

# Social Challenges of Young Adults in Rainbow Rowell's "Eleanor and Park"

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**Abstract** — This research work has chosen "Eleanor and Park" written by Rainbow Rowell to analyze social challenges of young adult. This is a Young Adult American Literature of 21<sup>st</sup> century contemporary novel published in 2013. This novel is primarily talking about the upper middle class, half- Asian teenage boy and with economically weaker section Danish girl, how both secure each other at different occasions while travelling to school, at public place, unconsciously both love each other, parental support, abuse at home, insecure status of a teenage girl at home and way to escape by engaging with schoolmate, who support when she was bullied by other children in school vehicle and many more in this story. The title of this novel derived from the first name of the main characters name Eleanor Douglas and Park Sheridan use it as title for this novel *Eleanor and Park*. Rainbow Rowell has written four young adult novels. Among the four novels "Eleanor and Park" is based on school aged young adults of both gender, and speak about invariably about the mental health of young adults, who were all either from middle income family or lower upper income families. The author narrates the stories with strong characterization of Young Adult facing challenges in modern scenario and made the readers as the same character and made them to recollect their past school experience naturally. Her writings explore the difficulties faced by the young adult based on racial differences, which cause for the development unique personality, who were all differ from normal child at home and at school environment. Therefore the author insisted the favourable family for healthy growth of young adult at home and in the society or community mobilization. She has narrate the character of school aged of both gender's character changes, intelligence, emotion, personality, friendship, conflict at various situations. This research gives a detailed review on selected novels of Rainbow Rowell's "Eleanor and Park" to find solution for the problems of Young Adult to minimize the mental illness and understand the reality on overall development, and navigate in a healthy way. Hence, this research on "Social Challenges of Young Adults In Rainbow Rowell's "Eleanor And Park" is much important to understand problems of adolescence and empowering youth.

**Keywords** — *Young Adult Literature; Mental Health; Racial Discrimination; Emotion; Gender Disparities; Domestic Problems; Victim of Bullying and Isolation; Unsecured Identity; Adolescence Issues.*

## 1. Introduction

This research work is based on contemporary Young Adult Fiction from American Literature and it's reflection on social challenges of adolescence. The chosen fiction for this research work is "Eleanor and Park" which is written and published by Rainbow Rowell in 2013. This novel is primarily talking about the upper middle class, half- Asian teenage boy and with economically weaker section Danish girl, how both secure each other at different occasions while travelling to school, at public place, unconsciously both love each other, parental support, abuse at home, insecure status of a teenage girl at home and finds her way to escape with schoolmate, who support when she was bullied by other children in school vehicle and many more in this story. The title of this novel derived from the first name of the main characters name Eleanor Douglas and Park Sheridan use it as title for this novel *Eleanor and Park*. Rainbow Rowell has written four young adult novels. Among the four novels "Eleanor and Park" is based on school aged young adults of both gender, and speak about invariably about the mental health of young adults, who were all either from middle income family or lower upper

income families. The author narrates the stories with strong characterization of Young Adult facing challenges in modern scenario and made the readers as the same character and made them to recollect their past school experience naturally. She has narrate the character of school aged of both gender's character changes, intelligence, emotion, personality, friendship, conflict at various situations. Hence, this research gives a detailed review on selected novels of Rainbow Rowell's "Eleanor and Park" to find solution for the problems of Young Adult to minimize the mental ill health and understand the reality on overall development, and navigate in a healthy way. This research made an attempt to highlight the adolescence social and emotional issues is entitled as "*Social Challenges of Young Adults in Rainbow Rowell's "Eleanor and Park"*".

## 2. Aims and Objectives

The aim and objectives of this research are to eliminate the discrimination among the people based on race, culture, gender appearance and socio-economic reasons. To helps the researchers to understand the value of Young Adult Literature for further research; to identify the

issues and challenges in the society through Young Adult Literature; to know about the social history of Young Adult and its value in writing history; to familiarizing Young Adult Literature as a source of research to know about the young adults in society; to creating awareness on emancipation of women and child rights in modern period; to know about how challenges in society affects the young adult development; to encourage the readers to understand the value of Young adult literature that reflects society.

