Adult Literature Research in the 21st Century,” *Theory Into Practice* 50, no. 3 (Summer, 2011): p. 178.

²⁶ Gay Ivey and Peter H. Johnston, “Engagement With Young Adult Literature: Outcomes and Processes,” *Reading Research Quarterly* 48, no. 3 (July/August/September, 2013).

²⁷ Ivey and Johnston, “Engagement With Young Adult Literature: Outcomes and Processes,” 256.

focused on engaged reading and the students' experience with reading on their own accord. All the teachers included in this study have agreed, that there will be no comprehension tests, homework or examination and the books shall be selected by students, the only focus was on engagement. The results were put into numbers into certain categories, the first one being engaged reading, where all seventy one students shown reading for extended hours, even outside of the school environment, some even got into trouble reading past their bedtime or reading in other classes. Other interesting result was that most students talked more between each other about the books they have read and recommending it to their friends and classmates. The last result I want to mention is that twenty two students reported being more curious in other learning and found out more information to fill out the gaps that they had while reading the books.²⁸

In my opinion, this is an important study to change the perspective on young adult literature as it shows that adolescents have the passion for reading, however the literature should be of interest to them, doing comprehension tests and expecting them to find interest in the books they are reading just because their teachers said so leads to smaller interest. I am not proposing that we should be getting rid of the classic literature that is taught at high schools, however we should include some books into the curriculum that the students choose themselves to promote better reading habits.

This section has focused mostly on finding the value of young adult literature in the classrooms, even though there are standardized lists of classic literature students have to read, there should never be books that are discarded just because in certain eyes they lack academic value. At this point in time, reading for student should be encouraged in every way possible and young adult literature forms a good bridge between children's books and more challenging reading. One of the main themes of young adult literature is often peer pressure, as it is an unfortunate reality for most teens, in the next section, I shall focus more on this topic.

²⁸ Ivey and Johnston, "Engagement With Young Adult Literature: Outcomes and Processes," 262-264.

4. Peer pressure and identity

4.1 Definition of peer pressure

This section will be defining peer pressure, as is an important theme in young adult literature and also one of the two themes I will be analyzing in my chosen works. The definition and broader discussion about peer pressure on children and adolescents belongs more to the fields of sociology and psychology, however we need to define what exactly peer pressure is, to know when it is used as a plot challenge in my selected works.

Peer pressure refers to the influence that peers, meaning people of similar age or status, have on each other's behavior, attitude and beliefs. According to Lorraine Savage and her book *Peer Pressure* there is a higher susceptibility to peer pressure during earlier adolescence and it "tapers off in later adolescence and early adulthood and that self-esteem and a desire to make one's own choices in life take precedence."²⁹ It is important to know, that there are two kinds of peer pressure, there is a positive peer pressure and negative. When we talk about positive peer pressure, it is about the positive influence on your peers, such as encouraging team work, promoting respect for others, avoiding smoking or drinking and so on.³⁰ With that being said, my thesis mainly focuses on the negative peer pressure. How the influence of your peers can force someone to change their behavior for the worse, or rather force them to fit in the norm that is given by the society around them. Comic books can be a powerful medium for exploring the complexities of social dynamics, as there is not only textual representation, but also visual.

Hopefully, this definition provided a better understanding of said subject, because it is pivotal for this thesis as all of my selected works deal with peer pressure as a literary theme. The other important theme that is closely related to young adult literature is identity formation, which I will define in the next section.

²⁹ Lorraine Savage, *Peer Pressure*. Farmington Hills: Greenhaven Press, 2009, p. 7.

³⁰ Savage, *Peer Pressure*, p. 12.

4.2 Definition of identity formation

Identity in literature is one of the most fundamental themes that has been explored by many writers throughout history. Identity refers to a sense of self that a character develops over time under certain factors such as character's culture, social or personal background and their experiences, struggles, beliefs and values. In literature, the theme of identity is often explored through characters who are struggling to understand themselves, this is an especially important topic in young adult literature as the characters more often than not, struggle with the confrontation of challenges and conflicts that relate to their identity. Combined with peer pressure, the manifestation of these challenges can be shown in many ways such as questions of their race, gender, religion or social class and how they can fit in within those categories. In the teenage years, the area of exploring the theme of identity formation is rich and complex, as young characters are navigating the transition from childhood to adulthood, while also trying to establish a sense of self within their peers.

One of the strengths of young adult literature in this theme I want to highlight is that it can provide a safe space for readers, who are overcoming the same issues as them, especially in the comic books medium, where they can see themselves and their struggles reflected in the graphic narrative with relatable and diverse characters that implicitly or explicitly speak on the challenges of adolescence.

To conclude, the theme of identity in young adult literature is fundamental for most books in said genre. It has the power to inspire more empathy towards readers' peers and also towards themselves. It can also encourage critical thinking, by learning not to succumb to the idea of what everyone else wants for them, but who they want to be themselves, without other input. The idea of being themselves and ignoring the societal pressures or standards is closely related to my next section, as I have chosen two articles on feminist literary theory that coincide with the topic of identity and gender constructs.

5. Feminist literary theory

5.1 Feminism

It would be impossible to talk about feminist literary theory without explaining the history of feminism, as they are inseparable. In this chapter, the main focus will be on the historical development of feminism and its main objectives which are closely connected to the objectives of feminist literary criticism. However, even though the term feminism and feminist criticism seem so closely intertwined, there is a clear distinction between them. According to the dictionary definition, feminism is “the belief in social, economic, and political equality of the sexes.”³¹ It is important to note, that the radical modern idea of feminism might have skewed the original thought behind it, which would be equality for all. The movement deals with the position of women in the patriarchal society which is prevalent in all western countries.

The idea behind it is to bring both sexes to an equal level, regarding that feminism has been closely associated with an organized activity in support of women’s rights. To this day, women’s rights are still hindered by the patriarchal society, one example of that I want to mention is the right for abortion being overturned in the United States. Since 1970s there has been a constitutional right to abortion in the United States, until 2022 where this decision was overturned by the Supreme Court. I want to emphasize this issue, as many people may think that feminism is no longer needed, because in their eyes we have achieved equality in every sense, nevertheless that is not true as women are forced to carry children even in a western country which claims to be the most free of them all. Even though I do not discuss the topic of abortion in this thesis, I wanted to highlight one of the issues modern feminism might deal with and the importance of it.

When we talk about the history of feminism, or the feminist movement, we need to emphasize that it came in three distinct historical waves, each wave came with its own goals that reflected the needs of women during that particular

³¹ “Feminism,” *Britannica*. Accessed January 1, 2023.
<https://www.britannica.com/topic/feminism>

era. The first wave of feminism emerged in the late 19th and early 20th century, however the origins of the first wave can be traced back to the 18th century to the publication of Mary Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Women* written in 1792. Her work emphasized the inequalities between the sexes, such as women not being allowed to own property, or to vote. Some of the most prominent American suffragettes of the first wave are Susan B. Anthony, who co-founded the National Woman Suffrage Association in 1869 together with Elizabeth Cady Stanton. According to Nancy A. Hewitt and her article "Feminist Frequencies: Regenerating the Wave Metaphor"³² the narrative of first wave of the feminist movement ended in 1920 with the passing of the law that women are allowed to vote in the United States. The second wave of the feminist movement emerged during the 1960s and 1970s and it was characterized by the focus on reproductive rights, workplace discrimination and sexual harassment. Second wave feminists criticized the male-dominated nature of society and its institutions. The movement's impact can be seen in the passing of the Equal Pay Act of 1963, which abolished wage disparities between men and women and ensured equal pay. The third wave of feminism emerged in the 1990s and is prevalent to the present day. This wave focuses on issues such as representation in the media, gender-based violence and once again the right for abortion. The third wave also emphasizes the importance of not fixating the focus on only white, heterosexual, middle class women and includes other races and people who do not fit into the preconceived categories of genders, such as transexual people and non-binary people. However as Hewitt notes:

many scholars have critiqued the existing wave metaphor and suggested that it flattens out the past and creates historical amnesia about the long and complicated trajectory of women's rights and feminist activism.³³

³² Nancy A. Hewitt, "Feminist Frequencies: Regenerating the Wave Metaphor," *Feminist Studies* 38, no. 3 (Fall, 2012).

³³ Hewitt, "Feminist Frequencies: Regenerating the Wave Metaphor," p. 660.

Therefore, we may consider that even though the wave metaphor serves as a useful tool for describing the history of feminism, there is yet much to be discussed about the way it is perceived.

Feminist activism has taken many forms throughout history, including protests, demonstrations as well as art and literature. During its history it challenged traditional gender roles and gave voice to the oppressed. Despite the significant progress, there is still much to improve regarding equal rights and sometimes it may even seem like we are going backwards, that is why it is important to still let women's voices be heard, so that the equality is ensured for the future generations. That is why it is important to understand the issues discussed in the feminist movement, because these are the issues that certain feminist literary critics built upon in their analysis of literary works.

