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Representation That Matters:

A Queer and Intersectional Analysis of Three Young Adult Novels

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Abstract

Even in a relatively safe country such as Norway, queer youth are vulnerable. According to the curriculum, schools should be safe and inclusive spaces which promote curiosity around sexual orientation. Nevertheless, “gay” is the most frequently used slur in Norwegian classrooms. In the lower-secondary English subject, the students are to explore diversity, in addition to reading, interpreting and reflecting on young adult literature. Using the metaphor of mirrors, windows, and sliding glass doors, this master’s thesis argues that diverse queer literary representation can be a tool in deconstructing prejudice and counteracting the othering of queer students. As a literary analysis of three newer young adult novels, the study considers how the novels portray three concepts from queer and intersectional theory: coming out of the closet, connections between homosexuality and death (‘queer fatalism’), and intersectionality. The selected novels are *Like a Love Story* by Abdi Nazemian, *The Love and Lies of Rukhsana Ali* by Sabina Khan, and *You Should See Me in a Crown* by Leah Johnson. The study found that all three books feature coming-out moments as dramatic turning points, and the closet is presented both as a result of shame and heteronormativity and as a deliberate strategy. Queer fatalism is reproduced and disrupted in different ways: While two of the novels depict queer characters as closely tied to illness, violence, and death, the third novel upends this stereotype. The novels both challenge and reproduce stereotypes associated with queer people of color, and show how one’s own identity markers can make it challenging to empathize with the difficulties others face. These findings illustrate the need for multitudinous queer literary representation. Additionally, they underscore the importance of critically assessing the literature one presents to students, in order to avoid unintentional reproduction of stereotypical or harmful notions.

Keywords: queer young adult literature, the closet, queer fatalism, intersectionality, *Like a Love Story*, *The Love and Lies of Rukhsana Ali*, *You Should See Me in a Crown*

Sammendrag

Selv i et relativt trygt land som Norge, er skeiv ungdom en utsatt gruppe. Ifølge læreplanen skal skolen være et trygt og inkluderende sted som fremmer nysgjerrighet rundt seksuell orientering. Likevel er «homo» det mest brukte skjellsordet i norske klasserom. I engelskfaget på ungdomstrinnet skal elevene utforske mangfold, samt lese, tolke og reflektere over engelskspråklig ungdomslitteratur. Med bakgrunn i metaforen om speil, vinduer og skyvedører av glass, argumenterer denne masteroppgaven for at mangfoldig skeiv litterær representasjon kan være et verktøy for å bryte ned fordommer og motvirke andregjøring av skeive i klasserommet. Studien er en litterær analyse av tre nyere ungdomsromaner, og den tar i hovedsak for seg romanenes framstillinger av tre konsepter fra skeiv og interseksjonell teori: å komme ut av skapet, forbindelser mellom homoseksualitet og død («skeiv fatalisme») og interseksjonalitet. De utvalgte romanene er *Like a Love Story* av Abdi Nazemian, *The Love and Lies of Rukhsana Ali* av Sabina Khan og *You Should See Me in a Crown* av Leah Johnson. Studien fant at samtlige bøker bruker ut-av-skapet-øyeblikk som dramatiske vendepunkt, og skapet fremstilles både som et resultat av skam og heteronormativitet og som en gjennomtenkt strategi. Skeiv fatalisme reproduseres og dekonstrueres på ulike måter: Mens de skeive karakterene i to av bøkene er tett knyttet til sykdom, vold og død, snur den tredje romanen denne stereotypien på hodet. Romanene både utfordrer og reproduserer stereotypiske holdninger til skeive mennesker med minoritetsbakgrunn, og viser samtidig hvordan ens egne identitetsmarkører kan gjøre det vanskelig å forstå andres utfordringer. Funnene illustrerer behovet for mangfoldig skeiv representasjon. I tillegg understreker de viktigheten av å kritisk vurdere litteraturen man presenterer for elevene sine, slik at man kan unngå utilsiktet reproduksjon av stereotypiske eller skadelige holdninger.

