

The Rise of Diversity in Young Adult Fiction

BA Werkstuk Amerikanistiek

Hosna Rauofi

S1000519

[To be included by the lecturer on every front page of exams]

Integrity code for students for remote testing

Radboud University wants to contribute to a healthy and free world with equal chances for everyone. To that end, we are training students to become conscientious, involved, critical and self-aware academics. This involves an attitude of reliability and integrity.

At Radboud University, we assume that you began your programme of studies because you sincerely want to gain knowledge and acquire insight and skills. It is essential for the structure of your programme (and thus for your further career) that you possess the knowledge, insight and skills that are tested. We therefore expect that you will take this exam on your own without using resources unless this is permitted by the examiner.

We trust that, when you take this exam, you will observe the applicable laws and regulations, that you will not commit identity fraud, plagiarism or another form of fraud and that you will not fraudulently assist other students.

Declaration of fraud and plagiarism exams Faculty of Arts

By making and handing in this examination I declare to have made this examination myself and without any help from others.

I also declare that for this examination I have not made use of paper and/or digital sources, notes, recordings or any other information carriers (unless expressly permitted by the examiner in advance) and have not consulted other persons.

I also declare that, even after handing in the examination, I have not been in contact with others about the contents of the examination before the maximum set time period (including half an hour after the examination for special provisions) had expired.

By adhering to these guidelines, I adhere to the rules of scientific integrity that apply to students in academic education. I am aware that I am committing fraud if I violate these guidelines when taking this examination.

All remote examinations are fully subject to the Radboud University Fraud Regulations as included in the Education and Examination Regulations:

<https://www.ru.nl/letteren/stip/regels-richtlijnen/onderwijs-examenregelingen-oer-0/@959750/onderwijs-examenregeling-oer-education-and/>

All exams will be checked for plagiarism after submission. If the answers to substantial parts of submitted examinations correspond to an examination of another student, the board of examiners will investigate possible plagiarism.

Radboud University, Faculty of Arts, 2 June 2020

ENGELSE TAAL EN CULTUUR

Teacher who will receive this document: L. Visser-Maessen

Title of document: The rise of diversity in young adult fiction

Name of course: BA Werkstuk Amerikanistiek

Date of submission: 30/6/2021

Please read the Faculty's Declaration concerning Fraud and Plagiarism preceding this cover sheet. By signing this cover sheet, you also acknowledge your knowledge of and agreement with its terms.

The work submitted here is the sole responsibility of the undersigned, who has neither committed plagiarism nor colluded in its production.

Signed

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Hosna Rauofi', written in a cursive style.

Name of student: Hosna Rauofi

Student number: s1000519

Abstract

This thesis examines the rise of diversity in young adult fiction in the 21st century. Developments in the literature genre are analyzed to account for the embrace of diversity by readers, writers, and publishers. Muslim Iranian-American Tahereh Mafi's novel *A Very Large Expanse of Sea* is the case study in this research and serves as a representative of ways in which diversity can be approached in the 21st century. The novel's success has paved the way for other successful Muslim-oriented novels. The findings of this thesis indicate that the current genre trend of contemporary realism and the increased usage of social media have resulted in the rise of diversity in the young adult literary landscape.

Table of contents

Abstract	3
Chapter 1: Introduction	5
1.1 <i>Introduction</i>	5
1.2 <i>Social and academic relevance</i>	6
1.3 <i>Research questions and sub-questions</i>	13
1.4 <i>Methodology</i>	14
Chapter 2: The Tumultuous Beginnings of Diversity in the 20th Century	16
2.1. <i>Introduction</i>	16
2.2 <i>The literary landscape of young adult fiction</i>	16
2.3 <i>Twentieth Century Approaches to Diversity in American young adult fiction</i>	18
2.4 <i>Minorities increasing Diversity</i>	19
2.5 <i>Conclusion</i>	21
Chapter 3: Diversity embraced in the 21st century	23
3.1 <i>Introduction</i>	23
3.2 <i>Social Media and Diversity in the 21st Century Young Adult Fiction</i>	23
3.3 <i>The Game-changer: Social Media</i>	24
3.4 <i>Contemporary Realism and 21st Century Young Adult Fiction</i>	26
3.5 <i>Muslim Voices in 21st Century Young Adult Fiction</i>	27
3.6 <i>Mafi's Social Media and Contemporary Realism</i>	28
<i>Conclusion</i>	30
Chapter 4: Progressive Muslim representation in <i>A Very Large Expanse of Sea</i>	31
4.1 <i>Introduction</i>	31
4.2 <i>The Appeal to a Wide Readership</i>	32
4.3 <i>Tackling Muslim Stereotypes</i>	35
4.5 <i>Conclusion</i>	41
Chapter 5: Conclusion	42
Bibliography	43

Chapter 1: Introduction

1.1 Introduction

I knew I'd end up here. It's always been my hope to change the perception of Muslim women in the media. When I was a teenager, I only ever saw ladies in hijab on the news; Muslim women were depicted only at the forefront of controversy. We were allowed a voice – a platform – only if we used that voice to remain within the confines of religion or culture or what was considered our oppression. As a young person, I desperately longed to see a Muslim woman break free from those stereotypes. I wanted to see her recognized for more than her knowledge of politics and/or religion. Establishing myself as an author separate and apart from my identity as a Muslim woman was a feat I once never thought possible. Because even though I knew I would write this book, I never knew if it would find an audience.

- Mafi, *A Very Large Expanse of Sea*

This segment is the foreword of the young adult contemporary novel *A Very Large Expanse of Sea* by author Tahereh Mafi. This novel is one of the fifty Muslim-centered novels published in the United States in the year 2018, which may seem impressive, but less so when considering that 3,683 young adult novels were published overall that year (CCBC). These statistics are derived from the University of Wisconsin's Cooperative Children's Book Center (CCBC), which analyzes trends in children's publishing on an annual basis since 1985. The CCBC has discovered that "over 85% of all children's and young adult books published feature white characters – a statistic that has barely moved since the 1960s" (Thomas 112). While the young adult fiction genre (YA) has been gaining traction in its number of successful publications the past few decades as well as numerous popular young adult novel film adaptations such as *The Hunger Games* (2008), *Shadow and Bone* (2012), and *The Hate U Give* (2017), diversity in the genre is still clearly lacking.

While racial diversity has picked up in the last decade, progress has been slow. CCBC director Kathleen T. Horning shares that 26.8% of children's books were written by authors of color in 2020 and no more than 30% of the 3000 children's books published in 2020 included racially diverse characters or subjects. A barrier to achieving diversity is the myth within the publishing industry that literature about people of color does not sell (Fernando, AP News). Mafi's contemporary novel *A Very Large Expanse of Sea* (AVLEOS), however, not only augments the diversity rates but negates the myth entirely: the novel has been a commercial

success as a *New York Times bestseller*, will be adapted onto the cinema screen in the near future, and has gained recognition for its contribution in the literary community with its nomination for the 2018 National Book Award for Young People's Literature. The novel is a trailblazer which challenges verbose notions of literary commercial success and has helped pave the way for other diverse voices to be written and published. This thesis will therefore delve into the reasons as to why and how this particular novel with its Muslim teen protagonist in a post-9/11 society is both representative of but also impacted the development of the young adult fiction genre on the front of diversity representation.

1.2 Social and academic relevance

AVLEOS' post 9/11 setting makes sense when one observes the political atmosphere with regards to Muslims after the 9/11 attacks. According to a *Washington Post-ABC News* poll from 2006, 46% of Americans had a negative view of Islam. This number was much lower before the 9/11 attacks. The poll also showed the belief that Muslims were prone to violence (Baer & Glasgow 23). Although President George W. Bush stated "the enemy of America is not our many Muslim friends; it is not our many Arab friends. Our enemy is a radical network of terrorists, and every government that supports them," hate crimes, bias incidents, workplace discrimination, and airline discrimination targeting Muslim Americans increased tremendously (Alsultany 161). The FBI recorded a 1,600% rise in hate crimes against Muslims between 2000 and 2001. The Council on American-Islamic Relations (CAIR) registered hundreds of violent incidents involving Muslims and citizens mistaken to be Muslims. Hundreds of Muslims "reported discrimination at work, receiving hate mail, and physical assaults and their property, mosques, and community centers vandalized" (Alsultany 161). Airline passengers assumed to be Muslim were declined access to board flights. Discriminatory acts such as these persisted well during the first few years after 9/11 (Alsultany 161).

Professor of religion Todd H. Green argues that "terrorism is the most prominent theme in media stories of Islam. In the United States, stories of Muslim terrorism have dominated news coverage since 9/11 and reinforced the link between Islam and violence" (235). This particular link has been translated into Muslim terrorism with Muslims being depicted as the threatening 'Other' in popular TV shows and films such as *24* (2001–2010, 2014), *Homeland* (2011–2020), *The Kingdom* (2007), *Zero Dark Thirty* (2012), and *American Sniper* (2014). The Islamic faith of Muslims is incessantly linked with male supremacy, acts of terror, and Muslims being hostile alien intruders (Green, 246, 256). Lecturer Jack Shaheen,

deemed the “foremost expert on Hollywood’s portrayal of Muslims” estimated that, as of 2008, 1,150 films have misrepresented and vilified Muslims (Green 255). The most common stereotype has been of Muslims who are featured as loathsome terrorists prone to violence and religious extremism. The Muslim villain stereotype is easily perceived as realistic, especially after 9/11 because of the assumption that Muslims are the actual real-world enemies who attacked the United States on 9/11 and with whom the nation was at war with in Afghanistan and Iraq (Green 257).

The portrayals of Muslims as terrorists have led to publicized criticisms with the CAIR even accusing the show *24* of Muslim terrorist stereotyping. CAIR insists that “repeated association of acts of terrorism with Islam will only serve to increase anti-Muslim prejudice” (Green 249). The producers and writers of the show, however, disagreed and claimed that the show had “not singled out any ethnic or religious group for blame in creating the characters” (Green 249). This disagreement became notably interesting when the television network Fox began airing an announcement during commercial breaks which featured *24*’s lead actor, Kiefer Sutherland, warning viewers about the dangers of stereotyping Muslims as terrorists. The show *24* was not alone in the inability to fathom criticism. The director of *Zero Dark Thirty* argued that her film was ‘just a movie’ when it met with protests concerning its portrayal of torture as a reliable tool for accumulating information needed to track down Osama bin Laden and portraying any brown character immediately as a Muslim ‘bad guy’ intent on assassinating all Americans, while rarely showing a Muslim ‘good guy’. While these are certainly ‘just’ movies and TV shows, they do to a certain extent create the realities in which we reside. All forms of media, furthermore, construct an ‘illusion of authenticity’ by framing situations and people in such a specific manner that a constructed reality built on stereotypes is created. Ergo, when the media depicts Muslims as people who are prone to violence and terrorism, audiences can interpret these depictions as accurate portrayals and react accordingly (Green 264).

These portrayals, moreover, are simplified complex representations (SCR) that signify a recent standard of racial representations according to Evelyn Alsultany, scholar of contemporary Arab and Muslim American cultural politics and popular culture (162). She explains that SCR “are strategies used by television producers, writers, and directors to give the impression that the representations they are producing are complex, yet they do so in a simplified way [...] These representations often challenge or complicate earlier stereotypes yet contribute to a multicultural or postrace illusion” (Alsultany 162). These ‘positive’ representations occur in the form of a patriotic Muslim American, a Muslim devoted to

fighting terrorism in the United States, or an innocent Muslim American who has become the victim of post-9/11 hate crimes. These representations are included to counter the presence of a Muslim terrorist thus the representations merely function as sympathetic portrayals (Alsultany 163). Muslim identities seem to be inherently linked to terrorism and religious fanaticism and representations in other contexts remain strikingly unusual (Green 251).

An interesting and less common simplified complex representation is the Muslim woman who is a victim of oppression by the Islamic religion. Green shares “the stereotypical Muslim woman in the Western media is depicted as a victim of either violence or sexism (or both) at the hands of angry and misogynist Muslim men” (242). The Muslim woman lacks agency, a voice, and because of her victimhood, she is passive. Alsultany demonstrates the severity of this phenomenon by pointing to the news headlines after 9/11 that read ‘Lifting the Veil,’ ‘Unveiling Freedom,’ ‘Unveiled Threat,’ and ‘Beneath the Veil,’ (165). In these stories, journalists vowed to “take viewers ‘behind the veil’ to reveal a secret, hidden, mysterious world that would shed light on why Arabs/Muslims are terrorists” (165). Women’s oppression was framed as providing insight as to why terrorism occurred. The journalists presented evidence that supposedly testified to the oppressive nature of Islam and how women suffer under this oppressive ideology. The stories chronicled “Muslim women dying in ‘honor killings’; facing female genital mutilation; being beaten on the streets of Afghanistan and Saudi Arabia for violating the dress code; sentenced to death for adultery and [...] buried alive [...] or stoned to death; beaten for disobeying their husbands; [...] and being unable to get a divorce or child custody rights” (164). The media perceived Muslim women to have little more complexity or nuance than Muslim men.