5.2 Feminist literary criticism

Feminist literary criticism stems from the objectives of feminism, therefore it uses principles and ideology of feminism and implements them on literature and the language used. Feminist literary criticism looks between the lines of chosen works and critiques the idea behind the authors' message. The literary theory in question aims to examine and analyze how literature depicts the narrative of male domination in certain fields such as political, economic and social forces embedded in literary works. The main two essays of feminist literary theory I want to focus on, as they pertain to this thesis is Judith Butler's "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory"³⁴ and an essay in *The Cambridge Companion to Feminist Literary Theory* by Nickianne Moody "Feminism and Popular Culture."³⁵

Judith Butler concerns most of her work on gender as a construct of society. In the essay I have chosen she explores the relationship between gender and identity and she argues that gender is not an inherent or natural characteristic,

³⁴ Judith Butler, "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory," *Theatre Journal* 40, no. 4 (December, 1988).

³⁵ Nickianne Moody, "Feminism and popular culture" *The Cambridge Companion to Feminist Literary Theory*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006.

but rather a social construct that is performed through repeated actions and behaviors. Butler argues that gender is some sort of performance, she uses the term “performativity” to describe the way the individuals create and express their gender identities through their looks, actions and speech. And those who fail to conform to these societal norms are “regularly punished.”³⁶ Butler examines the ways in which gender is enforced through social norms and expectations and she argues that these norms are not only imposed on individuals, but they are also internalized into their identity. Butler’s conclusion is that gender is a complex phenomenon that cannot be reduced to a simplistic binary biological explanations.

Moody’s “Feminism and Popular Culture” examines the complex relationship between feminism and popular culture. She argues that popular culture can be a powerful tool for feminist activism and that it has the power to both reinforce and challenge gender norms and stereotypes. Moody discusses the ways in which popular culture has historically represented women and how it often perpetuated harmful stereotypes about femininity and reinforced gendered power dynamics. Throughout her essay, Moody draws on variety of examples from popular culture, such as films, music, television and social media, to illustrate her arguments. Moody emphasizes the importance of recognizing the diversity of feminist perspectives and experiences and points out that popular culture can be both, site for solidarity or struggle. Moody offers in her essay an insightful analysis of the importance of carefully engaging with popular culture in the ongoing struggle for gender equality, while also acknowledging the limitations and challenges of working within male-gaze dominated mainstream platforms.

The main reason why I chose these two essays for analyzing my works is because none of the characters I focus on are the ideal norm of their gender. As you will notice, none of them are bothered by that fact also, and when they are, it is only because of the peer pressure from other students. I think it is important to mention the concept of not focusing on the characters’ looks, especially in comics. Butler says that those who do not conform to the societal pressure of “performing” as their gender, they get punished, nevertheless, at least the women

³⁶ Butler, ““Performative Acts and Gender Constitution,” 522.

in my chosen graphic novels do not get punished. It is important to normalize the fact that everyone can look however they want to look and comic novels bring more representation for young adult readers than many other mediums. All three graphic novels that I will analyze in the next sections represent characters with a great variety of inner thoughts about their looks and identity, and the contemplation if it is better to succumb to the norm and “perform” as their gender, or if they should rather be themselves even under the societal pressure.

6. *Anya's Ghost*

6.1. Introduction to *Anya's Ghost*

In this section, we will take a closer look on the graphic novel *Anya's Ghost*³⁷ and the themes of identity and peer pressure will be analyzed in said work. *Anya's Ghost* is a graphic novel, which belongs into the young adult fiction genre. *Anya's Ghost* is written by Vera Brosgol and it was her first comic book, however not her first comic animation. *Anya's Ghost* won the Harvey Award in 2012 as the “Best Original Graphic Publication for Younger Readers” and in the same year the graphic novel won also the Eisner Award for “Best Publication for Young Adults”

The story of the main character Anya, or rather Annushka Borzakovskaya, is set in the United States, even though as the name suggests Anya's family came from Russia. Anya is finding it hard to find her place in school, but also at home. She would like to see herself as fully American, however her family and her name makes that difficult. She deems herself as an unpopular teenager not fitting correctly into any of the conventional social groups. Anya's hope in climbing the social ladder comes from an unexpected source, when she falls down an old well she finds herself in the company of a ghost of a young girl, at least appearance-wise a young girl, Emily. Emily, however, reveals that she has been in the well for at least ninety years. After a few days, Anya is found by a young boy and saved from a similar ending that happened to Emily.

After the accident, Anya is forced to go back to school and Emily's ghost appears to Anya in the school bathrooms, after Emily helps Anya with a biology test, Anya lets her to live life with her for a bit longer. The problem comes when Emily does not want to live life with Anya, but wants to live her life through Anya. After a serious of manipulative gestures and malicious acts, Anya decides that enough is enough and gets rid of the ghost once and for all.

³⁷ Vera Brosgol, *Anya's Ghost*. Indiana: RR Donnelley & Sons, 2011.

6.2 Peer pressure in *Anya's Ghost*

The normal definition of peer pressure does not truly fit into this comic narrative, as the main societal pressure on Anya is from a ninety-year-old ghost. However the ghost, Emily, looks Anya's age and therefore we could classify it as such. As I mentioned in the introduction to the comic, Emily appears to Anya first in the well that Anya fell into and kept her company. Later in the graphic novel, Emily appears to Anya in the school bathroom before a test from biology and Emily helps Anya cheat by seeing what others wrote in the test, Emily using her invisibility therefore establishes a careful friendship with Anya. When Emily finds out that there is a boy Anya likes, Sean, she helps her talk to him about a party happening that day and later on she helps Anya find the right clothes for the party.

The problem comes whenever Anya feels uncomfortable with Emily's organizing her life, Emily manipulates her into believing that what she is doing is right for Anya and she should be glad that she is even helping. The first time Emily pressures Anya into doing something without her being fully accepting is when she tells her to ask Sean for "a ride" to the party I have mentioned earlier. It is easily missed, as Anya is glad after the conversation that Emily forced her to ask him to take her to the party, however it was not Anya's decision as she did it solely because of Emily's pressure.

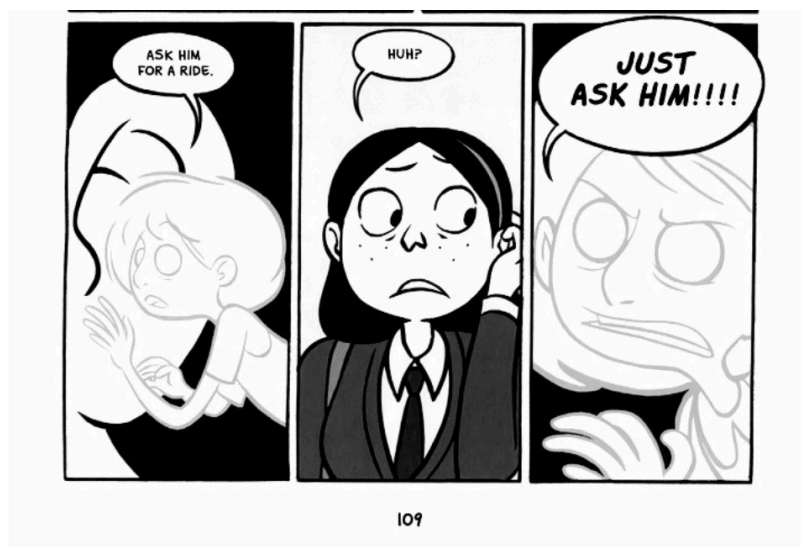


Figure 1 (Broskol, *Anya's Ghost*, 109).

The next time peer pressure could be seen in the graphic novel is when Anya is preparing to go to the party. She is picking out clothes and Emily is helping her, or rather forcing her into clothes that Anya does not feel comfortable in. Anya points out that the clothes are in her wardrobe since before she was in puberty and she has grown significantly by now. However Emily points out that she has been doing her research in women's magazines and she knows better. To quote Emily: "I have been doing my research, this is exactly the kind of thing men like nowadays."³⁸ This is a great example of not only the pressure Anya is experiencing from Emily, but also from society itself. Even if uncomfortable and uncertain about the clothes she is about to wear, she obliges anyway since it is expected from her and any other girl at that age to do anything possible to impress a boy she likes.

If we were to take it from the perspective of a teenage boy, on most occasions they do not think like that, there is no pressure on them to impress girls by their clothing or by how they have done their hair. The peer pressure boys in young adult literature experience is usually from other boys, there is an important distinction between the sexes here, while girls are trying to impress the boys and fit in with other girls, the boys usually try to impress other boys and the girls are an afterthought.

If we come back to Anya, she is dressed for the party, but she is still very unsure about her clothing and she comments on that by describing herself looking "loose-womany" and "slutty."³⁹ At that point, Emily knows that she would get nowhere with her previously seen aggression so she tries to persuade Anya with emotional manipulation. She plays on Anya's feelings by saying "I wish I could wear stuff like that. I wish I could wear anything other than this [...]"⁴⁰ and since they have at this point already discussed Emily's tragic past, Anya surrenders and keeps the clothing on in order to make Emily happy again, even asking her what make up Emily would like Anya to wear.

³⁸ Brosgol, *Anya's Ghost*, 112.

