A Feminist Reading of Laurie Halse Anderson's Speak

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Abstract:

Laurie Halse Anderson's *Speak* (1999) is her first landmark work addressing a social problem—rape—that is all too common to girls entering adolescence in the United States. This paper employs a feminist approach that presents the painful narrative of the rape victim and investigates the novel's promotion of individual, resistant action within the oppressive social structure, achieved through what the postmodernist feminist Judith Butler calls "gender performativity". It is this individual agency or subjectivity that enables the protagonist in *Speak* to overcome the adverse effects of rape, which is the product of a patriarchal system that regards females the second sex, to borrow the term by the French, feminist thinker Simone de Beauvoir. As such, *Speak* functions as a site of discursive resistance against such a patriarchal system by resisting some of the popularly held myths that discredit rape victims' narratives.

Key words: feminist theory - rape myths - rape culture- resistance.

Introduction:

Laurie Halse Anderson's *Speak* is her first novel echoing, in Anderson's words, "what goes on in the halls and classrooms all over America every day" (Anderson, *Speak* 231). Although what happens in the novel seems to resonate to Anderson's rape experience at the age of thirteen proclaimed 25 years later, the author claims that *Speak* is not an autobiographical work since only "10% of the story is based on what [she] went through after [her] sexual assault," as stated in the QA section of her website (n. pag.). As Janet Alsup argues, *Speak* is not a traditional "rape story" that can be easily ignored as boring, clichéd, and something that the reader has "heard before" (165). In her opinion, readers are compelled to pay attention to this novel because of its unconventional form of narrative—including lists, bulleted points, "script-style dialogue introduced by names followed by colons", and multiple headings—which symbolically represent Melinda's inability to speak about what happened to her in a conventional way (165).

As a *New York Times* Best Seller, *Speak* has received much critical attention in the past two decades (Alsup, 2003; O'Quinn, 2001; Latham, 2006; Tannert-Smith, 2010; Park, 2012, Malo-Juvera, 2014; Hubler, 2017). To interpret this work in a novel way, this paper employs a feminist approach that aims at presenting the painful narrative of the rape victim who happens to be the protagonist of the novel, through the impairment that the rape incident causes in her behaviour, attitudes, thinking, interactions, and her overall well-being. In addition to exposing the effects of rape on the main character, this paper investigates the novel's promotion of individual, resistant action within the oppressive social structure through the repetition of the everyday acts with a difference, as suggested by Butler. This individual subjectivity could lead to the distortion of the normative roles dictated by socially imposed gender categories, and as a consequence it makes the novel function as a site of discursive resistance against some of the popular held myths that discredit rape victims' narratives in the American social context. In order to lay the ground for such a discussion, it is essential to understand what rape myths and rape culture refer to. However, it is prerequisite to firstly define rape and see its prevalence in the U.S. cultural climate.

This paper is divided into seven sections. The first section is the introduction followed by the next two sections that provide definitions of rape, rape myths and rape culture. This is followed by an overview of the effects of rape on Melinda. It then provides a detailed discussion of Anderson's promotion of individual action as part of the postmodern feminist's preferred way of action in resisting gender-based oppression. It moves on to demonstrate the novel's capacity to resist some of the popular rape myths believed in a cultural environment, referred to as rape culture, which regards rape as an insignificant problem. The final section is the conclusion where the findings of the paper are briefly mentioned.

١. Definitions, Facts, and Figures:

In their 2010 National Intimate Partner and Sexual Violence Survey (NISVS), Centers for Disease Control (CDC) define rape as any completed or attempted nonconsensual sexual penetration of the physical body, through coercion, force, or any other form of non-consent (7). The act could target anyone, including those that are incapable of giving valid consent due to being unconscious, mentally disabled or too young to give legal consent, as it is the case in Anderson's novel. Unlike rape, which is a specific criminal act, sexual assault could refer to any other unwanted sexual encounters, including groping, kissing, rubbing, or touching (42). With this in mind, rape and sexual assault are sometimes used interchangeably in this paper as rape overlaps with sexual assault, though the latter is broader in scope.