Nøkkelord: skeiv ungdomslitteratur, å komme ut av skapet, skeiv fatalisme, interseksjonalitet, *Like a Love Story*, *The Love and Lies of Rukhsana Ali*, *You Should See Me in a Crown*

Preface

Like all good things must, my time at OsloMet is coming to an end. Submitting this thesis is bittersweet; as much as I look forward to teaching, I will miss studying, and this project has been the highlight of my academic experience. The topic of my research feels acutely important to me, and I hope that I am able to relay this sense of urgency to those who read it. My goal is to inspire educators to incorporate queer and intersectional perspectives into their work, and for their students to be afforded the mirrors I never had.

I am grateful for the encouragement and guidance of several people who have helped me along the way. Firstly, I would like to extend my gratitude to my advisor, Colin Haines. Thank you for being so generous with your time and advice, for responding so quickly to my e-mails, and for being so excited about this thesis. Your insight has been invaluable to my research and writing process. Secondly, I want to thank my parents, whose enthusiastic support and genuine interest in all my pursuits means so much to me. To my friends and fellow students who are also completing their theses this spring: Thank you for making these last five years so memorable. Special thanks to Helena Staahle, who came to the rescue when my writing program malfunctioned, and to Alexandra Torjusen, who proofread my thesis and offered constructive criticism.

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Contents

Abstract	ii
Sammendrag	iii
Preface	iv
1. Introduction	1
1.1. <i>Background</i>	1
1.2. <i>Aim of the study</i>	3
1.3. <i>Limitations</i>	3
1.4. <i>Thesis structure</i>	4
2. Theory	5
2.1. <i>Windows, mirrors, and sliding glass doors</i>	5
2.1.1. The importance of queer representation.....	6
2.2. <i>Queer theory</i>	7
2.2.1. The closet	8
2.2.2. Queer fatalism	10
2.3. <i>Intersectionality</i>	12
2.3.1. Queer of color critique	14
2.4. <i>Summary</i>	16
3. Methodology and Secondary Literature	17
3.1. <i>Methodology</i>	17
3.1.1. Novel selection.....	17
3.1.2. Limitations	18
3.1.3. Literature search.....	18
3.2. <i>Secondary literature</i>	19
3.2.1. <i>Like a Love Story</i>	19
3.2.2. <i>The Love and Lies of Rukhsana Ali</i>	19
3.2.3. <i>You Should See Me in a Crown</i>	20
3.3. <i>Summary</i>	21
4. Like a Love Story	22
4.1. <i>Introduction</i>	22
4.2. <i>The closet</i>	22

4.2.1. The closet's effects on others	23
4.2.2. Closeted families	24
4.3. <i>Queer fatalism</i>	26
4.3.1. Stephen as 'the dead queer'	26
4.3.2. Queer futurity	27
4.4. <i>Intersectionality</i>	28
4.4.1. Queer and of color	29
4.5. <i>Conclusion</i>	31
5. <i>The Love and Lies of Rukhsana Ali</i>	33
5.1. <i>Introduction</i>	33
5.2. <i>The closet</i>	33
5.2.1. The family closet	34
5.2.2. Out of the closet	35
5.3. <i>Queer fatalism</i>	36
5.3.1. Sohail as 'the dead queer'	37
5.4. <i>Intersectionality</i>	38
5.4.1. Challenging stereotypes	38
5.4.2. Gender	39
5.4.3. Queer or of color	40
5.5. <i>Conclusion</i>	41
6. <i>You Should See Me in a Crown</i>	43
6.1. <i>Introduction</i>	43
6.2. <i>The closet</i>	43
6.2.1. Liz's closet	44
6.2.2. Consequences of coming out	46
6.3. <i>Queer fatalism</i>	46
6.3.1. Sickness and health	47
6.3.2. Queer as adolescent	48
6.4. <i>Intersectionality</i>	48
6.4.1. Rejecting categorization	48
6.4.2. Inviting categorization	50
6.4.3. Unresolved issues	50
6.5. <i>Conclusion</i>	51
7. <i>Conclusion</i>	53