³⁹ Brosgol, *Anya's Ghost*, 114.

⁴⁰ Brosgol, *Anya's Ghost*, 114.

When Anya is ready to go, Sean picks her up with his girlfriend Elizabeth. Elizabeth is shown a few times in the comic book, she is a popular beautiful girl, however unlike the stereotype of such girls she seems actually nice. At the party, Anya goes looking for Sean, but finds only Elizabeth keeping watch in front of a bathroom door. It becomes apparent that Sean is in there with another girl and Elizabeth is just standing there so others will not come in. Anya asks her why would she do that as this situation seems highly disrespectful of their relationship and Elizabeth answers “Sure, he gets... bad at parties, but I’m the one he’s seen with. I’m the one people look at and know ‘That’s his girlfriend!’”⁴¹ Here Brosgol shows that even the most popular girl at school is influenced by peer pressure, Elizabeth quietly stays in a relationship where Sean goes to have fun with other girls.

I think this conversation was a breakthrough for Anya, after finding out that Elizabeth’s life Anya secretly wished to have is not all that great she started to oppose to Emily’s pressure. After seeing Elizabeth in that position, Anya went home from the party as she no longer want to stay after her illusion about Sean was shattered. This is a moment when Emily appears again, telling Anya to go back to the party, back to Sean, telling Anya that she still has a chance with him, when Anya tells her that she is no longer interested in Sean, Emily gets angry and as you can see in figure 2 tells Anya that she cannot give up after all the hard work Emily has done. By the hard work she means pushing Anya to do the things Emily cannot do. Anya is starting to see here that Emily might not want what is best for her, but instead what Emily wants for them both. Anya becomes more aware of the manipulation after this incident. When the girls talk in the morning, Emily still focuses on how to get Sean to like



Figure 2 (Brosgol, *Anya's Ghost*, 127).

⁴¹ Brosgol, *Anya's Ghost*, 124

Anya, but Anya tells her firmly, that she is no longer interested in Sean.

The final point I want to mention about peer pressure in *Anya's Ghost* is not about Emily, but about Anya's best friend Siobhan. While here the peer pressure is not explicitly mentioned, it is implied from the narrative. Throughout the comic book, we can see Anya and Siobhan smoking together or alone, but no other character smokes. In the end, Siobhan offers Anya a cigarette and Any declines, Siobhan then asks what is wrong with her. In this case we can deduce that Anya smokes mainly because her best friend does too, and when Anya declines the offer, she is met with confusion and almost contempt from her best friend.

Peer pressure is closely tied with the theme of identity in this graphic novel. Anya wants mostly to fit in with the other American children, even if it costs her her heritage. She saw an opportunity in Emily to help her be more popular and achieve her dream of becoming Sean's girlfriend, even if it meant compromising her values or beliefs. Brosgol highlighted very well the dangers of trying to conform to others' expectations and changing oneself to fit in. Luckily, in the end, Anya learns to accept herself for who she is and wins literally and also figuratively the fight against the pressure from the ghost Emily.

6.3 Identity in *Anya's Ghost*

Another important theme in *Anya's Ghost* is the theme of finding her identity. As I mentioned, Anya is a Russian immigrant in the United States, there is a clash between her family trying to keep their heritage and family customs and Anya trying to fit in and be just like her peers. Through Anya's experiences, the graphic novel explores various aspects of identity, such as cultural identity and identity of one's own and how it can be influenced by outside forces, as I have shown in the previous chapter on peer pressure. In this chapter, I shall focus more on the aspect of Anya trying to accept her culture and what problems might come with that.

Anya is a Russian born immigrant and even though she does everything in her power to fit in and be just like her American peers, it proves difficult for her when her mother does not want to give up their traditions, such as attending

orthodox church, eating traditional food and meeting other Russian friends and their children. The first collision between Anya's need to be perceived American and her mother trying to keep certain traditions alive is actually right in the beginning of the graphic novel. When Anya's mother offers a traditional Russian breakfast to Anya, she declines with a statement "Can't we just get low-fat pop-tarts or something?"⁴² Pop-tarts are a typical snack, consumed mainly in the United States. The conversation continues with Anya's mother saying that when Anya was younger she loved this breakfast and Anya rebutting that argument that when she was younger she was fat. Anya's mother continues on that being fat in Russia meant that you were rich, so it was not such a bad thing and Anya completely disregards that with "Oh boy, again with the back in Russia"⁴³ while rolling her eyes. This might be a minuscule conversation, happening only for a moment in the graphic novel, however it sets a precedent of Anya refusing anything to do with her Russian traditions together with her family. This trend of Anya not wanting to spend time with her family continues throughout the whole graphic novel, the only time Anya willingly spends time with her mother is when she is studying for her citizenship test. After Anya's mother makes a mistake, Anya leaves angrily. Anya is in puberty, many teenagers go through a phase where they dislike their parents, however Anya's mother never forces Anya to do anything she does not want and she is overall a very nice lady. Anya's negative attitude seems to only stem from the fact that they are not a normal American family.

The next example of Anya refusing her Russian identity is when she comments on another Russian boy that attends the same schools as her, Dima. We later find out that he is the son of her mother's friend and they know each other well. Nevertheless, whenever they meet at school, Anya ignores him and pretends she does not see him. After a biology test, Dima offers to help the teacher collect the tests from other students early, which angers them and Anya says that he will get beaten by the boys later. During lunch, Anya prediction becomes true and

⁴² Brosgol, *Anya's Ghost*, 2.

⁴³ Brosgol, *Anya's Ghost*, 4.

Emily shows a bit of confusion on why Anya would not help poor Dima, as he is Russian too. Anya separates herself from Dima by saying that he is “fresh off the boat” as we can see in figure 3. Even though Anya was also born in Russia, just like Dima, she still describes him in a derogative way, for the same “flaw” as she has.



Figure 3 (Brosgol, *Anya's Ghost*, 57).

Anya seems to be ashamed of her Russian heritage most of the time, when Sean asks her for her name, she says her name is “Anya Bor- uh... Brown.”⁴⁴

Even denouncing her name when talking to a boy she likes. One of the best examples of Anya’s disdain for other Russians is when she is talking to Emily about Russian church her family goes to, she elaborates on that by saying “It’s a bunch of old people who didn’t bother to learn English ... It’s not fair! I got bullied for years for talking funny, I did my time in ESL, I don’t have an accent”⁴⁵ If we take aside the childish ignorance of not understanding that it is harder to learn second language as an older person who has to work and has not so much time on their hands, we can see where all of Anya’s contempt comes from. She feels that if she managed to learn proper unaccented English, so can everyone else and it is their own fault for not fitting in correctly into American society. She does not take into consideration that many immigrants enjoy staying true to their cultural identity and their heritage.

There never comes an explicit moment where Anya fully accepts her Russian part of her, but there are small instances in the end of the graphic novel which lead us to think that she did. The first one is in a library, where she spends time with Dima, researching Emily’s death, where she is actually supportive of

⁴⁴ Brosgol, *Anya's Ghost*, 71.

⁴⁵ Brosgol, *Anya's Ghost*, 97.

him and calms him that he will one day fit in too. The second instance is after Emily attacks Anya's brother and mother, she decides to finally bury the ghost forever and organises a civil project with her school to bury the well she fell into in the beginning of the graphic novel. One of the organisers asks her for her name and instead saying Brown, just as she said previously, she proudly says her full name Borzakovskaya. Both are small moments in the graphic novel, however they carry a larger message for the audience, especially for the younger children reading this and that is while it is hard, they should accept who they are and be nicer to others.

The final point that I want to mention in *Anya's Ghost* that belongs in this section is right at the end, when her best friend Siobhan tells her "You may look normal like everyone else, but you're not on the inside"⁴⁶ and Anya smiles and thanks her. As we have discussed, Anya wanted to be as normal as she could in the beginning, she wanted to fit in and be just like any other American child, however in the end, she thanks her best friend when she says that she is not normal. Anya at this moment values herself enough that she understands she does not need to fit in in every sense of the word and that all the particularities that are different from the others are what makes her Anya. This is an important message hidden in the graphic novel, as Brosgol does not say many things explicitly, but she implies and hopes that the young readers take her message to heart.

⁴⁶ Brosgol, *Anya's Ghost*, 220.

7. *Awkward*

7.1 Introduction to *Awkward*

The graphic novel *Awkward*⁴⁷ was written by Svetlana Chmakova in 2015. Svetlana Chmakova was born in Russia, and emigrated to Canada at the age of sixteen. *Awkward* belongs into the genre of young adult fiction in a school environment. Similarly to *Anya's Ghost* our main character is a young girl, who tries to fit in with her friends. The story follows the struggles of Penelope Torres, Peppi for short, who is a new student at Berrybrook middle school. She has three cardinal rules of surviving school, the first one is “Don’t get noticed by the mean kids,”⁴⁸ which she unfortunately breaks the first day, when she accidentally pushes away a fellow student named Jamie who tried to help her after she fell down. Peppi knows her actions were wrong and she is eaten by guilt for the next few weeks. She tries to apologize many times, but she always runs away because she is embarrassed. After she finally manages to apologize properly, she becomes friends with Jamie and they embark on a journey to save their after school clubs together.