The act of rape is not uncommon to the American cultural climate. According to the survey mentioned above, approximately one in five women in the United States has raped at some point in their lives (1). Over half of these victims were raped by an intimate partner, and 40.8% were raped by a colleague or acquaintance (1). According to the survey, 13% of women experience sexual coercion in their lifetime. This accounts for the cases in

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which the female's consent was received through verbal coercion when they had initially shown non-consent (2). The survey also demonstrates that 1.3 million women reported being raped within one year of taking the survey (2009-2010) (3). These statistics seem to demonstrate that American culture has created an environment that arguably does not see as abnormal sexual violence and degradation of women. And, what makes rape stand out away from other health problems is that it is socially constructed, conditioned, and sustained by a cultural environment that does nothing to challenge the popular rape myths.

٢. Feminists' Stance on Rape Culture:

Rape culture was a concept developed by the second-wave feminists, primarily in the United States in the 1970s, to refer to a cultural setting that does not oppose but normalises, consciously or unconsciously, sexual violence and degradation of women. Such an environment embeds aggressive acts within normal male sexuality and overlooks rape as a non-existent or insignificant problem. This cultural climate is made possible through certain social and cultural practices, including conservative gender roles, rape myths, and victim-blaming. Rape culture believes in rape myths, defined by Kimberly Lonsway and Louise Fitzgerald as "generally false beliefs about rape that are persistently held, and that serve to deny and justify male sexual aggression against women" (133). Rape myths are prevalent and pervasive worldwide and the American culture, from which this novel originates, is not an exception (Sanday 338).

Feminists, in general, have worked hard to challenge the cultural norms—conservative gender roles and rape myths— that contribute to rape culture. In their "Twenty Years Later: The Unfinished Revolution," Peggy Miller and Nancy Biele argue that rape is not simply a personal deviation in which a male figure overwhelmed by strong sexual impulses assaults a female that dresses provocatively. Rather, rape is a violent act in which a victim's soul and body are violated. It is also a kind of restriction imposed on over more than fifty percent of the population (49). They further argue that "something much larger than individual pathology is involved. Rape is a hate crime, the logical outcome of an ancient social bias against women," reinforced by language, law, and custom (52). Joint to the critical stance of Miller and Biele, Susan Brownmiller, in her book *Against Our Will: Men, Women, and Rape*, writes that

> When we accept as fundamental truth that rape is not a crime of irrational, impulsive, uncontrollable lust, but is a deliberate, hostile, violent act of degradation and possession on the part of a would-be conqueror, designed to intimidate and inspire fear, we must look toward those elements in our culture that promote and propagandize these attitudes, which offer men, and in particular, impressionable adolescent males, who form the potential raping population, the ideology and psychological encouragement to commit their acts of aggression without awareness, for the most part, that they have committed a punishable crime, let alone a moral wrong. (391)

According to the above quoted sentences, rape is a purposeful act in which the conqueror aims at instilling fear in the mind of the victim and violating their bodily integrity. Here, Brownmiller also calls for exploring and scrutinising the reasons that have sustained the presence of rape culture that sees rape not as a personal violation but a very insignificant problem.

Feminists such as Miller and Biele and Brownmiller emphasise that rape culture sees rape as an insignificant issue only committed by a disproportionately small minority of mentally unstable individuals, rather than a serious cultural problem (52; 391). It is crucial to provide a detailed overview of the effects of rape on Melinda throughout the narrative, her resistance to being defined by these changes, and her active potential as a subject moving towards recovery.