<i>7.1. Representations of the closet and coming out</i>	53
<i>7.2. Reproduction and disruption of queer fatalism</i>	54
<i>7.3. Intersecting identities</i>	54
<i>7.4. Limitations</i>	55
<i>7.5. Implications for practice and future research</i>	55
References	57

1. Introduction

1.1. Background

Classrooms are impactful spaces. As the lower-secondary school years constitute a formative period in students' lives, marking their transition from children to young adults, it is vital that they are provided with positive affirmations of themselves in this time. For some students, however, the conditions for this affirmation are less than ideal. Despite Norway's relatively accepting stance toward homosexuality, queer individuals are vulnerable: The 2022 Oslo Pride parade was canceled after a shooting targeting a gay bar left two dead (Benjaminsen & Rød, 2022), Pride flags are burned in schoolyards (Kristensen, 2022; Nilsen, 2022), and gay-related slurs are the most common profanities in Norwegian classrooms (Litschi, 2022, p. 50). This name-calling is not necessarily intended as hostile, or even meant to indicate that the recipient is queer (Slaatten & Gabrys, 2014, p. 30). On the contrary, students often use gay-related slurs as a joke, or as random substitutes for other derogatory words (Slaatten et al., 2015, p. 713). However, when gay-related name calling is so incessant in classrooms that it is normalized and perceived as harmless, an implicit understanding is developed of 'gay' not only as 'other', but also as 'less than' (Nilsen, 2021, p. 111). Combined with the aforementioned homonegativity outside of the classroom, this othering is detrimental to the affirmation of queer individuals as equal participants in the classroom and in society.

Despite the clear necessity, many teachers report having insufficient competence on topics related to sexual orientation (Litschi, 2022, p. 5). The curriculum contains several references to it, namely in the subject curriculum for social studies (Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training, 2019a) and in the interdisciplinary topic "Health and Life Skills" (Ministry of Education and Research, 2017). Additionally, the appendix "Educational Support on Gender and Sexuality" ("Støtte til undervisning om kjønn og seksualitet", Ministry of Education and Research, 2020, my translation) states that schools should be a safe space for curiosity regarding sexuality, and specifies that all students should be included in teaching about these issues. Although making no explicit mention of sexuality, the English subject curriculum states that after year 10, students should be able to "explore and describe ways of living, ways of thinking, communication patterns and diversity in the English-speaking world".

Furthermore, the subject's relevance and central values call for the English subject to prevent prejudice and develop students' understanding that their worldviews are culture dependent (Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training, 2019b). In other words, it is established

that sexual orientation should be addressed in schools. A question that seems to be left unanswered is *how*.

The government recently presented their new action plan for sexuality and gender diversity (Ministry of Culture and Equality, 2023). Among the proposed initiatives are assessing the need for increased competence in schools (p. 15) and making queer art, culture, and history visible to the general population (p. 21). One of three target areas is queer people from minority backgrounds, about and for whom the action plan aims to increase knowledge, acceptance, and quality of life (p. 25). How can teachers increase their competence on queer issues, make queer art, culture, and history visible, and affirm the complex identities of students who simultaneously belong to sexual and ethnic or cultural minorities? The answer could lie in the literature they present to their students.