### 3. Methodology

This research is based on primary and secondary sources to reveal the fact and made an attempt to extract the theme narrated by Rainbow Rowell in “Eleanor and Park, a Young Adult Literary work. The research used printed articles, e-sources, magazines, printed books as secondary sources to enrich this research title. Analyzing, narrative, explanatory methods to write this research based on YAL.

### 4. Hypothesis

This research are identified the social challenges are reflected in Young Adult Literature are true in present scenario and which helps the elders, teachers and readers enable them to understand and try to implement effective measures to solve the problems of adolescence child at home and school environment which is much more important than in paper textual execution as it deals with character development of young adult to become better adult in future.

### 5. Limitations

This research has focused only on two characters from Rainbow Rowell’s novel ‘Eleanor & Park’ and not analyzing the entire Young Adult novel. The chosen characters for the research are Eleanor and Park as they are victim of bullying and family abuse in American pop culture society and act as mirror reflection of victimized adolescences in modern society. This research includes problems of adolescences belongs to Asiatic race in America. However, this research is much more valid due to its theme which represents the most common issues faced by teenagers.

### 6. About the Author

Lit Lovers website refers that, Rainbow Rowell was born on 1973 in Nebraska, USA. In 1995, she has completed her journalism degree from the University of Nebraska Lincoln. She worked as a columnist and ad copywriter at the Omaha World-Herald on 1995-2012, and became the youngest and first female columnist there as a

columnist and advertisement copywriter at the Omaha World-Herald from 1995 to 2012. After send-off her position as a columnist, she was working for an advertisement agency and began writing Attachments, as a pastime which later become her first published novel, which took her eight years to complete the novel “*Eleanor & Park*” in 2013 and another novel “*Fangirl*” in the same year. Both novels have gained reputation as the best young adult fiction of the year by *The New York Times* and in the top 10 list of Amazon. In 2015 she has written *Carry On* (2015) which has been subjects of serious applause. She is presently the writer of the 2017 revival of Marvel Comics’ *Runaways*. ‘*Midnights*’ and ‘*Kindred Spirits*’ are short fiction written by her. Some of her novels have adaptive as Movie and she is the script writer of the same.

### 7. Eleanor and Park Plot

The two teens weren’t more different from tastes, trying to get through their own struggles and unplanned, complicated first love which began to crack and crumble in each other lives.

#### 7.1 Racial and Sexual Bullying

JoAnn Stevelos, MS, MPH, is a public health professional and consultant has published an article entitled as “BULLYING, Bullycide and Childhood Obesity” in winter 2011 gives an account on bullying and its effects on teens in current scenario. She also quoted that “*Bullying has become an epidemic. Many children are victims of sexual bullying and cyber bullying, and overweight children are especially targeted. The problem is finally getting the attention it deserves.*” As in the novel Eleanor’s physical appearance becomes an attention for bullies to bully her. Eleanor become victim of bullying and isolated from the first day by her peers due to her physical appearance. She feels a great deal of shame and anxiety each time when she thinks of popular kids at bus and in school. She is looking different by virtue of being new to school, and her loud, strange appearance and social awkwardness don’t help at all.

*“Not just new – but big and awkward. With crazy hair, bright red on top of curly. And she was dressed like ... like she wanted people to look at her. Or maybe like she didn’t get what a mess she was. She had on a plaid shirt, a man’s shirt, with half a dozen weird necklaces hanging around her neck and scarves wrapped around her wrists. She reminded Park of a scarecrow or one of the trouble dolls his mom kept on her dresser. Like something that wouldn’t survive in the wild.” [pg.7-8].*

Eleanor’s bright red fizzy hair, chubby or obesity, wearing men’s shirts and weird necklaces becomes target for bullies as she doesn’t fit among like other kids of her

age. According to Dr. Julie C. Lumeng, the lead researcher of the study, states that *“the child with obesity was simply more likely to be bullied than the child who was not; none of these things affected it at all.”* So as the novel mirrors the reality of bullied victim through Eleanor who becomes the victim of bully. She been bullied by girls at school, who put her clothes and shoes in the toilet and stick menstrual pads on her locker in gym class,