Along the way Chmakova addresses important issues that adolescent face in the school environment, similarly to Brosgol, the main theme is peer pressure and finding one’s identity, but in Chmakova’s case finding one’s voice. The main difference between *Anya's Ghost* and *Awkward* is apparent just by looking at the two comic books. *Awkward* is very colorful and expressive, while *Anya's Ghost* is mainly in the shades of violet. This combined with the seriousness of the struggles of Peppi and Anya tells us that while both are marked as young adult fiction, *Awkward* is for younger adolescents as it deals with less heavy topics. *Awkward* is also the first graphic novel in Chmakova’s trilogy, the other ones are *Brave* and *Crush*.

⁴⁷ Svetlana Chmakova, *Awkward*. New York: Yen Press, LLC, 2015.

⁴⁸ Chmakova, *Awkward*, 6.

7.2 Peer pressure in *Awkward*

The theme of peer pressure in *Awkward* is a bit different than the one I have discussed in *Anya's Ghost*, as most of the pressure comes from Peppi's friends. By the definition, there are two kinds of peer pressure, negative and positive, here the line between those two is smudged. It is also not as serious, as they are middle schoolers, so they are not in the age of starting to try smoking or alcohol. Here the pressure on Peppi is more about fitting in with others and pushing her to do more, in the sense of pushing her to do more for the Art club she is a part of and more for her friends.

At the beginning of the graphic novel, Peppi describes her main rules for surviving school, the first one I have already mentioned, the second one is "Seek out groups with similar interests and join them."⁴⁹ Following this rule, she joined the Art club, where most of the peer pressure will come from in this novel. The first example of peer pressure is seen when the Art club decides they will be doing a comic strip for the school newspaper. Maribella, one of Peppi's friends, takes the lead and proposes she will be the main editor and almost without asking forces Peppi to be her co-editor. Peppi then regrets her agreement to accept the role, as she already has a lot on her plate. This is in my opinion both positive and negative peer pressure, as being a co-editor is a good role to have, Peppi becomes more involved with her friends and has more power to say what goes into the newspaper and what does not. However, she never asked for the role and was forced into it by Maribella. I think Chmakova shows this, because when we think of peer pressure, usually it is associated with something bad or wrong, which in this case is not, but still it is not something Peppi chose for herself out of her own volition.

The next example of peer pressure is once again by Maribella, after the principal of Berrybrook middle school announces that there is only one more spot for school club fair and the competition is between the Art club and their main nemesis the Science club, Maribella decides that Peppi will come to her house for an editorial meeting. Even though Peppi does not oppose, on her way to

⁴⁹ Chmakova, *Awkward*, 12.

Maribella's home, she debates why is she such a pushover as you can see in figure 4. Peppi has a problem saying no and I think a lot of her peers take advantage of that. I do not mean that in a malicious sense, however it is easier to exploit someone who does not protest much. That is why peer pressure is mainly issue in younger adolescents as they still have not fully developed brain, together with their personality and they still feel as the admiration from their peers is more important than their own choices. Peppi proves this theory many times in this graphic novel, building on her second rule, she wants to fit in the group with similar interests and does not want to oppose them in any case.

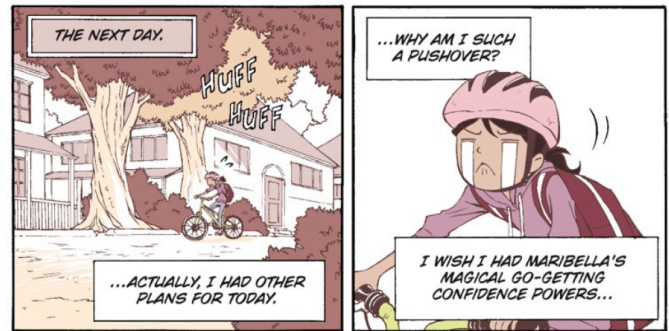


Figure 4 (Chmakova, *Awkward*, 101).

As I have mentioned earlier, Peppi pushed a boy named Jamie over on her first day at school. After agonizing over it for a few weeks and then after he tutored her a few times, Peppi decides that she needs to apologize. She does it in a form of a comic strip which she places in Jamie's locker. After he reads it, they start to build a friendship. Although they are becoming fast friends, there is still an issue hanging over their heads. Jamie is in the Science club, which is a rival club to the Art club and the stakes are high after the principals announcement. Both Peppi and Jamie are pressured to have a certain kind of disdain for the each other's club. Peppi describes it as "I don't feel like it's okay to even say hi to him..."⁵⁰ She feels pressured not to even acknowledge her friend at school, because it might anger the other members of the Art club. Even though Peppi knows it is ridiculous to pretend disinterest, she still does it because she does not want to feel excluded by her other friends. Nevertheless, Jamie and Peppi still meet after school and send each other letters, they discuss their hobbies and have fun together. Between them, there is never a sense of rivalry or competition.

⁵⁰ Chmakova, *Awkward*, 144.

After the Science club announced their project for the school club fair competition, the tension between the clubs is even higher, because it seems that the Science club is going to win without a doubt. They built a solar plane and announced that the decision on the name for the plane is going to be voted by all the students. When one of the Art club student expressed interest, the others yelled at him “What?? You’re gonna support them?!! Whose side are you on?!”⁵¹ This deepened the animosity between the clubs even more and it seemed that most of the Art club gave up. That is when Maribella decided to steal the controller for the plane that the Science club made. Immediately after she stole it, she came to Peppi and told her to hide the remote controller. At this point there is a clear distinction that this is negative peer pressure, there are no blurred lines as what Maribella did was wrong and what is she asking of Peppi is wrong too. As I said previously, Peppi has a hard time saying no, once again after Maribella comes to her she is willing to listen. Maribella starts with her manipulation tactics by saying “Please... I don’t have anyone else to ask. You’re the only friend I have...”⁵² Which is clearly not true, as I have mentioned previously, Maribella is the self-proclaimed leader of the Art club, she indeed does have many friends, however Peppi is the only one who does not mind listening to her commands. From Maribella’s previous experiences with Peppi, she knows she can pressure her into doing almost anything she asks. Now, I do not want to paint Maribella as some kind of master manipulator, she is a middle school girl with problems at home. Most of the times she just wants to impress her father, however even if unknowingly, she does put Peppi into certain unpleasant positions. In the end, after Maribella does not return to school for the next few days, Peppi decides to return the remote controller to the Science club, so we can assume that when the perpetrator of peer pressure is missing, Peppi, as many adolescents, decides to act on her own accord and refuse the manipulation.

I hope I have shown in this chapter how it is very likely that peer pressure can come from the children’s friends and that not all peer pressure is negative. In

⁵¹ Chmakova, *Awkward*, 151.

⁵² Chmakova, *Awkward*, 160..

this graphic novel, the line between negative and positive peer pressure is hard to distinguish, as we could see in the first few cases, however in the last example there is no doubt that it was negative peer pressure coming from the main character's best friend. This plot challenge is important to show to younger children as they may have preconceived notions that their friends would never push them into doing anything they did not want to, but Chmakova shows that it can be the case.

7.3 Identity in *Awkward*

Similarly as in *Anya's Ghost*, in this graphic narrative we shall also focus on finding one's own identity as a plot challenge. The theme of finding one's identity is also very important in *Awkward*, however it is from a different point of view, rather than focusing on cultural identity, as I have discussed in the previous chapter, Chmakova discusses the theme of finding one's voice. Even though Svetlana Chmakova was born in Russia, just as Vera Brosgol, Chmakova does not incorporate the importance of cultural values into her graphic novel, but she rather highlights the significance of growing into your own voice.

As I have previously discussed, at the beginning of the graphic novel, the main character Peppi, pushes Jamie in order not to be laughed at by other students. She finds it hard to even apologize for that, because she is so unsure of herself yet. This was the first introduction into Peppi's inner dilemma, she wants to do the right thing, but also as we know, her first rule is do not get noticed. When Peppi describes Maribella, she says about her "confident, talented, problem-solver and a go-getter. I'd hate her if I didn't kind of want to be her."⁵³ So even in the beginning, we can see the clash of how Peppi acts and how she aspires to be.

Peppi's journey to finding herself and her voice is apparent from how she acts during the first meetings of the Art club and how she acts in the ones later in the school year. When Maribella asks if anyone has an idea on how to save the Art

⁵³ Chmakova, *Awkward*, 14.

club, Peppi says under her breath “Hmm, maybe art.. for the newspaper..?”⁵⁴ But as you can see in figure 5, she says it very quietly, shown by the dashed text bubble. And even though Peppi’s idea is great, she does not say it out loud even when encouraged by her peers. Peppi visibly flinches when everyone turns to her and says that it is nothing and that it was stupid anyway. Then later when Maribella says the same idea that Peppi had, she thinks to herself that she should have said something. I think this is a pivotal point where Peppi recognizes, she has to speak up sometimes, because she does have great ideas.