Reading is a core component of the English subject, and a competence aim after year 10 is that students should be able to “read, interpret and reflect on English-language fiction, including young people’s literature” (Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training, 2019b). Young adult literature, as defined by Cart and Jenkins (2006, p. 1), is literature that is marketed toward young adults (i.e., teenagers), features a young adult protagonist, is told from a young adult perspective, and deals with issues of interest to young adults. Bishop (1990a, pp. ix-x) explains that reading is a way to understand the human experience, and that, to see themselves affirmed as part of that experience, it is essential for students to feel represented in the texts they read in school. Students who never find their identity mirrored in literature might as a result feel devalued – othered – in the classroom (Bishop, 1990b, p. 5). Additionally, texts with minority representation can prevent prejudice, by letting majority group readers engage with perspectives they otherwise may not have reflected upon. It is, therefore, essential that teachers make a conscious effort to present diverse literature to all students (Johnson et al., 2017, p. 573). Including queer perspectives, in particular, might help promote empathy in this regard – but how can teachers make sure that the perspectives they choose are appropriate for their students? Aiming to help teachers develop their competence on this topic, this thesis suggests three concepts from queer and intersectional theory to consider when selecting queer literary representation for the classroom or for recommendation.

1.2. Aim of the study

Given the vulnerability of non-heterosexual students, the need for increased understanding and acceptance of queer people of color, and historic representations of homosexuality as inherently diseased, fatal, or incomplete, it is vital that English teachers are able to avoid reinforcing harmful stereotypes through the literature they present to their students. Seeking to illuminate the need for diverse queer literary representation, as well as issues teachers should be aware of when selecting queer texts, this thesis analyzes three young adult novels featuring queer protagonists. The works chosen are *Like a Love Story* by Abdi Nazemian, *The Love and Lies of Rukhsana Ali* by Sabina Khan, and *You Should See Me in a Crown* by Leah Johnson. *Like a Love Story* (Nazemian, 2019) is set in 1980s New York, where newly arrived immigrant Reza finds his friends in gay rights activist Art and aspiring fashion designer Judy, all while struggling to accept his homosexuality amidst the AIDS crisis. *The Love and Lies of Rukhsana Ali* (Khan, 2019) follows Bengali-American lesbian teenager Rukhsana, who is discovered kissing her girlfriend and promptly sent by her parents to Bangladesh to marry a man, jeopardizing her chance to attend her dream university. In *You Should See Me in a Crown* (Johnson, 2020), when black high school student Liz fails to receive a college scholarship, she enters her predominantly white and heteronormative school's competition to become prom queen and win the prize money – competing against her new crush.

The novels are analyzed in light of queer and intersectional theory, specifically considering three central concepts: 'the closet' and coming out, queer fatalism, and intersectionality. The goals are, firstly, to provide perspectives on what these books' different representations of these concepts can convey to the young readers who encounter them, and secondly, to develop an understanding of why it is crucial to view the literature one chooses for the classroom through a critical, queer, and intersectional lens to assess its suitability.

Based on this, the research questions are:

- 1) How do the novels deal with 'the closet' and coming out?
- 2) How are notions of queer fatalism reproduced or disrupted?
- 3) How do the characters' different intersecting identities affect their experiences?

1.3. Limitations

Although introducing students to diverse representation is undoubtedly an important factor in promoting empathy (Batchelor et al., 2018, p. 35), exposure is not everything. Simply having

students read novels that feature queer characters will not, in itself, eradicate homonegativity in schools or make queer students feel affirmed. This thesis' scope and methodological approach mean that an important aspect is omitted: *how* teachers can utilize these novels as teaching material in order to create meaningful change.

Gender diversity is a frequent collocate of sexual orientation both in the curriculum and the action plan. As this thesis mainly examines representations of homosexuality, however, it bases itself on an understanding of gender as a binary construct. The concepts of hetero- and homosexuality, in themselves, indicate that genders can be 'same' or 'opposite', and, by extension, that 'man' and 'woman' are stable categories. This partially contradicts many key points about gender within queer theory. Nonetheless, as none of the novels' characters appear to be gender-nonconforming, choosing not to generalize them into binary gender categories would be speculative. As such, they are treated as cisgender. The issue of categorization will be revisited in the methodology section.