*“Eleanor didn’t notice at first how un-horrible everyone was being in gym...*

*When Eleanor got to the locker room,... Tina and her friends – and the black girls, too, everybody wanted a piece of this – were standing at the end of Eleanor’s row, waiting for her to walk to her locker.*

*It was covered with Kotex pads. A whole box, it looked like.*

*At first Eleanor thought the pads were actually bloody, but when she got closer she could see that it was just red magic marker. Somebody had written ‘Raghead’ and ‘Big Red’ on a few of the pads, but they were the expensive kind, so the ink was already starting to absorb.”[pg.54-55]*

She was bullied physically or verbal, and direct or indirect at school as well as at home. She has to face double abusive situation both at school and home. At home she has deal with abusive step-father named Richie as he has bad temper and can’t tolerate small noise when he is in bad mood.

*“Richie came up the stairs so fast, in Eleanor’s head he was flying. In Eleanor’s head, he burst open the door by hurling a ball of fire at it.*

*He was on her before she could brace herself, tearing the typewriter from her hands and throwing it into the wall so hard it broke through the plaster and hung for a moment in the lath.*

*Eleanor was too shocked to make out what he was shouting at her. FAT and FUCK and BITCH. He’d never come this close to her before. Her fear of him crushed her back. She didn’t want him to see it in her eyes, so she pressed her face into her hands in her pillow.*

*FAT and FUCK and BITCH. And I WARNED YOU, SABRINA.” [Pg156].*

The above situation explains step-father’s verbal abuse, damaging the things and life threatening, fearful moment that Eleanor has to face in day to day life. She feels insecure about not fitting in at school, but she wears her men’s Goodwill clothes like armor, focuses on reading and schoolwork, and even manages to make friends with two girls from her gym class, DeNice and Beebi. According to Dan Olweus who first developed and evaluated The Olweus Bullying Prevention Program since mid- 1980s

divides bullying into two forms: direct and indirect. In most cases direct bullying involves confrontations, derogatory comments, calling names, hitting, kicking, shoving and chasing. Eleanor was bullied using direct methods such as calling names, derogatory comments, hiding her cloths in toilet during gym class and so on.

*“Watch it, raghead.”*

*Tina pushed roughly past Eleanor and climbed onto the bus.*

*She had everybody else in their gym class calling Eleanor Bozo, but Tina had already moved on to Raghead and Bloody Mary. ‘Cuz it looks like your whole head is on the rag,’ she’d explained today in the locker room.” [pg23]*

*“...they called her.*

*A – Ass, Fat*

*B – Bitch, Red-Headed...” [ pg.91]*

*“Go. Big. Red. Go. Big. Red. Go. Big. Red.*

*She looked around. Everyone was saying it.*

*Go. Big. Red. Go. Big. Red.*

*Eleanor’s fingertips went cold. She looked around again, and realized that they were all looking at her.*

*Go. Big. Red.*

*Realized that they meant it for her.”[pg.132- 133]*

Tina and her group of friends does all sort of bully to her, also does Indirect bullying which is equally aggressive, but partially hidden from the victim and can include social isolation, the spreading of lies and rumors to peers and ignoring victims in group activities. Tina lies to Park’s mom that Eleanor provoked the fight between Park and Steeve at school. Cyber bullying may also fall into this type because the harassment and bullying is a step removed from face-to-face contact using text messaging or social media networks such as Facebook and YouTube. Thanks to her poverty Eleanor doesn’t have private phone so she escapes Cyber bullying for good. More over the novel is time leaped to 1980s where technology and social media is less developed but the issue of bullying at school hasn’t disappeared since then to now.

Park Sheridan, Son of ex-military and Korean beautician, belong to upper class family background unlike Eleanor who is poor in economical status. Park is handsome, half-Korean, socially isolated himself from his peer to avoid immature activities with them. He is matured enough to deal with bullies at school. He simply avoids the comments of bully by reading comics and listening to music. Thus he creates his own vortex where no one can enter. Park also enjoys some residual popularity due to having dated the popular Tina several years ago in junior high school; a part from popularity he also been bullied by his so-called “friends” for his Korean heritage which invokes racial slurs and insensitive caricatures of Asian individuals to get a rise out of him.