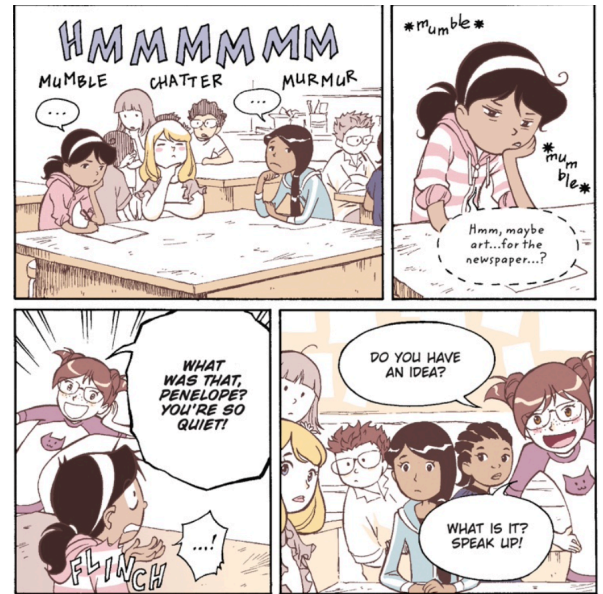


Figure 5 (Chmakova, *Awkward*, 29).

The next important moment for Peppi’s perception of herself and her other friends is when she goes one day after school to Maribella’s home. They are working on a project for the Art club, when Maribella’s father comes home early from work. He says some words of encouragement and then he tells Maribella “Ah, I’m so glad you take after me and not your lazy bxxxx mother. Don’t disappoint me.”⁵⁵ I think this is the moment, Peppi realizes that Maribella’s go-getter character stems mostly from very high expectations of her father. When Peppi compares that to her family environment, she understands more clearly why Maribella has such a presence. Peppi comments on that by saying that it seemed as Maribella was scared of her father. She feels more empathy towards her from this point on and also tries to accommodate Maribella’s needs.

The next moment in the graphic novel concerning this topic is when Jamie finds the apology comic strip from Peppi, in his locker and comes to tell her that he accepts her apology. Two other students come to them and take the paper from Jamie’s hands and start making fun of them. In that moment Peppi finds her voice

⁵⁴ Chmakova, *Awkward*, 29.

⁵⁵ Chmakova, *Awkward*, 104 - 105.

literally and also figuratively and starts to scream. She does not say any words, she just screams. The bullies run away from the fear of teachers coming and then Peppi stops. She proudly tells Jamie later that she has “never screamed like that before in her life”⁵⁶ After this experience, she feels more accomplished, she finally stood up for herself and also for her friend, even if it was just in the form of yelling. This is also the first time in the graphic novel that she truly opposes to someone who is mean to her, previously Peppi either ran away or hid somewhere. From the quote we can also assume that it is the first time not only at this school, but the first time in her life. In my opinion, this reaction was provoked by what I mentioned in my previous paragraph, Peppi has always recognized when someone acted wrong towards her or others, but never had the courage to speak up. When she saw how Maribella’s father treated his own daughter, Peppi began to understand the significance of standing up for herself and her friends.

From this point on, Peppi does not feel that awkward sharing her ideas. She still does not say anything unprompted, but when Maribella asks her what is she thinking about as a co-editor of the comic strip for the school newspaper, Peppi shares her thoughts willingly. This is a stark contrast compared to Peppi’s beginnings. Continuing this trend Peppi is learning more and more how to speak up for herself and this culminates after the principal announces that neither club will be allowed to be on the school club fair. This announcement starts an argument between both clubs and that is when Peppi yells at all of her peers to stop, because this is exactly why none of them have their clubs anymore. Despite the fact that Peppi is right, her friends find it hard to accept the fact that she yelled at them and they stop talking to her. Peppi begins to doubt herself again, especially after she has to go home from school alone, because her friends avoid her.

The final point I want to mention concerning this topic is when Peppi tries to save both clubs. After principal’s announcement that both clubs were acting in an unsportsmanlike conduct, so he decided that both clubs will be cancelled, Peppi comes up with a plan that might save them all. Peppi asks Jamie to help

⁵⁶ Chmakova, *Awkward*, 132.

organize the plan by gathering both clubs to the school yard, where Peppi will state how they can work together on a project to present it to the principal. From how Peppi acts throughout the graphic novel, public speaking is something she is extremely afraid of. When she is standing in front of all her peers, she still has doubts, but then she announces her plan for them to all work together and effectively contradicts any objection. At this moment, Peppi resembles Maribella in the beginning of the book, as I have mentioned, Peppi wanted to be like her in this sense and finally she has the courage to speak and to present herself in a confident way. Due to Peppi's growth, both clubs earned their place at the school club fair and Peppi's friends showed immense gratitude.

I argue that Chmakova shows even more of the journey young girls go through during their teen years than Brosgol. While Brosgol only touched up on the subject of Anya's cultural identity, which she never accepts fully, Peppi learned how important it is to speak up when it is needed. The growth of a young girl into herself shown in this graphic novel is very touching.

8. *American Born Chinese*

8.1 Introduction to *American Born Chinese*

American Born Chinese is a graphic novel by Gene Luen Yang written in 2006. It is a comic narrative combined from three seemingly different tales. The first tale introduced is about a Monkey King, who lives on a Flower-fruit Mountain with other monkeys, he is a master of kung-fu who mastered “four major heavenly disciples, prerequisites to immortality”⁵⁷ who sees himself as a deity seeking acceptance to be included with the gods. The second tale is about Jin Wang, a Chinese-American boy who struggles to fit in at school and the last tale is about a popular American boy Danny and his cousin Chin-kee, who is the epitome of Chinese stereotype. As the story progresses, the three characters’ tales converge in surprising ways, including the themes of identity, assimilation and the challenges that come along with it. Yang explores the complexities of being an American-Chinese boy at predominantly white school through humor and empathy. The journey of self-acceptance is the prevalent topic as the characters learn how to embrace their identities, one of the best quotes in the book comes from the Monkey King, when he stops trying to change himself into something he is not:

I would have saved myself from five hundred years’ imprisonment
beneath a mountain of rock had I only realized how good it is to be a
monkey.⁵⁸

The Monkey King, as we learn later in the graphic novel, has been through similar challenges as all the other characters I have mentioned and will mention in this thesis. The Monkey King was laughed at for being different and instead of accepting himself, even with his flaws, he tried to change himself so others would welcome him. However, after a long contemplation, he understood that there is nothing wrong with him and recognized that being a monkey is the best outcome

⁵⁷ Gene Luen Yang, *American Born Chinese*, New York: First Second, 2006, p. 10.

⁵⁸ Yang, *American Born Chinese*, 223.

for him and in the hopes of Jin understanding this concept, that acceptance of oneself is what is important in life, said the aforementioned quote. I will be resuming with the notion of being pressured into changing oneself in the next section on peer pressure in *American Born Chinese*.

8.2 Peer pressure in *American Born Chinese*

Since there are three main characters with different stories in this novel, the peer pressure will be discussed in this chapter for each of them separately. We will begin with the character introduced first in the graphic novel, the Monkey King. Even though he is not a human, nor he is a teenager, he in some sense is dealing with peer pressure. When he deems himself as one of the gods, he goes to a party that is only meant for the deity. After he is not accepted, because he is not wearing shoes, the guard tells him that he may be a king, but for them he is still a monkey. All the gods laugh at him, which angers him and he fights them all. However, the moment he returns on his planet he issued a law that all monkeys must wear shoes from now on. Then he locked himself into his chambers and worked on himself so that he would be invulnerable. After forty days, he emerged from his chambers looking more as a human rather than a monkey. Even though he held disdain for all the gods that made fun of him, he still wanted to impress them in this form. He then went to every god to discipline them for their transgressions, trying to persuade them that he was not a monkey anymore. This went on until the day he met Tze-Yo-Tzuh, who is the one who created all of existence. The Monkey King tried to fight even him, but failed and was imprisoned for five hundred years. After accepting himself as a monkey, he was freed. In this tale there is no literal image of peer pressure, however there is a figurative one. When the Monkey King tried to change himself for others, he was imprisoned in this image for many years and when he accepted himself as he is, he was freed.

The second character dealing with this topic is Jin Wang, who is the American born Chinese boy, finding it hard to fit in. When he is introduced by the teacher, the first thing said to him by a fellow student is that Chinese people eat dogs, which the teacher contradicts by saying that he probably does not do it

anymore. Yang shows here how it could be hard to make friends when this is the introduction Chinese people are met with, but he does it with humor. Jin says that there is only one other Asian in his class and they mostly avoided each other. Jin is subjected to immense racially motivated bullying, but about three months later he made a friend with Peter, a white boy who offered him friendship for his sandwich, with a threat that “otherwise he will kick his butt and make him eat his boogers.”⁵⁹ Their short friendship followed a similar trend of bullying behind a mask of games. When a new Taiwanese student Wei-Chen Sun came into Jin’s classroom, Jin thought to himself that “something made me want to beat him up.”⁶⁰ Wei came to Jin during lunch and spoke to him in Mandarin Chinese, after which Jin told him “You’re in America. Speak English.”⁶¹ Jin declined to be his friend and even though Jin was not mean to Wei as much as the other students, he still had no willingness to accept Wei. On this example I wanted to show, that while there is no explicit peer pressure from the other students, Jin does not want to be seen with another Asian boy as it could lead to more bullying. Jin would rather be alone, pretending to be accepted between the other white students than actually be friends with someone who wants to befriend him. They however become fast friends after Wei shows his toy Transformer which is Jin’s favorite toy.