1.4. Thesis structure

The following theory chapter presents the theoretical framework for analysis. The methodology and secondary literature chapter details the novel selection criteria, discusses limitations, describes the secondary literature search, and summarizes the search results. The discussion is divided into three chapters, one for each of the selected novels, considering them in light of the theoretical framework. Finally, the conclusion answers the research questions, addresses limitations, and suggests implications for practice and future research.

2. Theory

Why is diverse queer representation so important? What issues pertaining to non-heterosexuality should teachers be aware of to be equipped to select literature which represents it in a way that counteracts othering and fosters empathy? This chapter attempts to answer these questions. Firstly, it uses the metaphor of windows, mirrors, and sliding glass doors to elaborate on the importance of diverse representation in classroom literature. Secondly, it defines the theoretical concepts used for analysis: the closet, queer fatalism, and intersectionality.

2.1. Windows, mirrors, and sliding glass doors

In addition to entertainment, books offer readers affirmation of different aspects of the surrounding world (McNair, 2016, p. 375). As a powerful tool in young readers' identity construction, literature provides insight into both their own individual identities and their roles in society (Hefflin & Barksdale-Ladd, 2001, p. 810). The power of definition that literature holds over readers' perceptions of themselves and others can be summarized using the metaphor of mirrors, windows, and sliding glass doors (Bishop, 1990a, p. ix, 1990b, p. 3). Originally in the context of multicultural literature, but also relevant for other contexts of diversity (McNair & Edwards, 2021, p. 207), this analogy points out the affirming and eye-opening effects literature can have on its audience.

A text is a mirror when it reflects facets of the readers' own lives, affirming their identities and validating their experiences in the process. When a text is a window, on the other hand, it provides readers with representations of lives unlike their own – they can peek through the window to see a different world than the one they participate in, opening their eyes to other worldviews. The sliding glass door is like the window, except that it allows the reader to not only peek through the glass, but step into the experience for a little while, leaving changed in some way (Bishop, 1990a, p. ix). Hefflin and Barksdale-Ladd (2001, p. 810) explain that the pleasure of relating to characters and experiences in literature is a primary motivation for reading. Thus, it is problematic for the development of both skill and interest in reading if there is little to no relatability in the literature minority students are presented with.

Beach (1997, pp. 73-74) argues that young adult literature needs authentic and culturally diverse characters to counteract simplistic generalizations of cultures, religions, and genders. Delgado (1989, pp. 2436-2439) likewise claims that majority-group readers should be

exposed to minority perspectives to enrich their perceptions of reality, suspend judgment, and acquire the ability to internalize others' perspectives. Stories told from other viewpoints than the reader's own emphasize, and help readers adjust their attitudes toward, difference (Bishop, 1990a, p. xi). By inviting the reader in through the sliding glass door, literature with minority representation brings people from different societal groups closer together (Delgado, 1989, p. 2440): Readers from majority cultures are able to see and enter into the experiences of others, while those others are afforded reflections of their own experiences in the material they read.

2.1.1. The importance of queer representation

Cart and Jenkins (2006, p. 1) postulate the tremendous impact of, through literary representation, realizing that 'there are others like me'. For queer students, seeing themselves mirrored in an otherwise heteronormative school environment can be a great relief (Røthing & Svendsen, 2009, pp. 71-72). However, queer literary representation is not only important for queer students. Young adult literature, as previously stated, has the capacity to foster empathy and compassion through descriptions of lives that are unlike the readers' own – in other words, function as sliding glass doors – acquainting the reader with what would otherwise, if not for the encounter in reading, be an 'other' (Cart, 2008). Including queer texts in a classroom curriculum creates windows and mirrors that provide opportunities for all students to explore both others' and their own identities in a different light (Batchelor et al., 2018, p. 30). Clark and Blackburn (2009, pp. 30-31) write, however, that while teachers *must* include literature with queer representation in the classroom, in classrooms where teachers are unaware of their own unconscious biases and thus do nothing to counteract them, reading queer literature often contributes to further othering of queer individuals. Logan et al. (2014, p. 33-34) emphasize the importance of awareness of how texts handle stereotypes, how they challenge heteronormativity, and what kinds of windows and mirrors they present to the readers. Teachers who gain deeper insight into issues of sexual orientation, but even more importantly, a critical understanding of how queer identities are shaped in schools, are able to positively impact their students' learning – and being – in the classroom (Meyer, 2007, p. 17). In other words: Queer representation is vital, but teachers need to be aware of issues pertaining to non-heterosexual people and literature to be able to provide good mirrors, windows, and sliding glass doors for their students, instead of inadvertently perpetuating