*'Are you retarded?' Steve said. 'His mom's Chinese.'*  
*Mikey looked at Park carefully. Park smiled and narrowed his eyes. 'Yeah, I guess I see it,'*  
*Mikey said. 'I always thought you were Mexican.'*  
*'Shit, Mikey,' Steve said, 'you're such a fucking racist.'*  
*'She's not Chinese,' Tina said. 'She's Korean.'* *'Who is?'* Steve asked. *'Park's mom.'* (Pg6-7)

Park puts up with the abuse, and even believes that his friends are right, he resents that he looks different from the other white students at his school. While comparing with Eleanor who faces bullies where ever she goes, Park's suffering is lesser than her. Eleanor has to go with more of feeling insecurity, low self-esteem, depression, social isolation and marginalization, lack of social skills and the inability to defend themselves in confrontational situations which is similar to the psycho-social conditions of overweight children and teens. However Park might be ignoring the bullies from the beginning learns to stood up for himself and for Eleanor.

*" 'Jesus Christ, Park, what the fuck? I think you knocked out my tooth.'*

*Park lifted his head. His whole face was covered with blood. ... 'Leave ... my girlfriend ... alone.'*

*'I didn't know she was really your girlfriend,'*  
*Steve shouted. A bunch more blood spilled out of his mouth."* [Pg.134]

One of the defense methods from bullies is to enrolling children in self-defense or martial arts classes which can build their confidence and teach them how to protect themselves from bullies. Park used to be stay calm, stare the bully in the eye with half smiled and ignore them when it comes to supporting Eleanor during bully he chooses self-defense or martial arts. Park allows himself to let loose emotionally he has been shrinking himself in order to fit in with his cruel schoolmates, but with Eleanor by his side, he at last stands up to them. Park has been learning Taekwondo since the day he started walking which is also part of Korean heritage. It was Park who begun the fight with Steve to end the bully at school. Violence is not solution for everything, but his intention was right at the moment and also faces the consequences both at school and at home. He is enamored with punk rock style and does experiments with wearing eyeliner and makeup to school, to look cool among his peers as well as to look less Korean but this decision make him invigorates and causes him shame and anxiety.

*"The next morning, Park took the onyx eye-liner into the bathroom and put it on. He was messier than his mom, but he thought that might look better. More masculine.*

*He looked in the mirror...The eyeliner did make his eyes pop. It also made him look even less white.*

*Then Park did his hair like he usually did ...Today he left it wild'.[pg.222-223]*

Racism among students made Park to isolate himself to avoid unnecessary racial comments and idiocy of peers. He doesn't even bother to fit in as he feels matured and patient enough to handle the moronic and juvenile behavior of his peers. He is annoyed rather than frightened of them but this attitude brings him more shame and isolation. While Eleanor become victim of bullying and isolated from the first day by her peers due to her appearance. She feels a great deal of shame and anxiety each time when she thinks of popular kids at bus and in school.

Eleanor and Park don't shy away from wrestling with the very real feelings of shame and loneliness that define much of adolescence. Both of them struggle separately and together with their experiences of isolation and self-loathing, and though their time together helps them to understand themselves and one another better, the novel ultimately shows that neither is able to fully escape coming of age unharmed.. The author clearly projects the teenagers' issue of helpless situation, but it predicts the real life situation in her pages. Many a time, teenagers suffered due to biological appearance based on race, economic backwardness, and in heart they are good in nature but helpless to remove poverty, loneliness, which is an issue of whole world. Things are further complicated when Eleanor's home situation grows more and more dire, and she feels the need to flee her abusive stepfather Richie.