Superficial, negative, and simplified representations can have an impact on Muslim American’s well-being. Assistant professor of psychology Mona M. Amer examined this impact among a population deemed doubly traumatized – first by the 9/11 attacks themselves and then by the blame they were burdened with. Amer had difficulty determining this impact because “prior to 9/11, there was virtually nothing published that related to the mental health of Muslims in the United States [...] After that, there has been a handful of studies” (Clay, American Psychological Association). Amer furthermore asserts that the way Muslim are treated in the media, none of that would be “tolerated or said about any other group,” and the constant influx of message about the Muslim community being full of “terrorists, ignorant people, oppressive people” has led to the occurrence of widespread depression, anxiety, and even PTSD among Muslims (Clay, American Psychological Association). Assistant professor Hisham Abu-Raiya adds that the coping methods of Muslim Americans play a crucial role in

the way they handle ongoing harassment and discrimination. Abu-Raiya published a paper in 2011 in which she had surveyed Muslims in the United States about incidents related to their Muslim identity. They reported that they had faced special airport security checks, anti-Muslim comments, and discrimination. It was specifically Muslim youth aged 12 to 18 who had been confronted with discrimination linked to their Muslim identity. Although Muslim youth have a tough time in the United States, they cope well through reaching out to each other and this has resulted in positive changes, including an appreciation of life and personal growth (Clay, American Psychological Association).

While Muslims are making progress, there have been obstacles obstructing their progress. President George W. Bush, for example, attempted to avoid a divided nation with his speech after 9/11 but failed to do so when examining the representation that the media appointed to Muslims. The Trump presidency era has brought forth attempts to divide the population, but Muslims' coping methods have consolidated immensely. Trump's Muslim ban, for example, a travel ban prohibiting entry into the United States for migrants and refugees from seven Muslim-majority countries, created a loud uproar. The ban was deemed specifically targeted at Muslims and this led to protests in which Muslims and non-Muslims advocated for unification and widespread sympathy for Muslims. Muslims have more agency now compared to a decade earlier. No longer wanting to be associated with SCR, Muslims are trying to become more visible in the media in a positive manner. Examples of this counteract are: two Muslim women were elected to Congress in 2018, Mahershala Ali won an Academy Award for best actor, and the brand Gap released an ad that featured a hijab-wearing female (Bailey, *Washington Post*). These representations are not linked to terrorism nor religious fanaticism.

While YA fiction is enjoying a successful era in sales and is receiving film adaptation offers of its titles, its focus has only shifted gradually the past two decades towards diversity in characters and themes. The genre has existed for roughly six decades now and has had various trends in its stories with only now finding the right time to aim for diversity. While positive representation of Muslims in the media is increasing, it is utterly scarce in YA fiction. Writer Sheba Karim advocates for positive Muslim representation, especially in young adult literature since the Muslim youth of today does not know pre-9/11 United States. Karim accordingly sums up the importance of Muslim representation in young adult literature for this reason: "YA books with Muslim characters not only allow young Muslims to see their own stories reflected in positive and nuanced ways, but also enable non-Muslim readers to become familiar with the perceived 'other'. In novels, Muslim characters are given the space

to be more than ‘just’ Muslim, to be whole, to be contradictory, to be complicated, to be *teenagers*” (Karim, *HarperStacks*).

The YA genre in the 20th century struggled with establishing itself as a serious literature genre. The ‘young adult fiction’ label was assumed to be used for marketing purposes to attract teenagers, who were only introduced as a population demographic in 1904 by the American psychologist G. Stanley Hall (Cart 4). Until 1900, American society had only 2 categories of citizens, namely adults and children. Hall introduced the term adolescence referring to individuals from twelve to eighteen years old (Cart 5). It took another four decades for teenagers, adolescents, or young adults to be regarded as a distinct group who could have a separate category of literature specifically targeted at them. Novels meant for this group began to emerge gradually with adventure stories for boys and wholesome domestic stories for girls. Literary scholar Michael Cart remarks that the novels published at the time had one thing in common: “An astonishing innocence. Almost none of them smokes or drinks; drugs are never mentioned; none of the students is gay or lesbian or a gang member. None is emotionally troubled or the victim of abuse” (15, 16). The topic of sex, juvenile delinquency, and the presence of gangs were absent in this fiction as well while these topics were very much present in the lives of teenagers. While the 1950s saw a continuation of these innocent novels, critics like Richard S. Alm described them as “slick, patterned rather inconsequential stories written to capitalize on a rapidly expanding market,”; Frank G. Jennings even bluntly argued that “the stuff of adolescent literature, for the most part, is mealy-mouthed, gutless, and pointless” (Cart 22). Since the literature was deemed superficial and merely a commercial trick, YA fiction failed to be taken seriously.

According to English Professor Chris Crowe, the genre truly commenced with the coming-of-age novel *The Outsiders* by S.E. Hinton (121), which was a novel about teenagers written by a teenager. Deemed a controversial book at the time of its publication in 1967 because of its portrayal of youth gang violence, smoking and drinking, and vulgar language, it ranked #38 even on the American Library Association’s Top 100 Most Frequently Challenged Books of 1990-1999, but became banned in several schools and libraries (Fallon, *Huffpost*). Yet Hinton’s novel became a success because of its relatability as realistic elements of teenagers’ lives had been incorporated in the novel and that was, in the words of Cart, “groundbreaking and consistent with the demands of the realistic novel” (27). Young adult novelist Richard Peck named Hinton “the mother of us all” and that assessment has been confirmed with Hinton’s work being recognized as a lifetime achievement in young adult books. (Cart 27). A little over 50 years after its publication now, the book has stood the test of

time and has become a well-discussed piece of literature in high school English classes. After Hinton, the genre expanded in its themes and topics that the novels covered. From mental illness to disability to addiction to abortion to even one of the most strictest taboo topics: homosexuality, a transition from innocent, sweet literature had occurred to the “unpleasant realities of American adolescent life” (Cart 29). While the genre was diversifying on this front, novels about non-white people and particularly Muslims did not emerge anytime soon.

While 9/11 prompted films and shows including Muslims in their stories, young adult literature took a different course, namely that of escapism. This escapist desire resulted in the astonishing success of the fantasy subgenre. J.K. Rowling’s *Harry Potter* series charted the top of the subgenre and no other series or novel has been able to amount to the same success. Cart cites that an important element of series’ success is that Rowling permits the characters to grow up with the readership throughout the series (97). The first three titles are regarded as children’s literature, each volume thereafter is regarded young adult because of its sophisticated and darker subject matter (Cart 97). Particularly the fourth book in the series, *The Goblet of Fire*, was an incredible success as it fulfilled the desire of the youth for fiction to cope with the new reality shaped by 9/11. The United States and its citizens felt vulnerable after the attacks and that feeling is present in the novel as well. The novel’s antagonist Voldemort regains his power and threatens the lives of all wizards. This can be paralleled with Al-Qaeda threatening the United States. The youth could only occupy a passive role and watch their government figure out the looming threat of terrorism. Thus, 9/11 was an event that not only shaped the American political atmosphere but also the literary climate (Gray 14). The film adaptations were successful and this literary and cinematic success was picked up by the publishing industry. The reputation of YA fiction took a dignified form with publishing houses churning out hundreds of novels annually (Cart 98). With an established footing in literature, the genre seems to focus now on the literature it is producing without the duty to prove its quality.

The early reputation of the genre has impacted the attention it has received from the academic field, which has been meager to the present day. Scholar Cindy Lou Daniels adds young adult literature is still to a certain extent considered merely “a secondary category of childlike storytelling” which does not “offer enough substance to be included within the traditional literary canon” and is, therefore “unworthy of serious literary evaluation” (78). Despite this perception, crucial research has been conducted. Educator-writer Nancy Larrick brought national attention to the need for multicultural literature in her influential and controversial landmark article “The All-White World of Children’s Books” in 1965. Larrick

surveyed 5,206 books for young readers published between 1962 and 1964 and discovered that only 6.7% included one or more Black characters, and less than 1 percent included contemporary African Americans, meaning Black characters without slavery ties. And 60 percent of the 6.7 percent were “either historical fiction or were set outside the United States” (Hughes-Hassel 212). Larrick noted that at the time 6 million nonwhite children were reading stories that omitted them entirely or barely mentioned them at all. Another 39 million white children were reading stories in which only they seemed to matter.

In recent years assistant Professor S.R. Toliver has covered Black female diversity in YA fiction. Her article “Eliminating Extermination, Fostering Existence: Diverse Dystopian Fiction and Female Adolescent Identity” analyses how themes of universal adolescent identity are covered in young adult novels where the protagonists are young women of color. Young adult novels provide narratives that break the confines created for women of color by placing them in lead roles. Toliver emphasizes the importance of YA fiction since it “depicts young girls of color as people who find community, critique society, become leaders, sustain agency, love unconditionally, and grow steadily” (192). Toliver adds that if young women of color do not recognize themselves in literature, their self-image can be impacted negatively and they can feel as if they are devalued in society (188).

Professor Sandra Hughes-Hassell focuses on diverse youth literature and covers the cultural relevance of it in her paper “Multicultural Young Adult Literature as a Form of Counter-Storytelling”. The paper shares that the current literary landscape does not accurately reflect the world for American children. Hughes-Hassell claims that culturally relevant literature helps teenagers identify with their own culture and “engenders an appreciation for the diversity that occurs both within and across racial and cultural groups” (214). Hughes-Hassell most important argument is that diverse literature acts as counter-storytelling which is a method of sharing those stories of people whose experiences are often overlooked, such as people of color. Counter-stories provide members of marginalized groups a voice and educate readers of the majority group about the struggles and inequalities that others face and deal with. Professor Ebony Thomas adds that a lack of diversity can lead to an imagination gap. Thomas proclaims: “When children grow up without seeing diverse images in the mirrors, windows, and doors of children’s literature (Bishop, 1990), it limits them to single stories about the world around them (Adichie, 2009) and ultimately affects the development of their imaginations” (Thomas 112). Thomas advocates an increase in diverse literature so that children of color can be liberated from stereotypes and portrayed in a humanizing manner (113).

Author Michael Cart has covered the evolution of YA fiction from its beginning to the end of the 2000s in his book *Young adult literature: from romance to realism*. His work is crucial to get a more in depth perspective of the literary genre but it is also limited. While Cart does cover diverse titles, his work is limited as it only covers books published until 2010. The past decade has seen a rise in diverse literature. What is clearly lacking in academic research is how YA fiction is currently faring, how diversity is increasing, and what impact that leaves on the readers. Daniels calls for scholars to conduct a critical analysis of young adult literature as “there is plenty of opportunity for original scholarship” (79).

The diversity debate in the media and in literature corresponds to a larger overall pattern in American society whereby people from minority communities desire and demand more political and cultural representation. This trend began under the Obama administration and has been intensified by the rise of Black Lives Matter. This has further accelerated since the racism detected under the Trump administration. This trend has become more clearly visible in roughly the past decade with occurrences of #Oscarssowhite when all acting nominations were given to white actors and the rise of more politicians at the local and national level with a racial background. This means that what is happening now within the young adult fiction genre is not a standalone movement but it is a reflection of a larger tendency in society to give minority voices visibility on their terms in a political and cultural context.

1.3 Research questions and sub-questions

This thesis will contribute to the academic debate on how diversity in literature is increasing in the 21st century and which socio-historical circumstances have propelled this development within the young adult fiction genre. This thesis will provide an understanding of the position of diverse voices in the US today and in order to do so the following research question will be applied: “To what extent can *A Very Large Expanse of Sea* be seen as representative of 21st-century approaches to diversity in the young adult fiction genre?”. To be able to answer this question, the sub-question “How was diversity approached in the 20th century in the young adult fiction genre?” will be answered in chapter two and “What developments within the young adult fiction genre in the 21st century have propelled its embrace of diversity, especially Muslim voices?” will be answered in chapter three. It is important to delve into the past to understand the present context which is still evolving. Diverse literature that was published in the 20th century will be analyzed in order to get a good understanding of the current changes in the approach to diversity. This has, after all, enabled *AVLEOS* to thrive as a successful diverse piece of literature.