harmful stereotypes. The following sections elaborate on some of these issues, as well as the three concepts for analysis: the closet, queer fatalism, and intersectionality.

2.2. Queer theory

Due to its history as a slur, the word ‘queer’ may to some seem negatively charged. Although one might still find the word used pejoratively, the term is now reclaimed and widely used as descriptive of anyone or anything that fits outside traditional norms of gender and sexuality (Meyer, 2007, p. 15). The word ‘queer’ can, thus, both define non-heterosexuality or gender-nonconformity and denote deviance from cultural norms (Dyer, 2017, p. 293). Muñoz (2009, p. 1) goes so far as to describe queerness as intangible. For the purposes of this thesis, however, ‘queer’ is used synonymously with ‘non-heterosexual’.

Queer theory applies a critical lens to what is often taken for granted about sexuality, relationships, gender, and identity, and interrogates the allegedly stable interrelations of these categories in society (Jagose, 1996, p. 3; Meyer, 2007, p. 15). Is sexual orientation congenital or socially constructed? Is gender as stable as commonly assumed, or is that stability reliant on a repeated, even unconscious, performance of gender as a set of norms (Butler, 1993, p. ix [9])? Rather than comprising a fixed set of values, queer theory is understood as a challenge to traditional ways of thinking (Meyer, 2007, p. 26; Eggebø et al., 2018, p. 18). By refusing any specific form, queer theory maintains what Jagose (1996, p. 99) explains as a ‘resistance’ to what society perceives as normal – or what Lakhani (2020, p. 127) describes as a critique of normativity. One key tenet is to investigate and deconstruct the societal processes that lead to the presence of heteronormativity (Røthing, 2008, p. 255).

Heteronormativity is not synonymous with homophobia. Although one could argue that the term ‘homophobia’ is often used incorrectly, and that the correct term would be ‘homonegativity’, as the suffix -phobia indicates fear, the term homophobia is most often used to denote negative attitudes or aggression towards individuals based on their perceived homosexuality (Røthing & Svendsen, 2009, p. 206). Heteronormativity, on the other hand, refers to underlying societal structures and discursive practices which often stem from lack of awareness rather than overt disapproval. In short, it is the persistent and implicit notion that heterosexuality is the standard, thereby making non-heterosexuality abnormal and inferior (Parker, 2015, p. 186; Meyer, 2007, p. 21). The term is linked to the lesser-known concept of ‘compulsory heterosexuality’ – the idea that heterosexuality, through heteronormative societal

structures and discourse, is imposed upon all (Rich, 1980, p. 11). Hellesund (2008, p. 115) claims that acknowledging our culture as heteronormative means recognizing the shame this heteronormativity imposes on its non-heterosexual participants.

As previously mentioned, much of the name-calling in Norwegian classrooms is gay-related (Litschi, 2022, p. 50). Even when not intended as homophobic, this name-calling reinforces heteronormativity in the classroom by creating and upholding the notion of a social hierarchy that privileges heterosexuality over other sexualities (Meyer, 2007, p. 16; Nilsen, 2021, p. 111). Advertently or inadvertently, this lets queer students know that they are outside of what is accepted. The name-calling is not, however, the only reason for the reproduction of heteronormativity in Norwegian classrooms. While sexualities that fall within the heterosexual norm, or matrix (Butler, 1990, p. 208), is scarcely mentioned or questioned, homosexuality and other queer identities are often positioned as something separate that is to be tolerated. Røthing (2008, p. 263) asserts that as long as teachers treat homosexuality in a way that differs from their treatment of heterosexuality, no matter how well-intended they are, they position the students as a collective, presumably heterosexual ‘we’ whose job it is to tolerate ‘the homosexuals’ – or, in other words, ‘the others’. Thus, the acceptance of queer people seems to be, albeit inadvertently, at the mercy of a heterosexual audience.