## 7.2 Family and Abuse

The contrasts between Eleanor and Park's individual families aren't just socioeconomic—while Park comes from a steady domestic environment, Eleanor's family life is in shambles, and she, her mother Sabrina, and her siblings are subjected day by day to fear, control, abused and mishandle at the hands of her stepfather Richie. As Eleanor and her family has to face more abuse and humiliation, she seeks refuge more often at Park's house, which gets to be a secure safe house for her—but regularly daze smaller picture of Park himself suffers at the hands of his controlling, straight-laced father. Both Eleanor and Park have to deal with family life after school that goes from uncomfortable to dangerous. Rowell in the novel states that every teenager or an individual who appears to be secure and privileged in family like Park are also experience fewer abuses at home.

Rainbow Rowell doesn't withdrawn from portraying the more troublesome and agonizing viewpoints of family life. From Eleanor's poverty-stricken, fear-ridden domestic



environment to Park's pure but inflexible family structure, Rowell is projecting how conflict and abuse, in changing shades and varying levels of intensity, are commonly seen at the center of families of all shapes, sizes, and configurations. Eleanor's family environment is hell filled with poverty, abuse and misery. Her entire family suffers under the control of her step-father Richie who is cruel, often drunk, lecherous, physically and verbally abuse the entire family. He hits and shouts at Eleanor's mother Sabrina, as quoted from the text below, it is Eleanor who notices the bruises on her mother's face but her mother never complains about it or shares her pain even to her children or stood against the abuse of Richie.

*"...Her mother was standing at the stove, standing more still than usual. You couldn't not notice the bruise on the side of her face. Or the hickey under her chin..." [pg49].*

He even refuses to put a door on the bathroom so that he can monitor his stepchildren's activities in there, as we in text below,

*'Mom,' Eleanor whispered urgently, 'I have to clean off.' ...  
'What?'*

*Eleanor gestured at her clothes, which prob- ably just looked wrinkled. 'I slept on the floor with Mouse.'*

*Her mother glanced nervously into the living room; Richie would punish Mouse if he knew. 'Okay, okay,' she said, pushing Eleanor into the bathroom. 'Give me your clothes, I'll watch the door. And don't let him smell it. I don't need this this morning.' [pg49-50].*

There's no privacy even for bath or toileting at home as Richie wants to keep an eye on step-children and enjoys the pleasure of punishing them. Eleanor thus finishes her bathing before Richie arrives home. He fires "warning gunshots" at neighbors when they make too much noise too late, and, Eleanor once heard the gunshots and called the police for investigation in fear which provoked Richie's anger and warned everyone at home as in text below.

*"'Are you trying to get rid of me?' he shouted. 'Did you think you could get rid of me?'"*

*'It was a mistake,' her mother said gently. 'She was trying to help.'*

*'You never call them here,' he said to Eleanor, his voice dying, his eyes wild. 'Never again. And then, shouting, 'I can get rid of all of you.' He slammed the door behind him.'" [pg.152-153].*

At the start of the novel, she's just moved home after having been kicked out of the house for a year for standing up to Richie, Eleanor suffers daily from abuse, and it is

personal. She never experienced a happy family situation even before her mother married Richie: her father figure is distant emotionally and thus described as "selfish" in text. He is already remarried, doesn't care about his children's whereabouts and doesn't try to keep Eleanor with him when she was kicked out of the house. She lived a year with family friends. Eleanor's family life is downright miserable, and occasionally even dangerous. By the end of the novel, Eleanor recognizes Richie's handwriting and realizes he's been leaving the crude notes on her textbooks all along, she experienced a sudden and striking realization about all Richie's Predatory behavior that he has been exhibiting towards her such as tracking her whereabouts, commenting on her appearance, and indeed keeping a door off of the bathroom. She fears that Richie will physically assault her, if she stays any longer at home and decides to run away to get help from distant relatives which is safe than being victimized.