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٣. The Effects of Rape on Melinda:

Anderson's *Speak* tells the story of the rape and subsequent selective silence of a ninth-grade protagonist named Melinda Sordino. Melinda attends an end-of-summer party a few weeks before her first day of high school. At the party, she meets an older, attractive boy named Andy Evans, who studies in the same school Melinda will attend in the fall. Andy seems to be modest enough at first, so she agrees to make out with him. When she declines his further advances, he overpowers and rapes her when she is drunk and too young to know "what was happening" (Anderson, *Speak* 183). After the rape, Melinda calls the police, breaks the party then flees home through the backyard because she is too scared to inform the dispatcher of the rape incident. Her panicked phone call results in the arrest of the party attendants for underage drinking.

After a few weeks, Melinda starts high school at Merryweather High School as an outcast, shunned and ostracised by her peers for calling the police. During her fresher year, she is harassed and bullied at school and receives constant criticism from her parents for "flush[ing] her grades down the toilet" (115). In reaction to the rape and the provocation she receives from her peers and family, she retreats into resistant silence. As the effect of the rape escalates, she begins to skip school, withdraw from her parents and others who interpret her silence as a way to get attention. Despite the pain, anger, and loneliness she goes through, she chooses not to tell anyone of the rape incident. Instead, she hides in a closet to help herself cope with her pain and to prevent people from knowing the truth. She struggles with increasingly severe pain as she attempts to remain in denial (Latham 369; Malo-Juvera 414, 415).

Near the end of the novel, Andy furiously faces Melinda about her accusation and tries to assault her again. When Andy approaches Melinda, he locks the door of the closet with Melinda inside and states, "Rachel blew me off at the Prom, giving me some bullshit story about how I raped you" (193). He promptly diverts the blame with rape myths that justify his behaviour: "You know that's a lie. I never raped anybody. . . . You wanted it just as bad as I did. . . . You started spreading lies, and now every girl in school is talking about me like I'm some kind of pervert. . . . What's wrong, ugly, you jealous? Can't get a date?" (193). Andy later attempts to rape Melinda again, but in the fight Melinda pushes the base of her turkey sculpture against the poster of Maya Angelou and breaks the mirror underneath. She then holds a piece of the broken mirror to Andy's neck with the words, "I said no" (195) and renders him speechless. In this way, Melinda finds the power within her and can subdue him long enough for help to arrive. After this moment of triumph, Melinda shouts no, silences and paralyses Andy, and regains her ability to speak.

Melinda thoughtfully says, "IT happened. There is no avoiding it, no forgetting. No running away, or flying, or burying, or hiding. Andy Evans raped me in August […] It wasn't my fault. . . . And I'm not going to let it [the rape experience] kill me. I can grow" (198). The last two lines of this quotation emphasise Melinda's capacity to transform suffering into strength and show her resilience in the face of rape induced pain and her hope for a better future. In the last line of the novel, Melinda tells her art teacher, Mr Freeman, "Let me tell you all about it [the rape incident]" (198). This line, in which Melinda responds to the observation of Mr Freeman, that she has "been through a lot," concludes the novel, tracing Melinda's recovery from the effects of the rape incident.

Constructed as a story suffering, this novel portrays a bleak vision of the social environment in which Melinda lives; it foregrounds Melinda's experience and psychic impacts. This novel focuses on Melinda's strong gestures towards controlling the impact of the rape incident. These seemingly contradictory impulses can be seen as part of the texts' feminist politics, which combines the accusation of male cruelty and patriarchal tyranny with a vision of Melinda's potential for resistance.

