

Re-Constructing Emotions and Empathy in times of Social Violence: 4E Cognitive Perspectives on Literary Didactics for Young Adult Feminist Graphic Novels

This paper proposes the need to theorise how social emotions are reconstructed, in self-reflexive feminist young adult fiction. That is, I examine how young adult literature can explore questions in philosophy of mind of how emotions relate to choice and agency, and I foreground how feminist graphic novelists in particular enlist multimodal affordances, to make explicit the social need, and cognitive tools, to re-construct our emotion concepts. Using 4E cognitive approaches—in particular the theory of constructed emotion and an enactive account of affectivity (Lisa Feldman Barrett 2017; Giovanna Colombetti 2014; Miranda Anderson 2022)—I argue for a didactic framework that enables students to recognise that emotions are more socially complex than universal, passive responses. I propose that a 4E approach to composition (Hacioglu 2024) has the potential to train students in analysing emotions, as social cultures made *through* the embodiment and composition of micro-interactions.

The case studies Nidhi Chanani's *Pashmina* (2017) and Özge Samancı's *Dare to Disappoint* (2015) both represent the disordering of thought and social relationships that can result from structural gender-based violence and inherited trauma. But these novels also reveal emotions as culturally-made concepts that we feel, think, and make decisions through. As such, they offer the adolescent reader the opportunity to consider how emotion cultures scaffold decisions that may deprive the young adult girl of agency, and importantly, imagine new emotion concepts, and safely try out strategies for their remaking. In narratives of girlhood trauma and *bildung*, I argue, an emotional recognition, or “witnessing”, of violence—in theory and in the classroom—is not enough. We need to provide students with discursive tools to explore emotions in fiction, beyond the recognition, and sometimes unwitting replication, of expected gendered ideologies such as passive feminine suffering. Aesthetic frameworks for remaking emotions in times of crisis, in graphic feminist fictions, call for the remaking of the terms by which we make meaning and social cultures using emotions, and thereby contribute anew to gender politics through embodied reading practice.

References

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