Years later, when they get older, Jin tells Wei that he likes one of their classmates, Amelia. Wei begins to laugh at him, because as he explains, in Taiwan liking a girl before reaching maturity is hilarious. Jin tells him to stop acting like a f.o.b. I have mentioned this term, when I have discussed the graphic novel *Anya’s Ghost*, it means fresh off the boat, insinuating that someone is not fully “Americanized” yet. I have noticed that in both cases, this term is used only by other foreigners, the peer pressure in this case comes from Jin, who implies that Wei should be already more incorporated into the American society, its values and systems. Similarly to Brosnol’s Anya, Jin experiences pressure to try to fit in

⁵⁹ Yang, *American Born Chinese*, 34.

⁶⁰ Yang, *American Born Chinese*, 36.

⁶¹ Yang, *American Born Chinese*, 37.

more, to be just like his American peers. When he decides to perm his hair to impress Amelia and to look more like the other American boys, his friend Wei finds more funny than alluring. Another pivotal moment for the theme of peer pressure comes again from Jin. When he wants to go on a date with Amelia, he pressures Wei to lie to Jin’s mother to say that they are together that evening. After Wei disagrees, because he does not want to tell lies, Jin manipulates him into helping him. We can see in Jin’s case, he tries so hard to fit in and to be like other students at school, he is also often bullied for being different, however he is also the perpetuator of peer pressure on his friend Wei. Even if he does not see it that way, it is apparent that he forces his friends to conform to the societal norms, just like he was forced to conform. There seems to be never-ending cycle of being forced to refuse their differences and then forcing others to do the same later. When Jin kisses Wei’s girlfriend, Wei comes to confront him and asks him why, because Jin is like a brother to him. That is when Jin tells him: “You and I are not alike. Maybe I think she can do better than an f.o.b. like you.”⁶² Even though Wei is unarguably Jin’s best friend, Jin still wants to distance himself from him. Jin himself wants to believe that he is more American than Wei, therefore better, in Jin’s eyes the more you fit in with the American students, the “better” you are.



Figure 6 (Yang, *American Born Chinese*, 191).

The final character and the final tale is the one with Danny and his cousin Chin-kee. Danny is embarrassed by his cousin to the utmost level, because Chin-kee is a caricature of offensive Asian stereotypes to the utmost level, even eating a cat on one instance. Danny is a white boy with blonde hair who plays basketball, he is one of the more popular students, on his own, he would not be even worthy

⁶² Yang, *American Born Chinese*, 191.

mentioning for this theme. However, together with his cousin there is an implied peer pressure from Danny's friends. Danny's embarrassment throughout the graphic novel stems from the fear of being judged by his peers for having Chin-kee as his cousin. Danny tries to avoid his cousin whenever possible, mainly to not be ridiculed, but evading Chin-kee also means evading his family. Danny reflects on that one day after school with his friends. Danny shares that this is the third school he transferred to because of his cousin, he continues by saying that every time he finally finds friends and feels as a part of a group, Chin-kee comes for a visit and ruins it for him, embarrassing him and after that "No one thinks of me as Danny anymore. I'm Chin-kee's cousin."⁶³

Overall, the theme of peer pressure in *American Born Chinese* is closely related to the theme of cultural identity. Danny, Jin and Wei are all forced to reject part of their identities to properly fit in, but nevertheless even if they reject it they still find it hard to be respected as all the other students who just fit in because of the color of their skin.

8.3 Identity in *American Born Chinese*

As I have mentioned previously, identity is a very important theme in *American Born Chinese*. The theme of identity prevalent throughout the graphic novel, as it explores the challenges of growing up as a Chinese-American in a mostly white school, the reconciling of two clashing cultures and identities especially for Jin. All characters in some way experience the issue with accepting themselves fully. Similarly to Brosgol, the cultural identity is the main focus here, but to contrast *Anya's Ghost*, *American Born Chinese* ends with more acceptance of the characters' values and traditions.

First I want to once again mention the Monkey King, as he serves as an important metaphor to acceptance of your identity. As I said in the previous chapter, he despised being seen as a monkey at first but after many years he began to understand that there was nothing wrong with being who he truly is and he is the happiest he has ever been. Due to this example the graphic novel suggests that

⁶³ Yang, *American Born Chinese*, 127.

true acceptance and happiness come from embracing their true self and all of the aspects of one's identity.

In the end of the novel, it is revealed that Danny was Jin all along and his cousin Chin-kee was the Monkey King who came to Earth to serve as Jin's conscience. Chin-kee was the representation of everything Jin hated about himself, he of course never acted as the racial stereotype shown, he never ate a cat or talked with an accent or was overly sexualizing American women. However Jin perceived himself as such partly because of the incessant bullying by his classmates. Even when Jin was Danny, he still hid from his cultural heritage and tried to avoid what he thought was his cousin. When he finally confronted him and Chin-kee revealed himself as the Monkey King, Jin understood that there was no running from being who he really is and

that led him to a path of acceptance. After that, he knew that he needed to apologize to his friend Wei, who we learn is the Monkey King's son, and waited for a month in a certain café for Wei.

I want to also mention the struggle of Jin to accept himself. If we put aside that we now know that Danny is actually Jin and focus only on Jin's story, he struggles to see himself in a good light.

He tries to change himself to look more

American, one of the examples is his hair as seen in figure 7, he does not concentrate on what he values about himself, but rather what he has to change to appease the girl he likes. Even though, the girl likes him for who he is, because his friend Wei told her what a great friend Jin is and how he is nice and caring. Jin refuses to understand that changing oneself is not the answer to his problems, he needs to learn how to value himself as he is, even with his flaws, in this case his black straight hair. I think it is interesting to point out that Jin goes to a hair salon to perm his hair to change his appearance for a girl. Usually this would go against



Figure 7 (Yang, *American Born Chinese*, 97).

the societal norm, as men do not view their appearance in such details as women do. Jin, however, is different, he undergoes the stereotypical route that women go through by examining himself to an utmost detail, rather than what most men would do, which is just try and fail and repeat. Especially in Jin's case, the need to be seen just as "normal" as others, forces him to go to an extreme lengths, not just by changing his hair, but at some point, wishing so much that he was a white boy that he transforms into Danny. However, even as a white boy with blond hair called Danny he seems to still be haunted by his Chinese heritage in the form of his cousin Chin-kee. No matter how much of his looks change, his unescapable ancestry will still be there and until he accepts himself as he is, he will never be at peace with how he looks.

9. Discussion

9.1 Not conforming to gender stereotypes

This section is closely related to all three comic novels and their sections on forming identity. Because there are stereotypical representations that are expected from everyone, they are closely related to teens who are in their impressionable age and try to form friendships by conforming. However, it is important to note, that none of my main characters, that I have chosen for my thesis do not fit into the gender criteria fit for them. In the graphic novels it is not explicitly told, that they are acting against the social construct of gender, however in more implicit ways, they are rebelling against it. Anya, from *Anya's Ghost* seems to be envious of Elizabeth, the main popular girl and her ladylike behavior, but she rebels against that by wearing dark colors, smoking and being generally more manly in the way she behaves. To go back to Butler's essay "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution" she notes that people who do not conform to their gender roles are punished. However, in *Anya's Ghost* the moment when Anya is punished is right when she changes her looks to go to the party. She puts on a shirt which emphasizes her cleavage and at the party one of her classmates flirts with her in a crude way and tells her "Your boobs... look spectacular tonight."⁶⁴ And then Sean also comments on her shirt later in the night. Therefore, Anya is actually punished for trying to conform and is only seen as an object. Krystal Howard in her essay "Gothic Excess and the Body in Vera Brosgol's *Anya's Ghost*"⁶⁵ argues that on certain pages:

the reader is asked to spend time in 'erotic contemplation' as Anya falls in the image on the facing page. In *Anya's Ghost*, this particular gaze is

⁶⁴ Brosgol, *Anya's Ghost*, 118.