1.4 Methodology

Interdisciplinary research, existing of American Studies approaches and a literary analysis of *A Very Large Expanse of Sea*, will be conducted in order to provide answers to the research question. The socio-historical circumstances will be highlighted and the novel's publishing strategy, characters, themes, and plot will be analyzed thoroughly to account for the significant role the novel plays in the current diverse literary landscape.

Despite several YA novels increasingly using diverse voices, *AVLEOS* was chosen as a case study because of its commercial success, but also because of its content and the author's objectives and outspokenness about them. The author of *AVLEOS* is Tahereh Mafi, a Muslim Iranian-American young adult fiction writer from Connecticut. She established herself in the industry with her best-selling dystopian *Shatter Me* series (2011). Mafi was set on first establishing herself as a versatile author first before she decided to publish her Muslim protagonist-centered young adult novel *AVLEOS*. She switched to middle-grade fantasy after excelling in the dystopian young adult fiction subgenre, and her latest venture was into contemporary fiction with *AVLEOS*. Mafi revealed in *Teen Vogue* that she had had the idea of the novel for a long time but hesitated in writing and publishing the story due to the fear of being boxed as a Muslim writer. "You tell a story about a Muslim experience or any specific marginalized experience and people tend to think that's all you are, when oftentimes experiences have nothing to do with their race or religion and that we are so much more than just our grief. I didn't want to be limited as an author as someone who could just tell that one story" (Shippee, *Teen Vogue*). Mafi's plan to establish herself as an adept writer first has been beneficial to her career. Her *Shatter Me* series has been charting the *New York Times* bestselling list and the film rights of the series have been sold as well. An established career enabled the possibility to write a story that adds to a more racially diverse literary landscape.

AVLEOS' main protagonist is the sixteen-year-old Shirin, a Muslim teen who faces judgment and discrimination as she visibly wears her religion through her hijab. Shirin provides the reader a glimpse into what it is like to be a Muslim teen in post-9/11 America. From hateful slurs to being beaten up, Shirin is exhausted of being stereotyped. She stands her ground for her Muslim identity but refuses to be defined by only her faith and that makes Shirin a strong female of color.

Therefore, the case study analysis of *AVLEOS* will combine the text itself, the author's point of view, and the socio-historical context in which it emerged and was marketed to best

present a picture of how it is representative of and impacted the diverse literary landscape of young adult fiction.

Chapter 2: The Tumultuous Beginnings of Diversity in the 20th Century

2.1. Introduction

Why are they always white? This was the question that a five-year-old African American girl who was looking at a picture asked Nancy Larrick. Surprised by the question Larrick initiated her research into how diverse children's literature was in the 1960s and the result was her landmark article 'The All-White World of Children's Books' published in 1965. To answer this chapter's research question "How was diversity approached in young adult fiction in the 20th century?," the literary landscape of young adult fiction until the 1960s (section 2.2), the beginnings of diversity from the 1960s onwards (section 2.3) and the role of minorities (section 2.4) will be analyzed.

2.2 The literary landscape of young adult fiction

Since young adults were a newly distinguished population group in society, fiction catered to this demographic did not appear until the rise of youth cultures in the 20th century. In 1910 only 15% of American youths attended high school. This number increased to 50% by 1930 and peaked at 75% by 1939. This was all due to the 1930s Great Depression which drove young people out of the workforce and into the classroom. Being in daily company in classrooms in large numbers resulted in the emergence of youth cultures that centered on high school social life and included the courtship rituals of dances and dating (Cart 1). The magazine Scholastic was quick to focus on the youth and introduced the column "Boy Dates Girl" written by Margaret L. Hauser under the pseudonym Gay Head. The youth was counseled in this column on pressing matters such as how to make a proper introduction and whether to wait for a boy to open the car door (Cart 6). These columns, which lay the groundwork for future YA romance fiction, were very much male-oriented the intended readers were girls.

Publishers noticed the success of Scholastic and recognized teenagers as a distinct demographic to which a distinct type of literature could be catered. An insurgence of books specifically aimed at white middle-class teenagers emerged with Maureen Daly's *Seventeenth Summer* (1942) leading the romance trend successfully. Her novel was published and marketed as YA fiction because of its romantic juvenile tone, even though she had intended it for adults (Cart 11). These romantic novels were light-hearted with no mention of sex, alcohol, and drugs. The majority of the characters were white and the romantic relationships

were predominantly heteronormative. These novels were geared towards girls while the subgenre science fiction would target boys (Cart 17).

The 1950s demonstrated the emergence of American consumerism prompted by America's goods manufacturing industry which resulted in an economic growth that impacted the youth subcultures and its literature (Bodnar 21). The increase in affluence meant more time for leisure and more money for the youth to spend. Publishers exploited these circumstances by churning out rebellious works such as *The Catcher in the Rye* (1951) by J.D. Salinger which explicitly covered sex, alcohol, smoking, vulgar language and deliberately emphasized the youth's loss of innocence. These books, moreover, centered around characters who were immensely dissatisfied with modern life and resisted conforming to society (Gray 556). This was in stark contrast with the innocent romance novels of the 1940s.

The 1960s youth literature saw an interesting transition between children's literature and adult literature due to the political atmosphere at the time. The youth joined protests of the Civil Rights movement advocating for African American rights and protests against the Vietnam war advocating for its end as it was deemed a useless war (Gray 560). Black studies scholar V.P. Franklin recalls "it was children and young people who boldly led the way in many civil rights campaigns, who energized the movement at strategic moments. They asserted themselves, making it clear once and for all that they were fully aware of the racial discrimination and its adverse effects on them" (668). Literary scholar Cart recalls that the political environment impacted the literary landscape as "YA literature was in a hectic period of transition from being a literature that had traditionally offered a head-in-the-sand approach to one that offered a more clear-eyed and unflinching look at the often unpleasant realities of American adolescent life" (29). Topics that were usually unheard of such as addiction, teen pregnancy, and sexually transmitted diseases were suddenly addressed explicitly. While these novels were innovative at first, they became so-called recycled "problem novels" in the late 60s and 70s which were "very strongly subject-oriented with the interest primarily residing in the topic rather than the telling. The topics – all adult oriented – sound like chapter titles from a textbook [...]: divorce, drugs, [...] desertion and death" (Cart 32).

2.3 Twentieth Century Approaches to Diversity in American young adult fiction

A significant change was triggered in literature when Nancy Larrick published her article exposing how diverse literature for Black people was practically absent in children's literature. Cart sums up the change accordingly: "In the wake of Larrick's seminal article, of the burgeoning civil rights movement, and of such long-overdue legislation as the Voting Rights Act of 1965, the world of American blacks as depicted in literature began changing dramatically" (44). Within five years a Black literary renaissance was underway with the writers Walter Dean Myers, Virginia Hamilton, Mildred Taylor, Julius Lester, Rosa Guy, and Alice Childress providing much-needed diversity to the literary landscape.

Walter Dean Myers specifically began contributing to the literary landscape after he read Larrick's article and became one of the most prolific writers of books for young readers featuring Black characters. Myers was dissatisfied with the literature featuring Black people in the 1940s and 1950s: "Much was semi-racist—I remember some of the Bobbsey Twins books; there was an occasional black person, but the only depiction was slaves" (Jen Doll, *The Atlantic*). The lack of representation affected his self-worth and perception. "What happened as a result, in retrospect, was that I devalued my own experiences. I decided at about 14 I would stop being Negro—that was the phrase then. Books transmit values, and if you don't find your life in books, bingo, you have to reach the conclusion that you are less valuable. That affected me" (Doll, *The Atlantic*). Myers has tackled the topics of poverty, drugs, violence, and guns to portray the real world that young people, specifically African American youth, inhabit. Because of his efforts, he has been a five-time recipient of the Coretta Scott King Award, an award created to recognize outstanding works written by Black authors and to foster racial diversity (Cart, 44, 136). His impact in the literary field has been tangible in real life. Myers recalls an incident when an eight-year-old girl came up to him praising his picture book featuring a dog who plays the blues. "I said, 'You like the blues?' She said no. I said, 'You like dogs?' She said no. I said, 'What did you like?' She said, it looks like me" (Doll, *The Atlantic*). An author who did not have much representation himself growing up attempted to fill that gap for the younger generation.

While Larrick's article highlighted the diversity gap in literature and initiated change, incorporating diversity in literature was challenging due to the 1960s social revolutions and became a learning curve for white and non-white writers who intended well. Judy Blume was an American writer who contributed immensely to the genre of young adult fiction with her works that covered topics such as sexuality, body image, bullying, and family conflict. Blume, just like Hinton, broke away from the innocent type of young adult novels. She included Black

characters in her work as well to offer diversity, but her approach contained flaws. Blume's book *Iggie's House* (1970) is a fitting example in which a Black family moves into the house neighboring that of the white main character Winnie's. The Black character's race is the plot of the novel as evidenced in the beginning already: "Winnie shook her head impatiently. 'Mom, never mind about the mud. I saw them, Mom. I saw the new people. And guess what Mom? They're Negro! All of them. The kids and the parents. The whole family's Negro!'" (Doll, *The Atlantic*). Blume has since then acknowledged that her work portrayed Black people as the 'other' and provided an explanation for her well-intended but misrepresenting work: "The late sixties was a turbulent time in America. Racial tensions were high, especially following the assassination of Martin Luther King. The ongoing fight for racial equality affected all of us, one way or another. At the time, I was almost as naive as Winnie is in this book, wanting to make the world a better place, but not knowing how" (Doll, *The Atlantic*).

Black author Coe Booth addresses the satisfaction in being represented as well as the discontent in the manner of representation for Black people. Booth recalls that she disliked reading until she discovered Judy Blume: "Those made me into a reader [...] because the books we were forced to read that had black people in them, I didn't relate to them. As a little black girl growing up in the Bronx, I had no connection to books about sharecroppers or those books that took place in the '50s. I discovered Judy Blume. In those books, the perspective was always from the white character; the black character was the 'other.' In the '70s and '80s, the blackness of the person *was* the story" (Doll, *The Atlantic*). Booth, like Myers, opted to add diversity herself and published *Tyrell* (2006), a young adult novel featuring an African-American who grows up in a homeless shelter.

2.4 Minorities increasing Diversity

Diversity had a rough start in the late sixties, but the literary landscape became more diverse in the 1980s particularly because of a massive influx of immigrants from Asia and the West Indies. The immigrant population in 1940 had, in contrast, mainly hailed from Europe (Cart 42). Publishers did take their time to reflect the population's diversity in the young adult literary field. Specifically, it would take "nearly a decade and a half – from 1965 to 1980 – for [...] a new body of literature, called multicultural, that would give faces to these new Americans" (Cart 42). This new multicultural environment could enable literature to "break down borders" between the immigrants and the Americans (Cart 42). American publisher Margaret K. McElderry was the first who dared to publish a children's book from a German writer. McElderry deemed it of immense importance to "find writers among the new wave of

immigrants, authors who can portray creatively what it is like to adjust to life in the U.S., what their own experiences have been, written in either fictionalized form or as expository nonfiction” (Cart 43). Such authors had already emerged in adult literature, for example Sandra Cisneros, Amy Tan, Bharati Mukherjee, and Gita Mehta. These established authors would be the ones to dive into young adult fiction and pave the way for others.

Despite these efforts, publishers were hesitant to publish books for and about youth from other cultures. The assumption was that American teenagers had little interest in other cultures and perspectives. McElderry was aware of this mindset in 1994: “Our young readers some while ago seemed to lose interest in other countries, other peoples, other ways, tending instead to concentrate on themselves and their peers and their life-styles” (Cart 46). This assumption meant that even if publishers were willing to publish diverse stories, the readership would not be interested.

Certain minorities, such as Chinese Americans, Japanese Americans, Latinos, and Native Americans, did find literary representation in the 1980s. The existence of diversity, albeit scarce in the number of publications, was significant with minority writers pursuing to publish their literary work. Laurence Yep, a second-generation Chinese American, wrote about his own experience of growing up as an outsider between cultures. Throughout the seventies and eighties, he incorporated this experience in his novels *Child of the Owl* (1977), *Sea Glass* (1979), *The Serpent’s Children* (1984), and *Mountain Light* (1985) (Cart 44). Yep published in 1993 the anthology *American Dragons* which featured short works by twenty-five contemporary Asian American authors. Yep prioritized the diversity of Asian cultures in the United States as the term Asian American was too broad since it included many countries and he wished to offer as much diversity as possible to minority teenagers (Cart 45).