The abuse that Park suffers is mild when compared to the nightmare of Eleanor's home life—but the pressure is controlling, militaristic father Jamie exerts on him, especially when Park begins to wear makeup to explore the other aspects of his identity and gender roles at school which makes him feeling vulnerable and insecure. Rowell brings out the tense relationship of father and son to show that no family is perfect regardless of how they seem on the outside there is always emotional abuse rather than physical or otherwise invisible. Park and his father eventually reconcile, when he helps Eleanor flee Nebraska to seek refuge with relatives in Minnesota, his father catches him sneaking out of the house. The relationship between Park and his father mostly seen as misconception of each other opinions and actions that they been through. Park is afraid of incurring his father's anger, which is mostly verbal but occasionally physical, but his father hands him the keys to his truck and allows Park to drive Eleanor to safety, unconsciously forgotten the fact that the two of them have been arguing about Park's permission to drive the entirety of the novel. Park, who was infuriated that his father had been so strictly asserting he learn how to drive manual transmission, is pleasantly surprised by his own ability to maneuver the truck from gear to gear and drive Eleanor to safety. For Park and his father, there seems to be a light at the end of the tunnel—however for Eleanor, there is no chance of improving her abusive home life, and she knows that she must escape or drown. Rowell is fearless to show her young readers that familial conflict and abuse sometimes has no solution—unless like Park and his father might be able to find forgiveness and common ground, whereas like a monstrous Richie in the house, she suggests to keep fighting for "family" together is futile and even dangerous. In recent research done by Rod McCullom suggest that bullying can cause changes to victims' brain structure, with potentially lasting impacts throughout their life time. Researchers finds that more than 3.2 million

American students will experience bullying every year which is about 1 percent of the total national population. It states that 10-15 percent of students will experience “chronic disease” on persistent bullying which can last continuously more than six months. These kind of bullying experiences or chronic peer victimization is related to poorer academic achievement, higher rate of unemployment, depression, anxiety, post-traumatic stress disorder, material abuse, and self-harm and suicidal thoughts. Though Eleanor is fictional victim of bullying and family abuse who faces anxiety, depression, fear, and stress is representation of the 3.2 million American students who have experienced bullying at the present timeline. As per research done by The King’s College researchers under project named IMAGEN study which is one of the first longitudinal studies to research adolescent brain development and mental health. This research helps to track structural changes in the brain of young adult at ages 14, 16, and 19 on the extent of bullying in their daily lives, through MRI scans taken at ages of 14 and 19, the researchers identified that chronic stress due to persistent bullying will have the opposite effect on the young adult because their memory, cognition, sleep, appetite and other functions of body are continually on “alert” and not allowed to repair. Thus cause the negative outcomes on both mental and physical health of the young adult. So as the research states, Eleanor has faced a longitudinal suffering from bullying and family abuse, since childhood which definitely has impacts on her mental health. If not Eleanor runaway at the end with the help of park, she might have faced something even more dangerous that have left with scar that never heals.

## 10. Conclusion

This novel is based on school aged young adults of both gender, and speak about character changes, intelligence, emotion, personality, friendship, conflict at various situations Rowell writings explore the arousing aspects of young adult. She focuses on Female protagonist than male protagonist who has experienced the double the trouble in her life, willed with fear, poverty, abuses and bullies. The exploration of novel and its theme will help many educationalist, law en-forcers, teachers, and parents to understand the difficulties faced by teenagers in real life so that they can provide preventive measures and bright future for young adults in society. One such preventive association is The American Educational Research Association which also released a task force report in 2013 by reviewing the research on bullying and gives schools. There are other helpline for young adult like The Olweus Bullying Prevention Program (OBPP) which viably diminish all five forms of bullying such as verbal, physical, sexual, indirect/relational, and cyber/electronic bullying. Thus parents, guardians and teachers should be aware of their wards abuse in social

environment and must take necessary action to give positive environment for young adult’s growth. Unlike Eleanor who suffers mentally due to bullying and abusive step-father who finally finds light with the help of Park’s family support to flee from Omaha to distant relative hoping to be safe and at peace. Hence, this research gives a detailed review on selected novels of Rainbow Rowell’s “Eleanor and Park” to find solution for the problems of Young Adult to minimize the mental ill health and understand the reality on overall development in a healthy way. The school Administrators can also increase their efforts to implement social- emotional learning programs for young adults and make use of surveys such as youth risk behavior data to identify which students might be at a higher risk for depression, substance use, to be victims of violence or to perpetrate violence on other students and so on.

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