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٤. *Speak* and Its Feminist Stance:

Angela Hubler contends that Anderson's novel advocates individual action in favour of feminist collective action. She believes that Anderson is motivated by the feminist insistence that women should voice public tabooed subjects such as rape that they experience during their lives. However, the traditional feminist effort to politicise what has been understood as private is undermined by the first-person narration technique employed in this novel. This technique, Hubler argues, fails the novel to make the personal political by showcasing how gender interacts with other social institutions to generate violence (114). These institutions could include family, law, education, economy and religion that perpetuate male domination and female marginalisation. In other words, it fails to offer a systemic analysis of the social condition that underlines gender-based violence—including rape— because it lacks a "multivoiced narration . . . [that] highlights questions of power by constructing complex networks of character relationships that demonstrate the challenges that adolescents face while navigating various institutional and social hierarchies" as argued by Sarah Day (qtd. in Hubler 115). Melinda's speech, in Hubler's words, "becomes not a way to communicate an alternative perspective on reality, but to mark healing and signal closure, imposing a happy ending on the painful narrative (116).

Similarly, Linda Alcoff and Laura Gray argue that survivor narrative "has paradoxically appeared to have empowering effects . . . [although] in some cases unwittingly facilitated the recuperation of dominant discourses" (263). This is because survivor speech, Alcoff and Gray argue, concentrates on the "survivor's 'inner' self . . . rather than . . . a discussion of links to the 'exterior' and ways to transform it" (280). Their argument aligns with Hubler's view that *Speak* fails to address the social factors that lead to rape and is reluctant to demonstrate collective action. Elizabeth Schuhmann also acknowledges the drawbacks of first-person narration technique. She writes that first-person narration restricts "students' understanding (from several perspectives) of people in different positions in life" (319). Narrated in first-person, *Speak* remains narrowly focused on Melinda's rape, containing the novel's representation to the individual experience of a white girl and restricting the displaying of social relations and structures that result in rape.

As can be noted, these scholars contend that Anderson fails to put Melinda's act of speaking within a broader collective framework that can challenge on a larger scale the oppression dictated by patriarchy. As Hubler forcefully argues, this fails the novel to politicise Melinda's private experience. These scholars' opinions adhere to the traditional feminists' way of action in which the category of women is employed as subjects of political representation. However, Anderson seems to have drawn from the postmodern feminist insistence that women should stand for themselves, resist oppression and liberate themselves on an individual level within the oppressive power structures.

Undoubtedly, feminists, in general, see sexual violence against women as symptoms or tools of patriarchy through which men dominate women. Traditional (second wave) feminists use the category of women as a rallying point for purposes of political achievement. That is, to raise public awareness and perform collective action. However, postmodernist (third wave) feminists such as Judith Butler emphasise the individual acts of resistance. As one can note, by having Melinda resorting to resistant silence and refraining oneself from telling her story or collaboration with the adults around her, Anderson seems to follow Butler's prescription of individual, resistant action. Before discussing how Butler may have influenced Anderson in writing *Speak*, it is essential to clarify the distinctions between the traditional and postmodernist feminists further and explain what Butler means by her theory of gender performativity in her seminal book *Gender Trouble.*

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٥. Traditional vs Postmodern Feminism:

Fiona Webster argues that the purpose of feminist movements has been to represent the gendered identity category "women" (1). This means that despite the differences between the feminist groups, they are united in their struggle against unequal and hierarchical relationships between men and women. Webster writes that traditional feminists "have relied upon the idea that there is a subject of feminism [woman] whose needs and concerns can be defined as subjects of political representation" (1). In this spirit, traditional feminists in the 1960s and 1970s considered "the female subject" a stable, fixed and self-evident entity (Webster 1). This means that they assumed the existence of "the subject" by talking about "women", and they used this fixated category as a foundation for feminist political movements to emerge and flourish. However, with the emergence of the theories of some postmodern feminist theorists, such as Butler, Rubin and Sedgwick, different understandings of such categories and different ways of action come into existence (Webster 1-2). As argued by Peter Digeser, postmodern feminists regard the traditional notion of women and naturalised concepts of the human subject something of the past. Among the third-wave feminists, no other theorist has challenged the traditional feminist thought as powerfully as Judith Butler.