While providing diversity to a certain minority group can increase the diversity rate, it does limit minority writers to a certain extent. Author Sherman Alexie, for example, writes about his own experiences as a Native American to provide diversity for Native American readers. His best-known works are *Reservation Blues* (1995), *Indian Killer* (1996), and *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-time Indian* (2007). The latter novel is even deemed one of the greatest young adult works. While Alexie’s success as a Native American writer has contributed immensely to diversity in American youth literature, he has “come to represent the whole field” (Doll, *The Atlantic*). This latter part is troublesome for unknown writers who wish to write about Native Americans as well but are unable to become published because there is already one successful author on that front and that is deemed sufficient by publishers. Publishers do not feel the need to publish other minority writers. This limits a writer like

Alexie as well because he gets to deal with the unfair expectation that his works speak for all Native Americans (Doll, *The Atlantic*). Booth adds that this expectation is not set for white writers and confronts the issue directly with the question “why do books by authors of color have to have that much more responsibility? It’s just supposed to be a book” (Doll, *The Atlantic*).

Progress in diversifying the young adult fiction genre has been slow but tangible. The University of Wisconsin’s Cooperative Children’s Book Center (CCBC) registered that while only 18 out of 2,500 books published in 1982 were by non-white writers, this number rose to 317 out of 5,000 young adult novels in 1999. Those 317 books did not make up even 10% of the total but the difference between 1985 and 1999 seemed promising. Because of this increase, the CCBC could henceforth make a distinction between work written by and about a certain race.

Due to population increases in the 1980s and 1990s, particularly youngsters, publishers began to invest more in young adult fiction. Before, they believed such books, particularly those written by or featuring diverse voices, generated too little profit (Cart 126). The sales, however, could increase because of the growing youth population. In the 1990s 80% of the population growth consisted of racial and ethnic minorities, reaching America’s minority populations to 87 million. This was 43% more than in 1990 and 90% more than in 1980 (Cart 123). The 2000 census permitted respondents to self-identify as of more than one race. The result was a total of 6.8 million respondents identifying as of more than one race. 42% of these respondents were under the age of eighteen (Cart 124). The mixed-race population reached 7.3 million in 2008 and that number will continue to grow. Minorities are estimated to constitute 54 percent of the population by 2050. “Hispanics, numbering 133 million, will account for 30 percent. The Asian population, growing from 16 million in 2009 to 41 million in 2050, will account for another 9 percent, and blacks will grow in number from 41 million to 66 million and from 13 percent to 15 percent of the population” (Cart 125). These numbers do seem to be becoming reality and it is these numbers that are changing the relationship between publisher and reader as publishers will surely have to adjust their strategies and the number of publications based on the growth of the minority population.

2.5 Conclusion

This chapter set out to answer how diversity was approached in young adult fiction in the 20th century. Publishers did not regard teenagers as a viable target audience for a long time because the population was divided by only adults and children. This changed after the

emergence of the 1950s youth culture, but even then publishers catered solely to the white middle-class youth. Publishers preferred to release novels with white characters and heteronormative relationships to secure the novels' success. Diversity was approached cautiously only after Larrick's article. Novels with diverse characters in the late 1960s and 1970s were well-intentioned but often contained serious misrepresentation. Writers had a difficult time navigating the correct manner of positive representation. Their efforts were, nonetheless, appreciated and encouraged the youth to read. The influx of immigrants in the 1980s provided diversity as well. The success of these novels prompted minority writers to contribute to the literary scene as well. Their success, unfortunately, did come with the expectation of a few minority writers representing an entire race with their work. But the literary landscape was in transition. Scholar Cart fittingly says: "The world is changing apace – for good or for ill. But change has always visited our lives whether or not we're ready. And it remains literature that can help us cope with this sometimes-vexing and often-perplexing fact of life" (129).

Chapter 3: Diversity embraced in the 21st century

3.1 Introduction

As explained in the introduction chapter, 21st-century socio-historic circumstances, such as the negative portrayal of Muslims in the media due to 9/11 and the subsequent maltreatment of Muslims in American society, the Trump presidency, and the unification of Muslims and non-Muslims during acts of division, have created an environment in which calls for diversity were received more favorably. But developments within the young adult genre that occurred simultaneously enhanced these calls. To answer the research question “What developments within the young adult fiction genre in the 21st century have propelled its embrace of diversity, especially Muslim voices?” the influence of social media (section 3.3) and the revival of contemporary realism (section 3.4) on the embrace of diversity will be analyzed in this chapter. In section 3.5. and 3.6 this will be discussed specifically in relation to Mafi and other Muslim young adult fiction authors.

3.2 Social Media and Diversity in the 21st Century Young Adult Fiction

Diversity was not deemed an important element in the publishing industry until a 2014 book event in the United States caused an uproar over its lack of diversity. In March 2014 the reader’s convention BookCon announced its lineup of children’s authors, including John Green, Rick Riordan, Jeff Kinney, and James Patterson. The lineup of thirty writers consisted of only white male authors. In response to the lack of diversity in the panel, a group of 22 writers, publishers, and bloggers launched the campaign ‘We Need Diverse Books’. The campaign urged people of all ages to tweet with the hashtag #WeNeedDiverseBooks and explain the importance of diverse books to them as readers. Thousands of personal messages, sometimes accompanied with pictures, expressing the significance of diversity began pouring in (Lynn Neary, *NPR*). Ellen Oh, one of the campaign’s co-founders knew that “anger about the lack of diversity in publishing had been brewing for a long time,” but BookCon’s guest list announcement struck a nerve (Lynn Neary, *NPR*). Other writers of colors, such as Grace Lin, Jacqueline Woodson, and Daniel José Older demonstrated support. White YA fiction writers John Green, Gayle Forman, Jodi Picoult backed the campaign as well (Claire Kirch, *Publishers Weekly*). BookCon quickly corrected its lack of diversity by approaching the founders of the campaign. The result was the panel “The World Agrees: We Need Diverse Books” with a line-up of solely writers of color. A slideshow of images from the campaign highlighted the personal notes and pictures that readers had sent (Lynn Neary, *NPR*).

Diversity was not a focal point in YA fiction in the 20th century. In the 21st century, however, it demands the spotlight. The BookCon controversy presented a sign for the YA publishing houses to start taking diversity seriously as they now knew for certain that there were readers who craved diversity in literature. Multicultural children's publisher Lee & Low supported the campaign with the message “#WeNeedDiverseBooks because they SELL (no hiding behind that myth anymore!)”, accompanied by a photo of its staff holding a selection of titles (Kirch, *Publishers Weekly*). Lee & Low released data in 2016 which showed that more than 25% of all YA fiction books published in 2016 included characters of color. In 2013 this number was just 10% (Ehrlich, *Lee & Low Books*). While the increase cannot be directly linked to the BookCon incident, it is certainly remarkable. Because of this increase and the response that the campaign received, co-founder Oh was immensely pleased with the change and the impact the campaign had made. Oh then transformed We Need Diverse Books into a non-profit organization that advocates for diversity in literature. While driven in her motive to increase diversity in literature, which she hopes soon will no longer be necessary: "The part where we have to keep [...] reminding people about why it's good to read diversely and why it's good to introduce children to diversity — that part of it, I hope eventually it becomes the norm and we don't have to do that anymore" (Lynn Neary, *NPR*).

3.3 The Game-changer: Social Media

We Need Diverse Books demonstrated the needs and wants of writers and readers in the 21st century. Yet the campaign's dependence on social media showed that the internet was the true game-changer in the fight for more diversity in the publishing industry (Jarema, *Bustle*). Literary scholar Theodora Hawlin argued that the internet's capacity to facilitate engagement and interaction increases “audience diversity, expands readership, and opens new avenues for books, authors, and readers” (164).

Social media after all provides a "mouthpiece" for both authors and readers (Hawlin 163). Writers no longer publish their work and remain unknown to their readership. This has transformed the role of an author drastically. Authors can accumulate a following on a certain platform and interact directly with their followers who are oftentimes their readers. Publishing houses have noticed this new dynamic as well and are actively present on social media with their accounts to engage with the readers of their authors. These social media platforms are spaces that the readership of the novels often visit. If a newly released book receives a great deal of attention from Goodreads users, it has the potential to become a bestseller (Vos, *Diggit Magazine*). Youtube, with over a billion users, targets mainly adolescents and young

adults (Albrecht 15). The platform's reach has even led to the creation of a community called Booktube with videos related to literature. From reviews to discussions to book-related cross-referential games the platform offers viewers a great variety of entertainment-related to literature (Albrecht 18). Successful YA fiction writers John Green, Leigh Bardugo, Jay Asher, Sarah J. Maas have a massive following on the platforms Instagram, Twitter, and/or Youtube. Their platforms have allowed them to directly interact with their readers which in turn has had an impact on their writing. Tahereh Mafi explained in a 2014 Youtube interview that readers now feel entitled to inform authors of their opinions on social media and demand rectifications for things they disliked. This direct relationship between author and reader can be beneficial for the author who can gather a loyal fan base which can lead to a guaranteed success for their future works (Lola Vos, DiggIt Magazine). As Mafi put it: "We are expected to be in communication, in direct contact with the people who read our books which is kind of amazing and incredible" (Mike Goetzman, LA Review of Books).

This modern setting can, however, result in readers vocalizing their discontent as well. For example, successful YA fiction author John Green has one million followers on Twitter and has been active on the platform Tumblr since the beginning of his writing career. In addition, Green has three million followers on his Youtube channel which he shares with his brother. Green discusses his works, his personal life and covers the works of other writers as well on these platforms. Green is mostly famous for his novels *Looking for Alaska* (2005), *An Abundance of Katherines* (2006), *Paper Towns* (2008), and *The Fault in Our Stars* (2012). These novels revolve around teen protagonists who are exploring life and their identity. His novels are relatable for teenagers as they cover the topics of depression, friendship, sex, loss, and love. Social media has accordingly had a huge role in popularizing his work, but also became the tool for backlash. Readers for instance condemned Green for having all of his novels revolve around white boys infatuated with white girls. Occasionally these white boys have a Black best friend "who rarely serves as more than a plot device" (Haley Rogers, *The Odyssey Online*). Green has listened to these criticisms and has become aware that his works and the publishing industry severely lack diversity. Admitting "I do not know the solution to this problem – this is a big, complicated problem!" Green chose to become an ally in the discussion (Danielle Blinks, *Kill Your Darlings*). In 2014, after the BookCon incident, Green posted a video titled "Why We Need Diverse Books," declaring that he supports the production and promotion of diverse literature to demonstrate an accurate reflection of our diverse world.

3.4 Contemporary Realism and 21st Century Young Adult Fiction

Green's stance on this matter is crucial because he is considered a leading figure in the YA fiction genre due to his embrace of contemporary realism, starting with his 2005 novel *Looking for Alaska*. As young adult expert Michael Cart remarked: "trends come and trends go and the newest trend on the block here in the twenty-teens is a welcome return to YA's roots, the novel of contemporary realism. This is thanks in large part to a single author, the teen whisperer, John Green" (9). Green's novel became the fifth winner of the Michael L. Printz Award, which is the literary award for best young adult novel based on literary merit (Cart 6). This win declared loud and clear that contemporary realism was the genre to invest in.

Especially writers of colors slowly began publishing their contemporary realist novels covering crucial issues like racism, xenophobia, sexual assault, homophobia, and mental illness (Jarema, *Bustle*). Some outstanding titles are *Aristotle and Dante Discover the Secrets of the Universe* (2012) by Benjamin Alire Sáenz, which focuses on two Mexican-American teenagers exploring their sexuality; *The Sun is also a Star* (2016) by Nicola Yoon, which follows a Korean-American boy falling in love with a Jamaican-born girl who is facing deportation, and *The Hate U Give* (2017) by Angie Thomas with an African American main protagonist who is confronted with violence and racism. All of these novels provided diversity to the literary landscape of YA fiction. The success of these novels demonstrated that readers truly desired these diverse stories.