Even in queer literature, the heterosexual perspective has been pervasive. In 2006, Cart and Jenkins (pp. 171-172) wrote that, historically, the tendency in young adult literature with queer content has been for the perspective to be that of a heterosexual – that the queer characters are seen from the outside, as they are perceived by straight people, not as they are seen by themselves. This is, however, not the case in the newer novels analyzed in this thesis.

2.2.1. The closet

‘Coming out of the closet’ – declaring one’s sexual orientation as divergent from the norm – is a common theme in most young adult literature with queer characters (Banks, 2009, p. 36). Saxey (2008, p. 1-2) explains that as long as the heteronormative assumption that everyone is heterosexual until proven otherwise exists, it is logical that every queer person has a coming-out story attached to their person. Openness is not, however, a question of either being closeted or being out, but something queer people continuously navigate in different contexts (Anderssen & Malterud, 2013, p. 14). According to Sedgwick (1990, p. 67), the overwhelming majority of even the most openly queer people are closeted to someone in their

lives. This is the case even in relatively accepting societies such as Norway, where a significant percentage of non-heterosexual individuals report deliberately hiding their sexual orientation at least once a month (Anderssen et al., 2021, p. 114).

Griffin (1992, pp. 175-178) identifies four strategies of queer identity management. The first strategy, 'passing', involves actively hiding one's non-heterosexuality to a degree where lying is necessary to preserve a heterosexual façade. The second strategy, 'covering', is a milder version of this, where the queer individual omits names and pronouns or uses gender-neutral language when talking about a partner, but does not hide their existence entirely. The third and fourth strategies on this continuum of visibility are 'being implicitly out' and 'being explicitly out'. Individuals who are implicitly out of the closet assume that their sexual orientation is known to others, but do not disclose it of their own accord. When implicitly out, while not necessarily lying, one maintains the option to step into the closet, should it be necessary to stay safe. Explicitly out people, on the other hand, clearly express their non-heterosexuality. A resulting disadvantage is that, in traditionally heteronormative spaces like workplaces or classrooms, explicitly out queer individuals can sometimes find themselves defined entirely by their sexual orientation (Hellesund, 2008, p. 144) or becoming an inadvertent representative for all queer people as a homogenous group (Richards, 2016, p. 48). In an ideal world, some might argue that neither hiding nor announcing one's sexual orientation would be necessary. However, due to the aforementioned assumption of default heterosexuality, as well as the fact that many places in the world are dangerous for queer people to be open in, the closet persists. As a shaping presence for most queer people, it forces them to navigate in which spaces and situations it is necessary, appropriate, or indeed safe, to disclose their sexual orientation to their interlocutors (Sedgwick, 1990, p. 68).

Rasmussen (2004, pp. 144-145) explains that there exists an idea that all queer people should come out – a 'coming-out imperative' – and, as a result, a view of closeted queer individuals as disempowered. Brockenbrough (2015, pp. 36-37) argues that coming out as a liberatory act is a westernized ideal, and explains that in communities where coming out is likely to sever ties to family or employers, many individuals choose to stay closeted to maintain these relationships. In this way, selective openness is an agentic practice for those who prioritize upholding simultaneous connections with their queer and other communities (Brockenbrough, 2015, pp. 36-37; Narvesen, 2013, p. 74). Richards (2016, p. 50) similarly asserts that coming-out discourse often fails to recognize the complexity of the intersections between sexuality

and other identity categories and, therefore, neglects to acknowledge how these might complicate decisions to come out of or stay in the closet.