Butler challenges the attempts to unify women in one homogenous group as in her opinion women and their experiences are diverse. And, Anderson's stance that women need to behave more courageously as individuals adheres to Judith Butler's endorsement of individual action. Butler disapproves of unifying women in one single homogenous group as this happens to be viewed as exclusionary and repressive. Contrary to the traditionalists' fixed conception of the category of women and their use of it as a rallying point for political action, Butler believes what is needed is a change in our self-understanding of the category of women because this way an improved political life could be brought into being (189-190). Not only Butler, Peter Digeser, another feminist critic, also argues that this unification does not count for the differences between women in terms of their race, class and ethnicity (655). This is indeed a valid point to make. For example, it would not seem likely that a poverty-stricken factory worker in a developing country would feel she has much in common with a wealthy businesswoman from California. She would be more likely to feel empathy with a man in a similar position, rather than with a supposed white, middle-class sisterhood of women around the world. Digeser claims that this notion of sisterhood also results in the exclusion of minorities, women of colour, and other marginalised groups (655). The rejection of seeing women as one group can be interpreted as Butler's and Digeser's disapproval of collective action and sense of sisterhood because they believe that there is no single woman, so there would be no single feminism. Women are different from one another and so are their wishes and ways of action, or as Butler claims, "By conforming to a requirement of representational politics that feminism articulates a stable subject, feminism thus opens itself to charges of gross misrepresentation" (8). Butler rejects the use of the category of women for political action. She offers her suggestion for individuals to make changes through performing their gendered identity in different ways to distort the normative structures that govern them. Her proposed idea is what has been known as performativity of gender

It goes without saying that Butler's theory of gender performativity is indispensable to feminism, and it can be used as an essential tool to promote the issues of feminism. Through her idea of performativity of gender, she rejects unification of women and collective action. She does so by questioning the category of woman since, in her opinion, "*woman* itself is a term in process, a becoming, a constructing that cannot rightfully be said to originate or to end. As an on-going discursive practice, it is open to intervention and resignification" (43; emphasis in original). In other words, woman is a subject in the process of being created through discourse by the acts it performs. Here, Butler is extending Simone de Beauvoir's famous insight that "one is not born, but rather becomes a woman" (293) to suggest that woman is something one "does" rather than something one "is". According to Butler, it is through performing the everyday social acts with a difference that women can distort and blur the normative roles that are dictated by socially imposed gender categories. Since the subject is stabilised through the repetitive performance of gender norms, there is always a possibility of disruption and subversion. In this way, Butler stresses the individual acts of resistance and subversion. Hence, the dream of escaping altogether from oppressive structures is not feasible: it is

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within the oppressive structures that individuals must find spaces for resistance, though this resistance may not be of substantial scale.

Melinda's resourcefulness and her everyday actions give her the emotional strength to be empowered rather than being a compliant victim. As Alsup argues, *Speak* acts as a site of resistance against the act of rape (165). Likewise, O'Quinn posits that Anderson's novel gives readers the chance to experience a "capable rather than neutralized persona of main character, Melinda Sordino . . . [who] refuses to become a victim of the violent force that threatens her, but is instead emancipated by it" (55). Her recovery, in O'Quinn's opinion, suggests that "Melinda is not a compliant victim, and she is able to find the necessary inner sources to regain control of her feminine self as *she* defines it. . . . Her voice is never internally stilled, even while externally lost" (55; emphasis in original). By relating to Melinda as she overcomes her pain, female readers could be encouraged to attempt similar actions. This brings us to the conclusion that while *Speak* is the best-known young adult novel on rape encouraging its protagonist to speak out as an individual, it does not offer the example of collective feminist action; therefore, the feminism that scholars as Hubler claim is not named or present in *Speak.*

As part of her feminist stance, Anderson crafts *Speak* in a way that challenges some of the popular rape myths prevalent in the U.S. cultural context. One could argue that through *Speak* Anderson tends to resist rape myths in the aim of making changes in the understanding of her society that seems to see rape as an insignificant issue practised by a minority group of people. Anderson's position as a feminist is seen when she forcefully states in an interview: "I can't really think of a time when I wasn't a feminist" (Anderson, "Page Turner" n.pag). Lonsway and Fitzgerald list six different types of rape myths: rejection of rape's existence, dismissal of rape's seriousness, excuse for the perpetrator, victim blame, only "bad women" get raped, and women lie (138). These popular rape myths are challenged in *Speak* as one can see in a detailed discussion of the novel in the following section.