Angie Thomas's novel was especially well received. The novel follows the 16-year old African American teenager Starr Carter who witnesses the fatal shooting of her innocent friend Khalil at the hands of a white police officer. The novel touches upon contemporary topics which are sensitive and contentious in the United States: race, (white) privilege, and police brutality aimed at African Americans. The novel was deemed a "publishing miracle" for debuting at number one on *The New York Times* best-seller list where it held its position for 50 weeks (Hirsch, *The Guardian*). It was adapted into a commercially successful film as well. An important fact to note with this novel is that it was published by We Need Diverse Books. Thomas had previously been rejected 60 times until she contacted We Need Diverse Books. The organization allowed her to submit her work for the inaugural awards and chose Thomas as the winner (Hirsch, *The Guardian*).

3.5 Muslim Voices in 21st Century Young Adult Fiction

The return of the contemporary realist trend and its success for writers of color was picked up by Muslim writers as well. *Does My Head Look Big In This?* (2005) by Randa Abdel-Fattah, *She Wore Red Trainers* (2014) by Na'ima B. Roberts, and *Sofia Khan is Not Obligated* (2015) by Ayisha Malik were the forerunners who bravely attempted to offer Muslim youths a voice. While the authors' intentions were benign, the novels are lacking in some way regarding plot and character development. Abdel-Fattah's 16-year old protagonist Amal decides to wear the hijab but is ridiculed by peers for a 'towel head.' While the subject matter is certainly important, Amal's decision to start wearing the hijab is the entire plot. Not much more than that happens. Furthermore, her identity is her religion, something Amal seems content with. Readers of the novel disliked the meager plot, Amal's one dimensional identity as well as the preaching tone of the novel. Amal starts with her lists in the second page of the novel: "1. The Religious/Scriptures/Sacred stuff: I believe in Allah/God's commandments contained in the Koran. God says men and women should act and dress modestly." (Abdel-Fattah 2). Segments like these are scattered throughout the entire novel and it seems as if this preaching tone is aimed at non-Muslim readers who are supposed to be educated about Islam and its practices (Goodreads). Na'ima B. Roberts' *She Wore Red Trainers* (2014) about two Muslim teens falling in love with each other lacked substance, well-developed characters, and the novel had a limited readership, namely only Muslims (Goodreads). The two teenagers are practicing Muslims who after a few conversations end up marrying at the end of the story at the age of 19. Readers remarked that this is not realistic fiction for teenagers. Ayisha Malik's *Sofia Khan is Not Obligated* about the trials and tribulations of a young Muslim woman dipping her toes in the dating scene was well received by readers, with a solid 3.9 rating on the reading platform Goodreads. Readers have, however, criticized the main character Sofia's behavior. Sofia stalks a man and becomes physically violent towards him after he calls her a terrorist on the subway. Readers did not condone violence in response to racism.

The novels, despite their flaws, saw moderate success mainly because they appealed to Muslim readers instead of non-Muslim readers. This intercepted the success of the novels immensely. They did not become *New York Times* best-sellers nor did they leave an unforgettable mark in the YA fiction genre. None of these writers have a massive social media following to boost up their sales and popularity. Readers have, however, appreciated the existence of these books as stories about wearing a hijab and dating as a young Muslim woman are not found often in YA fiction (*Muslim Reads*).

Therefore, Muslim writers too have increasingly begun to embrace the important role that social media plays in the publishing industry these days. Writers like Samira Ahmed, Aminah Mae Safi, S.K. Ali, and Nadine Jolie Courtney published a novel with Muslim protagonists in 2018 and 2019 and fully took advantage of social media to increase their sales and popularity as writers. All of these writers have more than 2,500 followers on Instagram and 10,000 followers on Twitter. They are active on the platforms, posting content related to their works and other writers, but also of their personal lives. They also appeared on several social media platforms of their audience upon the release of their novels. Youtube interviews, blog reviews, and reviews on Goodreads boosted their work's exposure. Videos titled 'Recommending Muslim Books,' 'My Favorite Islamic Books of All Time,' 'How Muslim Fiction is Evolving' discuss Muslim writers and their novels thoroughly. The content creators of the videos provide honest reviews and sum up what they did or did not enjoy about the work and what could have been better. These videos reach thousands of viewers and can thus certainly affect the popularity of an author and their work. Samira Ahmed, Aminah Mae Safi, S.K. Ali and Nadine Jolie Courtney have, in part due to efficient use of social media, established themselves as writers.

3.6 Mafi's Social Media and Contemporary Realism

Tahereh Mafi, the author of *A Very Large Expanse of Sea* (AVLEOS), entered the publishing industry right as the YA genre was enjoying a peak in the fantasy subgenre and when the publishing industry was changing due to social media. Mafi's fantasy series *Shatter Me* (2011-2020) became a *New York Times* best-seller thanks to the popularity that the genre was enjoying. After *Harry Potter* and *The Hunger Games*, publishers knew that fantasy and dystopian novels sold well. Mafi jumped on that bandwagon and managed to turn her first novel into a complete series of six novels. The success of her fantasy work has led to Mafi "dominating the YA dystopia/fantasy scene" (Oldfield, *United by Pop*).

Mafi tested her fanbase's loyalty by first switching to middle-grade fiction, still fantasy, and then contemporary fiction. The switch to middle grade had more to do with the plot of her work than the genre itself. Mafi's middle-grade novel *Whichwood* (2017) is a dark Persian fantasy with a hijabi main character who washes dead bodies for a living. Readers reacted positively to the genre switch as well as to the novel's setting and main protagonist. One particular reader remarked that she picked up the novel because its jacket claimed 'Persian fantasy' and appreciated that Muslim kids were given representation (*Islamic School Librarian*).

Whichwood's success and the success of other writers of color paved the way for *AVLEOS*. Mafi was waiting for the right time to publish her contemporary realist novel featuring a hijabi Muslim female who faces discrimination and racism. Mafi addresses her readers in *AVLEOS's* foreword directly with the passage: "Contemporary fiction is a departure for me – I'm mostly known for my *Shatter Me* series – but I knew I'd end up here. [...] Establishing myself as an author separate and apart from my identity as a Muslim woman was a feat I once never thought possible. But this – this book – is also a feat I once never thought possible. Because even though I knew I would write this book, I never knew if it would find an audience" (*A Very Large Expanse of Sea*). Mafi's departure was well received with one reviewer noting that "stories of an American hijabi remain few and far between, and Mafi's thoughtful, personal, and powerfully emotional novel delivers a strong argument for why we need more" (Hoggat, *EW*).

Mafi's success has been tied to her media presence. Right from the get-go Mafi had interviews with *LA Times*, *Variety*, *Entertainment Weekly*, and *GMA News Online* and was active on the social media platforms Twitter and Instagram. This all worked out well in terms of her establishing her name in the publishing industry and becoming known to her readers. The readers of her YA works were frequently on those websites and platforms as well. Her personal content combined with her writing-related posts including pictures of book tours, meet and greets, and teasers of upcoming novels with hints earned Mafi "a large and dedicated fanbase" (Oldfield, *United by Pop*).

Mafi's success with *AVLEOS* has paved the way for Muslim writers like Samira Ahmed, Aminah Mae Safi, S.K. Ali, Hafsa Faizal, Sabina Khan, and Nadine Jolie Courtney to publish diverse stories. Ahmed's novels *Love, Hate & Other Filters* (2018) and *Internment* (2019) reached the *New York Times* bestseller list. Ali's novel *Love from A to Z* (2019) features two Muslim teenagers who fall in love during a holiday but tie the knot after years of getting to know each other. Safi's novel *Tell Me How You Really Feel* (2019) features a Muslim gay protagonist, a narrative that is underrepresented in Muslim-centered stories. Safi shares her reason for including an LGBTQ+ protagonist: "I do often have queer characters because people are queer. Right? There's so much more than just one type of person" (Humphrey, *Lunch Ticket*). Safi is also well aware that Muslim writers and stories are lacking in the current literary scene. "I'm also really lucky in that when I debuted, there were many other Muslim authors that debuted too. It was so wonderful to not be alone in that, and to not be the only Muslim woman. And to look behind me and see even more Muslim women coming in, and even more women of color succeeding" (Humphrey, *Lunch Ticket*).

Writer Hafsah Faisal struggled with finding an agent and publishing her work due to her religious identity. Faisal is a Muslim American who wears the niqab, a dress that covers her entire body except for her eyes. She submitted her novel's manuscript via the Twitter pitchfest #DVPit in the hopes of obtaining a book deal. #DVPit is a social media event that highlights manuscripts by marginalized voices that have been underrepresented in publishing. Faisal received over a hundred requests and managed to sign a book deal. Faisal, who struggled with the lack of representation growing up, was intent on contributing to the literary landscape with her own diverse work. Her *New York Times* bestselling fantasy novel *We Hunt The Flame* (2019) is filled with characters of color. Faisal shares: "Representation in literature tells readers that they are seen and they are valid—it's painful to read book after book, knowing you'll never be able to find yourself within its pages" (Moosa, *The Daily Vox*).

Conclusion

The answer to the question "What developments within the young adult fiction genre in the 21st century have propelled its embrace of diversity, especially Muslim voices?" can be answered easily. Social media has created an environment in the 21st-century where readers, writers, and publishers can be in direct contact with each other. Social media platforms, events, contests, and campaigns have made it easier to understand what readers crave to read and how their desires can be satisfied with suitable literature. Writers experience a different dynamic of freedom because of social media and can secure their careers by accumulating a loyal reading fanbase who are invested in the writer's work and life. Those without a large following on social media can still get a book deal simply by efficiently using social media. Muslim writers have noticed the many benefits of social media and have observed that the current literary trend in YA fiction is contemporary realism. They are acting upon this by sharing their religious identity and life on social media platforms and by writing contemporary fiction that is relevant and relatable to Muslim and non-Muslim teenagers. Their stories often revolve around Muslim protagonist who face issues regarding racism, discrimination, and prejudice but also issues around love, friendship and an identity quest. The success of these novels is encouraging other Muslim writers to publish their own work and fill up the lack of diversity on every front. The readers are eager to consume novels that offer them much-awaited representation.

Chapter 4: Progressive Muslim representation in *A Very Large Expanse of Sea*

4.1 Introduction

In *A Very Large Expanse of Sea*, 16-year-old Shirin is navigating life as a Muslim girl in 2002. Her immigrant parents constantly relocate the family for better opportunities, but being on the move so much makes it hard for Shirin to foster friendships. Her hijab does not help either on this front. Shirin is well aware that strangers link her hijab to the 9/11 attacks, as they say discriminatory statements to her such as "go home, go back to Afghanistan, you camel-fucking terrorist" and ask her whether she is "hiding bombs" underneath her hijab (Mafi, 8, 150). Her hijab is the reason that she is a frequent target of Islamophobic and xenophobic rhetoric. Shirin tries to avoid these comments by trying to fade into the sea of adolescents as much as possible with her hijab. Apart from some ignorant comments, Shirin is doing well by focusing on her break dancing crew and designing her own clothes. Life takes an unexpected turn when Shirin falls in love with the school's golden boy and star basketball player Ocean. Ocean's image is ruined when his town learns of his relationship with Shirin. Peers at school and adults, including Ocean's mom and basketball coach, try to tear Shirin and Ocean apart. Shirin is confronted with how cruel people in her town can be when they demand she break up with Ocean and Ocean becomes aware of the existence of white privilege, a privilege he has enjoyed his entire life. Both manage to overcome the hostile prejudices their environment has created for them at the end (*Goodreads*).

Mafi has made it very clear that she is focusing on Muslim representation with *AVLEOS*. "People of color are more than just our struggle, we also laugh, we also love, we also have complex, fulfilling lives. [...] There will be some people who relate to it (novel) and there will be plenty of people who don't – and I'm talking here about young Muslim women, young teenage girls who wear hijabs" (French, *LA Times*). This chapter will therefore be a case study of the novel *A Very Large Expanse of Sea* (*AVLEOS*) led by the question "In what ways has Mafi utilized contemporary realism, Muslim stereotypes, and autobiographical elements in order to elevate Muslim representation in contemporary young adult literature?". Mafi's wide readership (section 4.2), her method in battling Muslim stereotypes (section 4.3), and her insertion of positive Muslim characters (section 4.4) will be analyzed to provide answers to the question.

4.2 The Appeal to a Wide Readership

Mafi has deliberately followed the playbook of other successful YA fiction authors, such as John Green, which has made her work appealing to a large diverse readership. This has allowed Mafi to add diversity in her work by including Muslim and non-Muslim characters. She focused with *AVLEOS* on the relatable, universal coming-of-age narrative of the main character to offset stereotypes even while making the cultural identity of the protagonist central.