⁶⁵ Krystal Howard, "Gothic Excess and the Body in Vera Brosgol's *Anya's Ghost*," *Graphic Novels for Children and Young Adults*, Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2017.

assigned to the reader so that Anya's character must be viewed in a sexualized fashion.⁶⁶

I have to disagree with the argument, Howard continues on how Anya's thoughts about her body cause her to fall down the well and implies that all of Anya's thoughts are consumed by her body, which is simply not true. Anya is a much more nuanced character than Howard describes. It is important to note her clash of accepting her cultural identity and the need to fit in within the peers. She does not think about her body just because she is unsatisfied with it, she internalized the never-ending dissatisfaction because of her peers. She is never bullied explicitly in the graphic novel, but she explains that she was bullied when she was younger and fatter. Therefore we can assume that it was the societal pressure that made her question how she looks or how she is perceived. In my opinion Howard overly sexualizes Anya, who is still a teenager and has an evident problem of being sexualized. As I have discussed in my previous chapter, whenever Anya conforms to the peer pressure, she seems to regret that immediately after, the example being her dress for the party. When she was viewed sexually by her peers, she went home early because she felt uncomfortable. I believe that Brosgol shows this as a warning, by that I do not mean that women should not dress however provocatively they want to, but rather a precaution to younger readers not to do anything that makes them uncomfortable even under duress of their peers.

In *American born Chinese*, Jin is not a prototypical representation of a "manly" man, Jin is rather unconfident and self-conscious about his looks. These two attributes are mostly assigned to women. Being unconfident about herself is seen as an attractive characteristic in women because overly confident women often scare men away. However the self-consciousness in men is seen as a weakness rather than something attractive as it is in women.

Moreover, I want to mention that in *Awkward* there is no explicit notion of conforming to gender stereotypes, but there are implicit factors that play a role.

⁶⁶ Howard, "Gothic Excess and the Body in Vera Brosgol's *Anya's Ghost*," 251.

Since the graphic novel focuses on middle schoolers, there is no bullying about one's gender or the need to affirm their gender consciously changing the appearance of the characters. However, what is important to point out in Chmakova's writing is that everyone is accepted without question. As I have mentioned there are two clubs, the Science club and the Art club, both of them are a mixture of boys and girls. If we were to take previous generations into account, this would be something to pinpoint, for example if a girl were to enter the Science club, it would be a whole plot line, in *Awkward* it is not. It is taken as a given that girls can enjoy science and boys can enjoy art. Similarly, Chmakova does it with race also, which would bring us to my next chapter, but Chmakova draws a diverse cast without a smallest inclination that any of the bullying portrayed in the graphic novel is because of race. I feel that it is important to highlight the normalcy of the character's cast being so diverse in their hobbies, looks and attitude, without focusing on the different aspects shown.

What I want to point out the most, is that in none of my selected work there is a main character who is a man that portrays the traditional masculinity. Us as a society slowly but surely turn away from this concept. Especially the younger generations, men are more androgynous and softer in character. When there are certain side characters who are manly in that traditional sense, they usually lack respect for their women counterparts, the most significant example of that is Sean in *Anya's Ghost*, at first Anya thinks that he is the love of her life, but when she finds out Sean routinely cheats on his girlfriend, she loses interest immediately. I do not want to imply that looking manly is something wrong, however I do want to highlight the fact that all women that I have analyzed want to be respected as an equal and not be treated as less than.

This section closely relates to the section of identity and the articles on feminist literary criticism, as the there works I have analyzed in my thesis have brought up more nuanced characters, who do not ever fully conform to societal standards one way or the other. This in combination with the graphic narrative it invites a whole new academic research, as young readers are usually more inclined to read novels with characters they can emphasize with and including the

graphic part, it makes the characters more engaging. This coincides with the next section of this thesis on racial stereotypes, as the representation of identity formation and peer pressure is also often connected to racial prejudices. I have analyzed in this thesis three graphic novels, and in two of them the main characters are heavily judged on based on their race or family background.

9.2 Racial stereotypes

In this section I will be emphasizing more the racial stigma that closely relates to peer pressure and the identity formation, as both Anya and Jin try to distance themselves from their nationality as they feel they would be accepted more into their friend circles. In my work I have analyzed two graphic novels exploring racial stereotypes and how it affects the main and side characters. At this time in 2023, Russians and Chinese immigrants face the most racial profiling, during Covid, a lot of Americans called it “the Chinese virus” and there has been an increase in racially motivated crimes on all people from Asian countries. I want to include some data as not to exaggerate, but if were to take only the state of California, “The number of reported anti-Asian hate crime events increased by 107% in 2020”⁶⁷ This article however deals only with reported crimes. There has been also a substantial increase of day-to-day racism either in person or online. The article also mentions that most hate crimes go unreported as there could be for example fear from retaliation. There has been also increase in Anti-Russian sentiment in western countries as a result from the invasion of Ukraine. There are many Russian immigrant who do not agree with Putin’s war, but they are still being subjected to racism just for being born in a country that is currently seen as an enemy.

I also want to highlight the fact that reading *American Born Chinese* in the classroom, can promote the conversation about stereotypes even in a non-diverse classroom, it is important to teach students about certain ideas that are unfortunately prominent in our society, such as racism or gender inequality. It may

⁶⁷ California Department of Justice, “Anti-Asian Hate Crime Events During the COVID-19 Pandemic” accessed February 2, 2023, <https://oag.ca.gov/system/files/media/anti-asian-hc-report.pdf>

be hard to explain to students who are not racially stereotyped what does that even mean or how it shows in their daily lives, but I think that through especially this comic book, readers are shown how cliché it is to view a person one dimensional just for his race. Here the cousin Chin-kee serves as a great example of how can certain people view Asian-Americans just for their race and not for their character. It coincides with what Jin was told at school when he was younger, he just ate his dumpling for lunch and even that was a thing to mock him for. More often than not, adolescents find a way to laugh at other for their differences and appearance is one of the easiest picks as it is seen at a first glance, that is why I think bringing comic books such as *American Born Chinese* to the classrooms may change the outlook for readers and they may show more empathy towards their peers.

That is why, I think my work and many other works on the cultural identity of immigrants is important and why I also chose to select my works in graphic novels. It is important for adolescents to not just read about it but to see it with as it makes them feel more empathy for the characters. It is also important to note that the racial profiling does not just come from the caucasian students, but also from students that are the same race as them. Both Anya and Jin call one of the other students who are the same race as them “fresh off the boat” as they want to distance themselves from them, because they have adapted more and therefore are better in their mind. This is something many immigrants struggle with, not just the hate of their American born peers, but also their friends who should have more sympathy with them. I hope I have shown that in my chapter on peer pressure, because it is an important topic to discuss to more detail.

9.3 Why is peer pressure important

There are not many articles written on peer pressure as a plot challenge, especially in comic books. In my opinion, there should be more works written on this literary theme, as it is prevalent in most young adult literature. Even though, the topic of peer pressure seems more irrelevant to adult readers, as it is not something they have to deal with in their lives, it is still important to analyze this

phenomenon because the younger readers may experience it in their day-to-day lives.

The theme of peer pressure has been used in literature for many years, if I were to give an example, in William Golding's *Lord of the Flies*, most of the main characters face pressure from the other students that are stranded. However, it could be argued that there could be a disconnection between the students now and a novel written in the 1950s. Which brings us to the importance of comic books, as I have said previously, comics are used more and more throughout the western countries as a teaching tool, they are the modern way for teachers to influence their students to read. There is also a greater emphasis placed on the diversity of characters portrayed in the comic books, so more adolescents are able to sympathize with the characters that look similarly to them. Using comic books as a medium for children experiencing bullying and the need to fit in, is an important step for them to accept themselves and the people around them. I have chosen just three graphic novels, however there is an incredible amount of material that teachers can bring into the classrooms and teach more empathy and togetherness. In the graphic novels, peer pressure is often used as a catalyst for the character development and growth, through overcoming this problem the characters learn to express their own autonomy and accept themselves. By exploring this theme as a plot challenge, readers can gain insight into the challenges adolescents face in their daily lives and it can also be an opportunity to discuss the importance of critical thinking and making choices based on personal values rather than external influences.

As the theme of peer pressure was one of the themes I have analyzed in the three graphic novels, in my research I have noticed how prevalent and often forgotten it is. There seems to be often the misconception that peer pressure is just an explicit force that is visible and easily preventable, however it is more often implicit behavior ingrained in children. Similarly to racial stereotypes, it is a problem many students face implicitly, by just not being included by their peers for some sort of abnormality they often cannot influence in any way. In my opinion, the more we analyze and research these themes and then bring them into

classrooms, the more we will give students the option to critically think about their actions and how they affect others. This is why I have chosen to research and analyze these topics, as they matter maybe not to us, but to our students and the younger generation.

10. Conclusion

By analyzing certain excerpts from the three graphic narratives *Anya's ghost*, *Awkward* and *American Born Chinese*, this thesis has shown how the representation of the theme of peer pressure and identity influence the characters and serves as an important conflict which drives the plot forward. While the theme of peer pressure has been studied extensively in the fields of sociology and psychology, it lacks broader analysis in the field of literature. This thesis has included an analysis of said theme and has shown patterns in the representation of peer pressure and identity formation. One of the main points in my thesis is that the peer pressure can be both positive and negative and that it does not have to come only from character's enemies but also friends and how does peer pressure affect identity formation in a positive and also negative way.