٦. *Speak* Resisting Rape Myths:

Speak resists several rape myths, such as "all women want to be raped," "if you 're going to be raped you might as well relax and enjoy it," "he couldn't help himself," and "she lied," (Brownmiller 311). *Speak* has certain positive characteristics that may aid in reducing rape-myth acceptance and victim-blaming, such as not describing rape in a titillating way, showing the victim's non-consent, not holding the victim responsible, and positively depicting female power and voice.

One of the vivid examples of Anderson's work resisting rape myths is the way Melinda's rape is described. Anderson resists what Laura Mulvey terms the "male gaze" by refusing to sexualize the rape. In her essay "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," Mulvey describes male gaze to refer to a situation in which an erotic or rather sexually objectified female spectacle is used as an object to fulfil fetishistic fantasies of the male spectators while the personality of the female figure is disregarded (713). However, a woman being shown as merely body parts alone is perceived by feminists as something supporting the patriarchal order. In addition, Melinda's description of the rape as non-consensual, painful, and not in any way enjoyable is an effective refutation of the rape myths. It is important to note that there is no description of penetration, genitalia, or sexual activity. Therefore, this puts Melinda's rape definitely in the realm of forceful violation rather than seduction. Not describing her rape in a sensual way shifts the focus away from the perpetrator's sexual satisfaction and instead highlights the victim's pain and suffering. Melinda's perception of the rape as "he hurts me hurts me hurts me and gets up" (135) indicates a direct resistance of the myth that women enjoy to be raped as Melinda does not consider her rape as sexual, but rather as brutal. Refusing to sexualise Melinda's rape and portraying it as an act of brutal violation consequently benefit victims of sexual assault as it allows the reader to more readily accept other victims' narratives as true.

Demonstrating Melinda's clear non-consent is also important in disavowing rape myths that justify the rapist's act of rape. Melinda's verbal "no," and her efforts to turn away and scream, are important to clarify that the offender was not simply mistaken in his act. This is clear in the following quoted line where Melinda openly says "no" in

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addition to the recurring instances of the word "no" in her monologue: "'No.' No I did not like this" (135); "In my head, my voice is as clear as a bell: 'NO I DON'T WANT TO!'" (135). Although she cannot physically fight back since Andy is much heavier, Melinda attempts to push back and shout: "His lips lock on mine and I can't say anything. I twist my head away. He is so heavy. There is a boulder on me. I open my mouth to breathe, to scream, and his hand covers it" (135). Anderson's choice of words such as "heavy," "boulder," and "ground," which are repeated three times, symbolically indicates the sordidness of Andy's actions and also emphasises that this is something neither romantic nor desirable for Melinda. In their "Just Say No? The Use of Conversation Analysis in Developing a Feminist Perspective on Sexual Refusal," Celia Kitzinger and Hannah Frith argue that men who claim "misunderstanding" are simply justifying their coercive behaviour (295). Furthermore, Kitzinger and Frith claim that the problem with women's refusals is not how women refuse but how men receive refusals (310) as it is evident in this quotation: "Do you want to? he asked. What did he say? I didn't answer. I didn't know. I didn't speak" (135). Although Andy feels that Melinda "didn't like it" and hears her saying "no", Andy takes her "no" for approval and continues to assault her anyway. His forceful kissing, one of his hands over Melinda's mouth and the other on her butt are both to silence her "no" and her screams. It is important to note that none of Andy's friends justifies his actions as misunderstandings or suggests that he was too drunk to stop. Andy is guilty in Melinda's perspective as well as the girls who reply to Melinda's written statements on the bathroom stall: "He's a creep," "He's a bastard," "he should be locked up . . . he thinks he's all that . . . call the cops" (185). By not excusing Andy's behaviour as a misunderstanding, *Speak* resists the rape myth that would attempt to justify the rapist's act of violation. Admitting Andy's guilt could lessen people's willingness to excuse other perpetrators' behaviour when encountered with situations like this in their own lives.