Mafi has created a story that caters to a large readership by making Shirin a relatable teenager who is still figuring out who she is. She experiences loneliness due to being excluded by peers at school. Racist comments have led to Shirin building protective walls in anger, and thus she refuses to let anyone close enough to hurt her anymore. Her emotions of loneliness, anger, and sadness are universal experiences that teenagers can relate to, regardless of religious ideology and gender. Mafi shared during an interview with the *LA Times* that the novel's main focus is with Shirin "being a teenage girl in this complicated world who happens to be Muslim" (French). Readers do not have to be a Muslim hijabi female to empathize with Shirin. They can relate to her through her emotions and her interests, which include breakdance and fashion. Shirin's identity consists of more than merely her religion. While Mafi has purposely made Shirin a relatable character, her complexity is intentional as well. "I want people to know that Muslim kids are just as complicated and flawed and complex as any Christian or Jewish or Buddhist kid. There isn't room for nuance in conversation for that Muslim experience, and I think that's been the most frustrating thing, that everyone assumes that if you're Muslim you must live your life a certain way" (Shippee, *Teen Vogue*).

Mafi's novel is based on autobiographical events which amplify the gravity of the incidents in the novel. This personal touch creates an intimate relationship with the reader as Mafi is being vulnerable and honest over sensitive topics. Everything that happens to Shirin is a form of contemporary realism as they are based on real-life experiences. Mafi's foreword states: "What you're about to read is inspired by the true events of my life. Ultimately, this is a work of fiction, but Shirin's story is an amalgamation of real experiences. I was a freshman in high school in 2001. I used to breakdance. [...] The world around me was cruel and xenophobic and racist, and people had broken my heart so many times that by my sixteenth birthday I could no longer find the words to articulate my anger. This book is an attempt to capture this emotion – and its evolution – on paper." Since many incidents in the novel have autobiographical elements, the aftermath of those incidents and the accompanied emotions of the characters impact the reader significantly. Scholar Ira B. Nadel notes that autobiographies

are appreciated by readers because of the natural “interest of human nature in people rather than events” and because of fascination with the personal details of prominent people (131). Mafi’s autobiographical elements are an effective tool to expand readership as readers, especially white readers, get to identify with characters who are nothing like them.

Despite its segments about racism and Islamophobia, the novel is at its heart primarily a romance, as Mafi told *Teen Vogue*: “I think a lot of people will [...] think that [it’s] really a heavy issue book and it is in some ways, but it is mainly a love story [...] I feel like love stories are often overlooked and easily dismissed, but we don’t get love stories for women of color often or love stories that feature LGBTQIA characters. If we are talking about diversity and inclusiveness, then what about all the love stories that marginalized people don’t get to see themselves represented in? I think it’s time for more of those” (Shippee). Since we live in a more multicultural world where intercultural relations are more common, Mafi’s love story is a crucial piece of contemporary realism. It offers representation and a realistic image for those who are in an intercultural relationship or are open to one. Mafi’s novel simply offers a different love story than those from the 40s in which a white boy is in love with a white girl, which has become for a long time the standard love story in novels. Mafi’s is a romance which means to provide an insight into the complexity of an intercultural relationship through a non-white protagonist. Mafi explains her deliberate choice in opting for a white love interest: “There’s a learning curve that comes with being with someone who’s used to walking through the world in a certain way. Being a straight white man in the world comes with a great deal of privilege and when that man is now walking through the world with someone who is not accustomed to that level of privilege he has to learn how to readjust” (*French, LA Times*).

Shirin’s love interest Ocean is a tool that Mafi inserts for her white audience to learn about their white privilege and what the world is like for those without it. This is a form of contemporary realism as well. Mafi emphasizes Ocean’s white privilege and willful ignorance to first of all indicate that ignorance is nothing to be ashamed of, but it is important to be open-minded and willing to learn about other perspectives. Ocean asks Shirin’s reason to wear the hijab: “‘I mean,’ he said, ‘your parents don’t, like, force you to wear a headscarf, do they?’” (Mafi 90). Shirin responds with: “‘What?’ [...] ‘No. No, I mean I don’t love the way people treat me for wearing it – which often makes me wonder whether I shouldn’t just stop – but no,’ I said. [...] ‘When I’m not thinking about people harassing me every day, I actually like the way it makes me feel. It’s nice’” (Mafi 90). The conversation continues with Ocean asking whether it is alright to ask Shirin questions about her hijab and lifestyle. Shirin assures

him that it is completely fine. “No one ever asks me these questions. I like that you ask. Most people just assume they know what I’m thinking” (Mafi 91). Ocean comes to fully understand his white privilege when suddenly that particular privilege disappears when he gets involved with Shirin. Ocean is alienated by his friends and his basketball coach keeps demanding that he and Shirin call it quits. This reaction from his once-safe environment is shocking to him. Shirin shares: “It was so hard for Ocean to stomach that the world was filled with such awful people. I tried to tell him that the bigots and the racists had always been there, and he said he’d honestly never seen them like this, that he never thought they could be like this, and I said yes, I know. I said that’s how privilege works” (Mafi 238). Mafi lifts the veil from both Ocean's and the readers' eyes and with that from her white reader’s faces in an ironic twist on the hijab to wake them up from their privileged perspective in life.

Mafi’s diverse readership of Muslim and non-Muslim readers have responded immensely positively to the novel. Reviews on Goodreads and literature blogs applaud Mafi for writing this particular voice. Reader Valentina has commented: “I can’t imagine what a massive gigantic kick in the stomach was for all of you who not only understand her story, but are actually living what she is daily. I’m sorry. I’m grateful Tahereh decided to write this story. I’m happy she did it for each one of you who is going through all of this” (Goodreads). Reviewer Lauren shared on her blog: “Part of why I read is to learn things & gain a better understanding of people who are different from me. As a white, atheist reader, this book definitely did that for me. The experience of being a Muslim American teen in 2002 [...] is so far removed from my own reality that I cannot even comprehend what that must have been like, and what it is still like”. Reviewer Katie admitted that the novel had made her reflect on her own past behavior: “It made me wonder how my own attitude contributed to the negative experience of my Muslim peers. It made me wonder if I ever asked something idiotic and ignorant. It made me wonder if I saw these young women as *people*. And I was forced to conclude that even if I didn’t make things worse, I certainly didn’t make them better” (*Never Not Reading Blog*). The Muslim readers were ecstatic for being represented in YA fiction. Layla shared on Goodreads: “The fact that an Iranian-American woman, a Hijabi, wrote a YA novel about a Muslim girl in school [...] + the fact that it's a bestselling novel, is remarkable. Little Layla would never believe this. Little Layla would have felt dumbfounded that someone even remotely similar to her was in a book, something she could read and see herself in during a time when she was always seen and treated as Other.” Fafa shared the same enthusiasm with her comment: “As a Muslim I found the Islam rep to be amazing! Shirin also

has a lot to say about wearing the hijab. Such as why she wears it and her views on the hijab. I also wear the hijab so I loved everything she had to say!”

4.3 Tackling Muslim Stereotypes

Mafi tackles the SCR notion of Muslim women in an evident and delicate manner to confirm to Muslim readers that they have been granted superficial portrayals and to enlighten non-Muslim readers about the severity of the notion and its damaging effect. For example, Shirin’s hijab announces to her environment that she is a Muslim who practices her religion visibly by adhering to Muslim dress code. This leads to Shirin being treated differently by peers and adults at school. Shirin is well aware of this and calls her hijab “a metaphorical neon sign” flashing “CAUTION, TERRORIST APPROACHING” (Mafi 6). On her first day at a new high school, a math teacher promptly delivers a speech to the class about “people who don’t love this country should just go back to where they came from” when he notices Shirin (Mafi 6). Shirin’s day worsens on her walk home when an unknown lady shouts that Shirin lives in America now and she should “dress like it,” meaning that she should remove her hijab. These situations are truly realistic and an evident example of Mafi’s usage of contemporary realism. The 9/11 environment is tangible with these incidents that Shirin faces continuously, and while situations like these are not new to Shirin, they do make her feel dejected and exhausted. She expresses this in the passage: “I felt so withered by the emotional exertion that sometimes my whole body felt shaky. [...] I was so goddamn tired I couldn’t even drum up the enthusiasm to be angry” (Mafi 11).

Shirin’s experiences provide an accurate and realistic portrayal of Americans’ fixation and negative connotations with the hijab. Scholar Saama Abdurraqib for instance has noted that Americans, who have limited knowledge about the hijab, have determined the veil as a boundary indicator that solidifies difference and distance. The hijab is a symbol of potential fundamentalism and has become the signifier for the larger difference between ‘us and them’ with Islam being deemed as the religion of the ‘other’. This ‘other’ is assumed in need of dire liberation. This in turn complicates the comprehension of the practice of veiling as well as the narrative that embodies veiling. The hijab, as mentioned in the introduction chapter, has constructed the image of oppression. Muslim women who wear hijab are incessantly combating the notion of being perpetually oppressed. Voices that disagree with this are easily swept aside, which disallows Muslim women of any agency. Abdurraqib adds that besides oppression, veiling practices are linked to sexual control and nationality as well. This image creates a delicate dilemma for Muslim women who wish to wear the hijab. The hijab is a

visual repository for the preservation of the Muslim identity and culture. Women are the assigned carriers of traditions, cultural values, and symbols of the community. The hijab, however, simultaneously destabilizes this identity when the degree of ‘Americanness’ is called into question since the hijab is not an American practice. Muslim hijabi women then face the dilemma of compromising their religious dress and culture to integrate themselves into American society. The desire to escape ostracism within society may trigger Muslim women to reconsider their practice. Those who do continue with the hijab, however, fall into a narrative in which comfortable assimilation is unachievable (Abdurraqib 56-59).

Two very specific segments in the novel demonstrate that Shirin is treated differently by her peers and kept at a distance because of her hijab. Anyone who openly associates themselves with Shirin can expect direct backlash and criticism. When Ocean and Shirin arrive together at school one day their peers are taken by surprise. Shirin prepares herself for some type of negative reaction and narrates: “An unnerving quiet had just infected the groups of kids standing nearest to us, and I felt my body tense even as I looked forward and stared at nothing. I waited for something – some kind of hostility – but it never came. We managed to weave our way through the parking lot, eyes following our bodies as we went, without incident” (Mafi 225). The next day, however, an incident occurs. When Shirin and Ocean arrive at school together once again, a peer comments to Ocean “why’re you fucking around with Aladdin over here, bro?” (Mafi 226). Then someone throws a cinnamon roll at Shirin’s face. While used to verbal assaults regularly, this physical assault surprises Shirin and aggravates Ocean. The situation escalates quickly into violence between the peer and Ocean. Feeling numb and humiliated, Shirin flees the scene. This incident creates a rift between Shirin and Ocean. Shirin starts to have doubts whether their relationship will work if a regular day at school can be filled with verbal and physical assault. Ocean, who did not expect any type of backlash, comes to understand that a relationship with a Muslim hijabi girl is complicated in more ways than he could imagine. Shirin recalls that his friends turned against Ocean: “He was forced into an impossible position, trying to defend me against slanderous statements about my faith, about what it meant to be Muslim, about what it was like to be *me*. It was exhausting” (Mafi 236).

Considering the setting is post 9/11 and Muslim stereotypes play an evident role in the media and society, the novel portrays how sensitive the topic of an interracial relationship could be. Ocean’s life takes a drastic turn with a so-called prank on Ocean that leads to a definite rift between him and Shirin. An unknown peer hacks the school system and distributes a mass email to the school district’s database which includes students, teachers,

and parents. The email accuses Ocean of supporting terrorism and being anti-American. The note continues with the request to kick Ocean off the basketball team as he has become a poor representative of his hometown and has disrespected the veterans who supported their games. A picture of Ocean and Shirin holding hands at school is included in the mail to indicate that the root of this problem is Shirin or better specified, her hijab is the problematic element (Mafi 237). The school receives angry phone calls and letters from parents who demand an explanation for the situation. Ocean is stunned by this response and the accompanying racism and bigotry. Shirin points out that “the bigots and the racists had always been there,” but that Ocean’s white privilege had protected him from this confrontation (Mafi 238). Ocean’s basketball coach demands for the relationship to end. The school will then issue a statement with the explanation that it was all merely a hoax. The situation becomes overwhelming for Shirin and to protect Ocean’s reputation from further damage, Shirin ends the relationship. This leaves Ocean utterly heart broken.