We have seen in *Awkward* that peer pressure can bring comfort, as being part of a group that shares interests can be a pleasant experience, but we have also seen the darker side of said group friendship, when the main character Peppi faced challenges of peer pressure within her closest friends. In *Anya's Ghost*, the topic of peer pressure came from an unexpected source, which was the ghost of a young girl, who tried to force Anya into conforming to the image of what a teen girls should look like and how she should behave. Promoting the idea that even unhealthy relationship is better than being alone and forcing Anya to dress according to what men her age prefer. Lastly, in *American Born Chinese*, the form of peer pressure was more racially dictated, as the need to fit in was more focused on the behavior, as the main character Jin knew all along that he would never fit in based on his looks alone. These selected works have shown how peer pressure takes many roles in young people's lives and how important it is, to highlight the struggles of adolescents who struggle with this problem on daily basis.

The next part of this thesis focused on the formation of identities of the main characters. As the problem of peer pressure goes hand in hand with the problem of adolescents to understand who they truly are or what they are supposed to be. As I have shown, most of the characters I have chosen, fought

with the peer pressure and accepted the part of themselves which they disliked at the beginning. Anya in *Anya's Ghost* accepted that she will never not be Russian and said her surname proudly when asked. She also refused the pressure from the ghost to dress provocatively and to try to have a date with Sean, because she had enough respect for herself. In the end, as I have mentioned she is thankful when her best friend calls her not normal, because Anya has learnt that she does not need to fit in to be a good person. Similarly to Anya's journey to acceptance, Jin the main character in *American Born Chinese* undergoes a similar character evolution. Even though the graphic novel is divided into sections with different stories, when the stories come together in the end, we understand fully the progression Jin's character development. Mainly through Danny and his cousin Chin-kee we can see how many Chinese Americans are viewed in the eyes of caucasian Americans and how the acceptance of their Chinese heritage would not make them the Chinese stereotype that is Chin-kee. The main message on the topic of accepting their identity and not trying to be anything different than they are has the Monkey King, which I have quoted previously, he would save himself 500 years of imprisonment if he only realized how good it is to be a monkey.⁶⁸ And finally, in *Awkward* the sense of forming Peppi's identity is seen through how she finds her voice. I have described how Peppi goes through the struggles of not being able to say anything in front of even her friends and wishing she was able to be more like her friend and through a series of challenges she is in the end able to organize everyone for a project that will save all of them.

In the final part of this thesis, I have discussed why it is important to focus on these plot challenges, especially through the comic narrative and how this medium has a potential to explore more complex social issues and promotes a greater variety of characters than non-graphic novels would. By representing the diversity of young adolescents and their experiences in a relation to peer pressure and identity, graphic novels can and will contribute more to the development of inclusivity and representation. In light of these finding, I hope this thesis has made the basis for future research that could be build on this study and analyze broader

⁶⁸ Yang, *American Born Chinese*, 223.

and even more diverse sample of graphic novels to further explore the representation of said literary themes. Secondly, I hope I have shown that there should be more comic books in the classrooms used as a tool for promoting critical thinking and discussion on issues related to peer pressure and formation of identity among students.

In conclusion, this thesis has provided insights into the theme of peer pressure and identity in graphic novels and by analyzing the selected works, this research has highlighted the significant role of peer pressure and identity not only in graphic novels but also in the lives of the readers. There is still much more research to be done on the influence of young adult comics on readers and the topics young adult graphic novels cover, academics should not stray away from these types of reading as it is an important part of most readers during their adolescence. I have proven, along with other, much more prominent scholars, such as Hillary Chute, Sean P. Connors, Marci Glaus, and Dale Jacobs, that young adult literature and comic books are not less worthy of analyzing than other literary texts and the themes they deal with are as important as others. I have chosen to analyze just peer pressure and identity formation, however there are many more themes young adult literature covers and there is a gap to covered in future research.

11. Resumé

Tato diplomová práce se zaměřuje na analýzu tlaku vrstevníků a vytváření identity jako dějovou výzvu, která posouvá postavy dál. Specificky se zaměřuje na tyto literární témata v grafických románech *Awkward* od Svetlany Chmakové, *Anin duch* od Very Brosgolové a *Američan čínského původu* od Gene Luean Yanga. Tato práce zahrnuje analýzu uvedených témat a zobrazuje vzorek chování jedinců v těchto komiksech.

V první části této diplomové práce jsem se zaměřila na historii komiksů v Amerických školách a jejich nelehkou cestu k úspěšnému použití ve třídách jako nástroj k lepší kompetenci ve čtení. S tímto úzce souvisí další sekce této diplomové práce, která se zabývá literaturou pro mladé dospělé, na kterou je často nahlíženo s opovržením. Tato práce nicméně tento názor zamítá a s oporou článků dokazuje, že je literatura pro mladé dospělé stejně důležitá jako ostatní. Tlaku vrstevníků a formování identity jsem se věnovala v další sekci této diplomové práce, protože jsou to témata, které analyzuji ve svých třech vybraných grafických románech. Tato práce poukazuje na to, že tlak vrstevníků může být jak negativní tak i pozitivní jev, přesněji v komiksovém díle od Chmakové *Awkward*, vyzdvihuje to, že není nutné vnímat tlak okolí jen jako negativ, ale naopak i něco co tuto postavu zahrnuje do její skupiny přátel.

Dále tato práce poukazuje na to, že tlak od vrstevníků je úzce spojen s formováním jejich identity a že je často brán jako překážka kterou je nutno zdolat. Například v grafickém románu *Anin duch* od Brosgolové, tato práce analyzuje Anninu touhu po tom být začleněna do společnosti jako normální Američanka, ale následně si uvědomí že občas vybočit z řady není špatné, obzvláště po konfliktu s Emily. Také se v této části věnuji tématu rasové rozmanitosti v těchto vybraných pracích a přijetí svého kulturního dědictví i za cenu toho, že se ta postava stane odlišná od zbytku společnosti, tomuto tématu se tato práce věnuje nejvíce u grafického románu *Američan čínského původu* od Gene Luen Yanga.

Těmto třem komiksovým knihám jsem se věnovala metodou pozorného čtení, kde jsem analyzovala útržky vybrané literatury s tematikou nátlaku

vrstevníků a formování identity, tyto témata jsou velmi časté v románech pro mladé dospělé a jsou velmi velkou součástí životů studentů, proto je velmi důležité tyto témata analyzovat podrobněji. Jako první grafickou novelu jsem vybrala *Anin duch* od Very Brosgolové, kde se věnuji hlavní postavě Anně, která bojuje s touhou zapadnout mezi své vrstevníky i za cenu toho, že se zbaví své Ruské identity. Anna zprvu odmítá vše co by Jen trochu mohlo spolužákům připomenout že není Američanka, ale po překonání určitých překážek, přijme sama sebe i svou národnost. Dalším grafickým románem který jsem vybrala k analýze je dílo *Awkward* od Svetlany Chmakové, kde se zabývám mladší slečnou, která řeší problém zapadnutí do kolektivu. Věnuji se zde velmi tématice nátlaku vrstevníků, protože je tady tato tematika nejvíce patrná. Jako poslední grafický román jsem vybrala *Američan čínského původu* od Gene Luan Yanga, který podobně jako Anna řeší nejen svou národnost, ale i její vymazání a následně přijetí celé své identity jako celku.

V poslední části této práce, poukazuji na důležitost řešit tyto jevy u mladých dospělých, ať už v knihách nebo v grafických románech, protože je to bohužel něco s čím se potýká skoro každý student v pubertálním věku. Dále poukazuji na to, že žádná z mých vybraných postav nepodléhá tradičnímu konceptu genderové identity a tímto se autoři, i když pouze implicitně, vyjadřují k tradiční maskulinitě či k tradiční ženskosti.

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13. Annotation

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Title of the thesis: Youth Culture and Problems in Graphic Novels

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Year of defence: 2023

Key words: Graphic novels, Svetlana Chmakova, *Awkward*, Vera Brosgol, *Anya's Ghost*, Gene Luen Yang, *American Born Chinese*, peer pressure, identity, young adult literature

Abstract: This thesis examines the problems of adolescents, such as peer pressure and finding their identity in these selected graphic novels: *Awkward* by Svetlana Chmakova, *Anya's Ghost* by Vera Brosgol and *American Born Chinese* by Gene Luen Yang. My thesis discusses peer pressure and finding identity as a plot challenge specifically in graphic novels.

14. Anotace

Jméno a příjmení: Bc. Tereza Seidlová

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Název práce: Youth Culture and Problems in Graphic Novels

Vedoucí práce: Mgr. Elizabeth Allyn Woock, Ph.D.

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Klíčová slova: grafické romány, komiksy, Svetlana Chmakova, *Awkward*, Vera Brosgol, *Anin duch*, Gene Luen Yang, *Američan čínského původu*, tlak vrstevníků, identita, literatura pro mladé dospělé

Abstrakt: Tato diplomová práce se zabývá problémy mladých dospělých, jako například tlak vrstevníků a hledání jejich vlastní identity v těchto vybraných komiksech: *Awkward* od Svetlany Chmakové, *Anin duch* od Very Brosgololové a *Američan čínského původu* od Gena Luen Yanga. Moje práce rozebírá tlak vrstevníků a hledání své identity jako dějové výzvy konkrétně v grafických románech.