In addition to refusing to excuse Andy's behaviour, the narrative of *Speak* never holds Melinda accountable for her victimisation. In an imagined dialogue with daytime television talk-show hosting Oprah Winfrey and Sally Jessy, Melinda hallucinates that Oprah says to her, "You said no. He covered your mouth with his hand. You were thirteen years old. . . . you were raped. What a horrible . . . thing for you to live through" (164). Sally Jessy agrees by saying, "I want this boy held responsible. He is to blame for this attack. . . . It was not your fault" (164). These imagined confirmations are crucial for Melinda as it is in this moment when she is able to name what has happened to her as rape and never to put the blame of Andy's misconduct on herself. Denouncing the rapist and believing the victim is an important move from disbelieving the victim and excusing the rapist that rape myths depend on and may influence young adult readers to do the same (Lonsway and Fitzgerald 137).

Although Anderson effectively challenges rape myths acceptance in the text, Melinda initially feels embarrassed and ashamed due to inadequate knowledge about rape, and this has clearly been shown through her thought about herself. She thought that she was similar to Hester, the protagonist in Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter*, a novel taught in English class. Hester Prynne has been pleaded guilty of adultery. To publicly expose this humiliation, she is forced to wear a scarlet A on her dress to mark her shame as a punishment and stand on a platform for hours. Feeling ashamed, Melinda thought she shares affinities with Hester as she thought, "I can see us, living in the wood, her wearing that A, me with an S maybe, S for silent, for stupid, for scared. S for silly. For shame" (101). Similar to Hester who branded herself with a letter A, Melinda branded herself with a letter S to stand for silly, stupid and scared. Realising that Hester was mute, she then claims that they would get along. The phrases, "S for silly. For shame," suggest her regret and lament for going to that party. Consequently, her heart is slowly dying as she describes her feeling, "they [feelings] are chewing me alive like an infestation of thought, shame, mistakes" (125).

As can be seen, the rape incident leaves negative impacts on Melinda's behaviour, thinking, social interactions and her performance in school. However, these do not make Melinda appear as a weak character but as an individual capable of change and improvement through resisting to be defined by her rape experience. This is achieved through Melinda's individual, feminist insistence to stand for herself, overcome her painful experience and construct a recovery narrative. The ending scene where Melinda confronts her rapist makes *Speak* an empowering narrative for those young readers who have gone through similar episodes of sexual violence in the timespan of their lives. The

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novel thus denounces the wrongs done to Melinda and proclaims her right to liberate herself from male oppression. Therefore, one may safely suggest that *Speak* should, therefore, be given credit as a work of fiction that advocates a contemporary feminist perspective on rape that young readers might not otherwise access.

٧. Conclusion:

The focus on individual subjectivity, gained through gender performativity, rather than a collective way of action enables the identity of Melinda to emerge and her recovery from the effects of rape to become possible. In Melinda's attempt to recover on her own terms, Anderson seems to have been influenced by Butler's insistence on seeing the category of woman as "a stylized repetition of acts" (4) in a social sphere rather than a supposedly sense of sisterhood. As such, Anderson institutes the subject, Melinda, differently in ways that not only refuse to reinforce the existing power structures but also challenge the popular rape myths that are believed in a cultural context that yet sees rape as a non-existing or insignificant issue and does very little to eliminate sexual violence.

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