In the introductory chapter of this thesis professor of religion Todd H. Green indicated that Muslim women are depicted as victims of oppression by Islam as it supposedly forces women to wear the hijab. Because of their oppression, Muslim women are passive and lack agency (242). This particular portrayal is counteracted with Shirin defending her decision to wear the hijab: “I thought women were gorgeous no matter what they wore, and I didn’t think they owed anyone an explanation for their sartorial choices. Different women felt comfortable in different outfits” (Mafi 47). In another passage Ocean, who has limited knowledge about the practice of veiling, asks Shirin whether she is forced by her parents to wear the hijab. Shirin answers that it is truly her own choice and explains her reason for wearing it. “It makes me feel, I don’t know. Like I’m in control. I get to choose who gets to see me. How they see me. I don’t think it’s for everyone. [...] Obviously I don’t think anyone should wear it if they don’t want to. But I like it [...] I like that you have to ask for my permission to see my hair” (Mafi 90). The hijab is linked to Shirin’s identity and confidence. The mere portrayal of a character who reasons that she wears the hijab by choice and not by force disputes the simplified complex representation of Muslim women. Shirin’s choice demonstrates her agency.

Shirin also demonstrates her agency regarding her way of dressing early on in the novel during a scene where her brother comments on her tight jeans. “I don’t think Ma is going to like see your ass in those jeans’. I rolled my eyes. ‘Well she doesn’t have to look at my ass if she doesn’t want to’.” (Mafi 46). This is a crucial scene in the novel because Shirin stands her ground as she receives criticism from a sibling. While the conversation with her

brother quickly comes to an end with Shirin's sassy response, she takes the time right after this segment to tell the reader why she dresses the way she does, why the hijab is of significance for her and which positive connections she has linked with it. "Still, I knew what he was trying to say [...] But the conversation irritated me. People – and often guys – liked to say that Muslim women wore headscarves because they were trying to be demure, or because they were trying to cover up their beauty, and I knew that there were ladies in the world who felt that way. I couldn't speak for all Muslim women – no one could – but it was a sentiment with which I fundamentally disagreed. I didn't believe it was possible to hide a woman's beauty [...] I dressed the way I did [...] because it felt good – and because it made me feel less vulnerable in general, like I wore a kind of armor every day. It was a personal preference. I definitely didn't do it because I was trying to be modest for the sake of some douchebag who couldn't keep his dick in his pants. People struggled to believe this, because people struggled to believe women in general" (Mafi 47).

Mafi provides Shirin with agency but demonstrates the delicate existence of that particular agency when a picture of Shirin without her hijab is taken by a peer at school and distributed without consent to others. The incident takes place right after the cinnamon roll scene where Shirin runs to the bathroom to process the incident and to clean the icing off her hijab. She takes her hijab off when another peer walks in the bathroom and things seem fine until: "' Hey,' she said, and instinct forced my head up. I'll always remember the moment [...] I looked at her, a question in my eyes. And she took a picture of me. 'What the hell?' I stepped back, confused. 'Why did y-?' 'Thanks,' she said, and smiled. I was dazed. She walked out the door and it took me a minute to find my head. It took me another few seconds to understand. When I did, I was struck still" (Mafi 229). The picture circulates quickly around school and Ocean notifies Shirin of the situation. Feeling violated, Shirin becomes emotional. "It was my hair, I wanted to scream. It was my hair and it was my face and it was my body and it was my fucking business what I wanted to do with it" (Mafi 230). Shirin understands that the action was meant to intentionally undermine her decision. "A decision I'd made to keep some parts of me for just myself. They'd wanted to take away the power I thought I had over my own body" (Mafi 232). Mafi underscores Green's notion of the Muslim woman lacking agency, a voice, and therefore being passive. Shirin had agency but since Muslim women have continuously been portrayed as beings without it Shirin's agency becomes very fragile.

Mafi proves that while the picture taken without consent threatened Shirin's agency, it did not diminish it. At the end of the novel, Shirin has an important conversation with an

Indian peer named Amna. Amna initially criticized Shirin for dating a white boy and ruining the reputation of Muslim girls, but takes these words back after the picture incident and hearing that Shirin's relationship ended because of the mail prank. "I kind of couldn't believe it when you showed up," she said [...] "I saw you on the first day of school. I couldn't believe you were brave enough to wear the hijab here. No one else does" (Mafi 264). Shirin shares that she is not brave all the time and feels scared too. She shares that life would probably be easier if she would take it off. People might be nicer to her then. "But that seems like such a shitty reason to do something," I said. "It gives the bullies all the power. It would mean they'd succeeded at making me feel like who I was and what I believed in was something to be ashamed of" (Mafi 265). Shirin proves to have agency by continuing to wear her hijab despite the backlash she receives from her environment. Shirin's defense of her hijab reminds one of Abdurraqib's notion that Muslim women do reconsider the way they dress when they face potential ostracism. Mafi inserts Amna in this discussion as a character who has made this choice without positive consequences. Amna shares with Shirin "It doesn't make a difference, by the way." [...] "Taking it off," she said. "It doesn't make a difference." [...] Her eyes were full of tears. "They still treat me like I'm garbage." (Mafi 265).

Shirin's character development throughout the novel demonstrates that she is a three-dimensional realistic main character. Shirin keeps to herself at first due to the fear of public rejection and humiliation by peers. She hides in bathrooms during lunchtime and listens to music to drown out the loneliness that she experiences. She has, however, not noticed how her isolationist behavior is perceived by others. Ocean tells her frankly: "You're crazy intimidating," he said. And you don't even see it. you don't look at people, you don't talk to people, you don't seem to care about anything most kids are obsessed with. [...] You show up to school looking like you just walked out of a magazine and you think people are staring at you because of something they saw on the news" (Mafi 92). Shirin is taken aback by this statement because she sees the world differently. Shirin shares very early on that she avoids people because they often say "something offensive or stupid or both" (Mafi 2). But in a conversation with a teacher Shirin shows her vulnerable side that is well affected by people's comments: "I'm tired as hell, Mr. Jordan. I've been trying to educate people for years and it's exhausting. I'm tired of being patient with bigots. I'm tired of trying to explain why I don't deserve to be treated like a piece of shit all the time. I'm tired of begging everyone to understand that people of color aren't all the same, that we don't all believe the same things or feel the same things or experience the world the same way" (Mafi 119). This feeling intensifies when her relationship with Ocean is criticized and threatened. In the end, when

Shirin and Ocean get back together and ignore the hateful comments, Shirin's opinion about her peers changes. "The more I got to know people, the more I realized we were all just a bunch of frightened idiots walking around in the dark, bumping into each other and panicking for no reason at all. [...] I stopped thinking of people as mobs. Hordes. Faceless masses. I tried, really hard, to stop assuming I had people figured out, especially before I'd ever even spoken to them. I wasn't great at this [...] but I tried" (Mafi 296). Shirin comes to realize that due to the political circumstances triggered by 9/11 her peers act defensively for their own protection. The world is confusing to Shirin but also to her peers. Shirin's understanding that her peers are just humans who make mistakes and can have their judgment shrouded by external factors is a revelation as well as positive character development. Shirin is no longer the teenage girl who was the victim of 9/11 related incidents.

4.4 Diverse Characters of Color

Mafi elevates Muslim representation through Shirin, but also through providing diversity in other characters. These characters are, however, not given much dialogue or presence in the story. Shirin's brother Navid is a caring sibling who supports his sister unconditionally. While Shirin faces prejudice because of her hijab, Navid is treated as an "interesting boy with an interesting past and an interesting name" (Mafi 6). Knowing that his lonely sister hides in the bathroom during lunch he invites her to eat lunch with him and his friends. He also invites her to join his breakdancing crew as the only girl in a group of four boys. Mafi disputes the portrayal of angry and misogynistic Muslim men who oppress Muslim women through Navid. He has no issues with his sister dating a white boy and aids her in times when she wants to spend time with Ocean without their parents finding out.

Mafi's other characters of color play a small role in adding diversity but their presence alone demonstrates to readers that there are many other stories of color besides Shirin's that are worth exploring. Bijan is the gay Persian friend of Navid who teaches Shirin breakdance moves; Amna is the Indian girl who criticizes Shirin first for dating a white non-Muslim boy and then expresses admiration for sporting the hijab; Yusuf, a potential love interest for Shirin, is also Muslim. These characters are unfortunately superficial in their personalities and portrayal. The reader does not find out what it is like for Bijan to be a closeted gay to his Persian parents nor what Amna's explicit struggle has been as an Indian Muslim girl nor what Yusuf even does in his regular life. Mafi's novel would have benefitted from well-developed complex characters of color as its representation scale would have included a larger group than solely Muslim female teenagers. Mafi has, however, commented on this particular

matter. With *AVLEOS*, Mafi aimed to “tell my own story, but that’s just the thing: it’s my story. There will be some people who relate to it and there will be plenty of people who don’t — and I’m talking here about young Muslim women, young teenage girls who wear hijabs” (French, *LA Times*).

4.5 Conclusion

Mafi has utilized contemporary realism in her realistic characters who go through unique incidents but remain relatable to a wide readership including Muslims and non-Muslims. Shirin’s hijab and its negative connotation are highlighted throughout the entire novel to demonstrate to non-Muslim readers the detrimental consequences to Muslim women who wear the hijab. Mafi also goes against the simplified complex notion that hijabi women are forced to wear one. Mafi’s white love interest is an educational tool for non-Muslim readers who are confronted with their privilege through Ocean. Ocean’s purpose is to demonstrate that open-mindedness is crucial as it allows for people to learn more about others who are nothing like them. In our multicultural world it is essential to provide stories of those who are not often represented or heard. Mafi’s other characters of colors add to the diversity of the novel and along with Shirin provide positive Muslim representation to counteract the negative stereotypes that Muslims have been granted, especially Muslim women. Mafi’s autobiographical experiences incorporated in the novel expand the readership and intensify the gravity of the story. Mafi once shared in an interview: “I was speaking on a panel and was asked when I remembered seeing myself represented in media for the first time, and what that experience was like. Everyone went down the line and answered in beautiful and emotional ways. When it was my turn, I found myself floundering because I didn’t have an answer to the question (Shippee, *Teen Vogue*). *A Very Large of Expanse of Sea* is the novel that Mafi herself never had but needed and this novel is her answer to the question asked on the panel, but it is also the answer for so many other readers who never saw themselves represented.

Chapter 5: Conclusion

This thesis set out to answer to what extent can *A Very Large Expanse of Sea* be seen as a representative of 21st-century approaches to diversity in the young adult fiction genre? The novel is the prime example of how to tackle this issue. Its success is tied to the author's established status in the young adult genre as well as her prominent social media presence. The latter has erased boundaries between readers and the publishing world allowing calls for more diversity in literature to be communicated more easily through various platforms. The novel's contemporary realist elements have made it an appealing read for a wide readership including white and non-white readers who can either identify with the novel's subject matter and or learn from it. Specifically Muslims are given positive representation, a rare occurrence, to counteract the negative portrayals that have been placed upon them in the media due to 9/11.

The novel has had a significant effect on the rise of Muslim-oriented novels being published after its publication. Many more Muslim writers are active now in the YA fiction scene which is a stark contrast to the handful of Muslim writers in the 2000s. These writers have incorporated contemporary realism in their work and have utilized social media to their advantage just like Mafi.

The findings of this thesis lend itself for further research. Since the novel was published just a few years ago, a similar research could be conducted in the future to update the rise of diversity in YA fiction and what that landscape looks like for minority voices including African-Americans, Latinx American, and Native Americans for instance. Additionally, a comparable research could be conducted featuring more case studies within the genre as well as for example a case study comparison contrasting how a white author includes diversity in their work. Research in this field has been scarce in general which leaves plenty of room for original research on the effects of diversity in the self-perception of the youth. Michael Cart fittingly recalls: "It is fiction – the best fiction – that offers us essential opportunities for cultivating empathy, for feeling sympathy and emotional engagement with others. This leads to another essential point: multicultural literature is indispensable because it enables us not to only see ourselves in the pages of good books but also to see others, to eavesdrop on their hearts, to come to understanding and to what I can only call commonality" (129).

Bibliography

“A Very Large Expanse of Sea.” *Goodreads*,

<https://www.goodreads.com/book/show/38720939-a-very-large-expanse-of-sea>.

Accessed 23 June 2021.

Abdelaziz, Rowaida. “Fewer than 2% of movie characters are Muslim, report finds.”

HuffPost, 10 June 2021. https://www.huffpost.com/entry/movie-characters-muslim-riz-ahmed_n_60c2072ce4b0af343e9cc2eb. Accessed 14 June 2021.

Abdel-Fattah, Randa. *Does My Head Look Big In This?* Pac Macmillan, 2005.

Abdurraqib, Samaa. “Hijab Scenes: Muslim Women, Migration, and Hijab in Immigrant Muslim Literature.” *MELUS*, vol. 31, no. 4, 2006, pp. 55–70. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/30029682. Accessed 12 June 2021.

Albrecht, Katharine. *Positioning BookTube in the publishing world: an examination of online book reviewing through the field theory*. 2017. Leiden University, MA thesis. <https://studenttheses.universiteitleiden.nl/handle/1887/52201>.

Alsultany, Evelyn. *Arabs and Muslims in the Media: Race and Representation after 9/11*. NYU Press, 2012. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt9qfv0k. Accessed 22 April 2021.

Baer, Allison L, and Jacqueline N Glasgow. “Negotiating Understanding through the Young Adult Literature of Muslim Cultures.” *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy*, vol. 54, no. 1, 2010, pp. 23–32., doi:10.1598/JAAL.54.1.3.

Bailey, Sarah Pullam. “He cast his first vote as a U.S. citizen. Now, he’s eager for the ‘Muslim ban’ to go.” *Washington Post*. 7 Nov. 2020, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/religion/2020/11/07/religion-trump-muslim-ban/>. Accessed 1 May 2021.

Binks, Danielle. “The Fault in the Cult of John Green.” *Kill Your Darlings*. 20 May 2014,

<https://www.killyourdarlings.com.au/2014/05/the-fault-in-the-cult-of-john-green/>.

Accessed 2 June.

Bodnar, John. "Unruly Adults: Social Change and Mass Culture in the 1950s." *OAH Magazine of History*, vol. 26, no. 4, 2012, pp. 21–23., www.jstor.org/stable/23488977. Accessed 28 June 2021.

Cart, Michael. *Young Adult Literature: From Romance to Realism*. American Library Association. 2010.

Cart, Michael. "Young Adult Literature: The State of a Restless Art." *SLIS Connecting*, vol. 5, issue 1, article 7, 2016.

Clay, Rebecca A. "Muslim in America, post 9/11". *American Psychological Association*, vol. 42, no. 8, 2011. <https://www.apa.org/monitor/2011/09/Muslims>. Accessed 25 April 2021.

Cooperative Children's Book Center. *Books by and/or about Black, Indigenous and People of Color*. School of Education: University of Wisconsin-Madison, <https://ccbc.education.wisc.edu/literature-resources/ccbc-diversity-statistics/books-by-and-or-about-poc-2018/#USonly>. Accessed 27 April 2021.

Crowe, Chris. "Young Adult Literature: The Problem with YA Literature." *The English Journal*, vol. 90, no. 3, 2001, pp. 146–150. JSTOR, www.jstor.org/stable/821338. Accessed 4 May 2021.

Crowe, Chris. "Young Adult Literature: What Is Young Adult Literature?" *The English Journal*, vol. 88, no. 1, 1998, pp. 120–122. JSTOR, www.jstor.org/stable/821448. Accessed 4 May 2021.

Daniels, Cindy Lou. "Literary Theory and Young Adult Literature: The Open Frontier in Critical Studies." *The ALAN Review*, vol. 33, no. 2, 2006, doi:10.21061/alan.v33i2.a.11.

- Doll, Jen. "The Ongoing Problem of Race in Y.A." *The Atlantic*, 26 April 2012, <https://www.theatlantic.com/culture/archive/2012/04/ongoing-problem-race-y/328841/>. Accessed 27 May 2021.
- Ehrlich, Hannah. "The Diversity Gap in Children's Book Publishing, 2017." 30 Mar. 2017, <https://blog.leeandlow.com/2017/03/30/the-diversity-gap-in-childrens-book-publishing-2017/>. Accessed 5 June 2021.
- Fallon, Claire. "50 Years After 'The Outsiders,' S.E. Hinton Is Sure The Characters Aren't Gay." *HuffPost*. 1 Sept. 2017, https://www.huffpost.com/entry/outsiders-author-characters-arent-gay_n_5873a8b9e4b099cdb0fe542d. Accessed 1 May 2021.
- Fernando, Christine. "Racial diversity in children's books grows, but slowly." *AP News*. 16 Mar. 2021, <https://apnews.com/article/race-and-ethnicity-wisconsin-madison-childrens-books-480e49bd32ef45e163d372201df163ee>. Accessed 1 May 2021.
- Franklin, V.P. "Documenting the Contributions of Children and Teenagers to the Civil Rights Movement." *The Journal of African American History*, vol. 100, no. 4, 2015, pp. 663–671. JSTOR, www.jstor.org/stable/10.5323/jafriamerhist.100.4.0663. Accessed 28 June 2021.
- French, Agatha. "Exclusive: Tahereh Mafi on her next book, 'A Very Large Expanse of Sea,' about a Muslim American teen after 9/11." *LA Times*, 22 Feb. 2018, <https://www.latimes.com/books/la-et-jc-tahereh-mafi-20180222-story.html>. Accessed 16 June 2021.
- Gray, Richard. *A History of American Literature*. Wiley-Blackwell, 2012.
- Green, H. Todd. "9/11, The War on Terror, and the Rise of Political Islamophobia." *The Fear of Islam, Second Edition: An Introduction to Islamophobia in the West*, 2nd ed., 1517 Media, Minneapolis, 2019, pp. 111–158. JSTOR, www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctvcb5c4r.8. Accessed 22 April 2021.
- Hannah, Lauren. "Book review: A Very Large Expanse of Sea." *Lauren Hannah*, 16 Oct,

- 2018, <https://www.laurenhannah.net/books/book-review-a-very-large-expanse-of-sea/>. Accessed 26 June 2021.
- Hawlin, Theodora. "The Re-Birth of the Author." *The Digital Critic: Literary Culture Online*, edited by Houman Barekat et al., OR Books, New York; London, 2017, pp. 163–169. JSTOR, www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt207g899.18.
- Hirsch, Afua. "Angie Thomas: the debut novelist who turned racism and police violence into a bestseller." *The Guardian*, 26 Mar. 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2017/mar/26/angie-thomas-the-debut-novelist-who-turned-racism-and-police-violence-into-a-bestseller>. Accessed 9 June 2021.
- Hoggat, Aja. "Tahereh Mafi soars to new height with A Very Large Expanse of Sea: EW review." *EW*, 5 Nov. 2018, <https://ew.com/book-reviews/2018/11/05/tahereh-mafi-soars-very-large-expanse-sea-ew-review/>. Accessed 10 June 2021.
- Hughes-Hassell, Sandra. "Multicultural Young Adult Literature as a Form of Counter-Storytelling." *The Library Quarterly: Information, Community, Policy*, vol. 83, no. 3, 2013, pp. 212–228. JSTOR, www.jstor.org/stable/10.1086/670696. Accessed 15 April 2021.
- Humphrey, Regan. "Aminah Mae Safi, Author." *Lunch Ticket*, 2019, <https://lunchticket.org/aminah-mae-safi-author/>. Accessed 23 June 2021.
- Karim, Sheba. "Why YA Books with Muslim Protagonists Are More Important Than Ever." *Harperstacks*, 3 Dec. 2018, <https://harperstacks.harpercollins.com/blog/why-ya-books-with-muslim-protagonists-are-more-important-than-ever-author-post-by-sheba-karim/>. Accessed 22 April.
- Katie. "Review: A Very Large Expanse of Sea." *Never Not Reading*, 3 Mar. 2020, <https://nevernotreadingblog.wordpress.com/2020/03/03/review-a-very-large-expanse-of-sea/>. Accessed 26 June 2021.
- Koehler, Mimi. "Q&A: Tahereh Mafi, author of 'An Emotion of Great Delight'." *The Nerd*

Daily, 30 May 2021, <https://thenerddaily.com/tahereh-mafi-author-interview/>.

Accessed 23 June 2021.

Kruse, Julia. *The representation of gender performativity, intersectionality and hegemonic masculinity in Six of Crows, Shatter Me, and Warcross*. 2019, Radboud Universiteit, MA thesis.

Jarema, Kerri. "Why It's So Important That Diverse YA Books Feature "Quirky" Characters, Too." *Bustle*, 31 Jan. 2018, <https://www.bustle.com/p/why-we-need-diverse-ya-books-that-represent-marginalized-characters-in-all-of-their-complex-quirky-glory-8003404>.

Accessed 2 June 2021.

Kellog, Carolyn. "Tahereh Mafi on writing and her series' conclusion, 'Ignite Me'." *LA Times*. 4 Feb. 2014, <https://www.latimes.com/books/jacketcopy/la-et-jc-tahereh-mafi-tonight-at-barnes-noble-with-ignite-me-20140203-story.html>. Accessed 1 May 2021.

Kirch, Claire. "BookCon Controversy Begets Diversity Social Media Campaign." *Publishers Weekly*, 1 May 2014, <https://www.publishersweekly.com/pw/by-topic/childrens/childrens-industry-news/article/62094-diversity-social-media-campaign-goes-viral.html>. Accessed 2 June 2021.

Lampert, Jo. *Children's Fiction about 9/11: Ethnic, national and heroic identities*. Routledge, 2009.

Mafi, Tahereh. *A Very Large Expanse of Sea*. Harper Collins. 2018.

Mafi, Tahereh. "Tahereh Mafi at the LA Times Festival of Books." Youtube, uploaded by LA Review of Books, 19 May 2014, www.youtube.com/watch?v=sgHo4KS9-U8

Moosa, Fatima. "Author Hafsah Faizal: 'Representation is not a fad'." *The Daily Fox*, 5 Jun. 2019, [https://www.thedailyvox.co.za/?s=ry+FireMuslimsWomen+who+slay+Author+Hafsah+Faizal%3A+\"Representation+Is+Not+A+Fad\"](https://www.thedailyvox.co.za/?s=ry+FireMuslimsWomen+who+slay+Author+Hafsah+Faizal%3A+\). Accessed 23 June 2021.

Nadel, Ira B. "Narrative and the Popularity of Biography." *Mosaic: A Journal for the*

Interdisciplinary Study of Literature, vol. 20, no. 4, 1987, pp. 131–141. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/24777653. Accessed 13 June 2021.

Neary, Lynn. “A Year Later, #WeNeedDiverseBooks Has Left Its Mark on BookCon.” *NPR*, 29 May 2015, <https://www.npr.org/2015/05/29/410272351/a-year-later-weneeddiveersebooks-has-left-its-mark-on-bookcon?t=1622840063110>. Accessed 2 June 2021.

Oldfield, Kate. “Tahereh Mafi On Writing, Publishing And Returning To The World Of Shatter Me.” *United by Pop*, 8 Sep. 2019, <https://www.unitedbypop.com/young-adult-books/tahereh-mafi-shatter-me/>. Accessed 10 June 2021.

Rogers, Haley. “Why I’m Not A Fan Of John Green.” *The Odyssey Online*, 5 Apr. 2017, <https://www.theodysseyonline.com/why-im-not-fan-of-john-green>. Accessed 2 June.

“She Wore Red Trainers By Na’ima B. Roberts.” *Muslim Reads*. <https://muslimreads.com/2018/10/25/she-wore-red-trainers-by-naima-b-robert/>. Accessed 3 June 2021.

“Sofia Khan is Not Obligated.” *Goodreads*, <https://www.goodreads.com/book/show/25707621-sofia-khan-is-not-obliged>. Accessed 22 April 2021.

Shippee, Emily. “‘A Very Large Expanse Of Sea’ Author Tahereh Mafi on Representation for Muslim-American Teens and the Need for More Diverse Love Stories.” *Teen Vogue*, 2 Nov. 2018, <https://www.teenvogue.com/story/a-very-large-expanse-of-sea-tahereh-mafi>. Accessed 22 April 2021.

Thomas, Ebony Elizabeth. “Research & Policy: Stories ‘Still’ Matter: Rethinking the Role of Diverse Children's Literature Today.” *Language Arts*, vol. 94, no. 2, 2016, pp. 112–119. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/44809887. Accessed 25 April 2021.

Vos, Lola. “Why authors should be grateful for social media.” *Diggit Magazine*, 30 Apr.

2019, <https://www.diggitmagazine.com/column/authors-grateful-social-media>.

Accessed 2 June 2021.

“Whichwood by Tahereh Mafi.” *Islamic School Librarian*, 9 Nov. 2018,

<https://islamicschoollibrarian.wordpress.com/2018/11/09/whichwood-by-tahereh-mafi/>. Accessed 10 June 2021.