Sedgwick (1990, pp. 202-203) writes about the historical tradition of preterition, which involves referring to homosexuality without explicitly naming it, instead using euphemisms or phrases alluding to secrecy or shame. In media, stories of teenagers coming out have traditionally revolved around ‘naming the unnameable’ – revealing and labeling that which already exists (Mitchell, 2015, p. 454). This idea of ‘coming out of the closet’ can be linked to essentialist views on sexuality, where people are born into a stable, unchanging sexual identity, and at some point reveal this to others, liberating them and putting an end to the secrecy surrounding their ‘true’ selves. Contrastingly, one can consider coming out as an active construction of one’s own sexual identity (Saxey, 2008, p. 6-7). As many come out while still young, some choose to declare an affinity instead of a definite identity – for example, ‘I like boys’ instead of ‘I am gay’ – to account for the fact that their sexual identity is not yet fully formed, or to reject labels (Guittar, 2014, p. 393).

Much of young adult literature with queer characters has traditionally featured coming out of the closet as its dramatic turning point, entertaining the possibility of it leading to desertion by other characters in the story (Cart & Jenkins, 2006, p. xx [20]). Cart and Jenkins (2006, p. 171) argue that as the teenage years are a time where one typically becomes hyper-aware of sexuality in all forms, young adult literature featuring a queer character whose sexual orientation goes unmentioned is illogical, given its intended audience. Thus, coming out of the closet, an act of queer visibility, continues to be a topic in literature as in real life.

2.2.2. Queer fatalism

It is no secret that real-life queer individuals are at an increased risk of mental health issues, suicide, and violent hate crimes (Anderssen & Malterud, 2013, p. 130; Eggebø et al., 2019, p. 16). Even their literary counterparts have, since they started appearing in books, often been associated with death (Browne, 2020, p. 1; Duckels, 2021a, p. 427). This interconnection, and implied causality, between queerness and mortality has been named ‘queer fatalism’, or ‘queer as fatal’ (Ahmed, 2017). The AIDS epidemic, beginning in the 1980s, was a strong contributor to the fatalistic notions around homosexuality (Bersani, 1987, p. 204). Initially called GRID, for ‘gay-related immunodeficiency’ (Altman, 1982), the disease’s prevalence in

male homosexuals led to them being seen not only as victims, but as killers – their sexuality as inherently diseased (Bersani, 1987, p. 211).

In literature, homosexuality has traditionally been portrayed as nearly irreconcilable with adulthood (Banks, 2009, p. 35). A typical storyline from the second half of the 1900s had naïve young female characters seduced into lesbianism before, in the end, being ‘put right’ by men who could offer them marriage and children (Cart & Jenkins, 2006, p. 4). Queer characters in novels have otherwise been known to die, typically from a hate crime, AIDS, or suicide; decide to spend their lives in the closet; or somehow rid themselves of their homosexuality (Browne, 2020, p. 7). As will be explored in greater detail later in this thesis, two of the considered novels contain instances of this: A character in *The Love and Lies of Rukhsana Ali* (Khan, 2019) is murdered in a hate crime, and a character in *Like a Love Story* (Nazemian, 2019) commits suicide while waiting to die from AIDS. Death is a popular theme in young adult literature, as experiencing a traumatic loss often motivates character development (Duckels, 2021a, p. 429). Regarding queer literature in particular, however, Browne (2020, p. 13) states that the deaths of queer characters have historically served one singular function: To make non-queer characters grow from the experience of the loss. In this way, queer characters are most useful when dead (Banks, 2009, p. 35).

This ‘dead queer’ trope presents queerness as something temporary and adolescent, and suggests that, for characters to transition successfully into adulthood, their queerness itself needs to die (Browne, 2020, p. 3, 18). What readers bring into the texts they read – their identities – shape what they take from them (Johnson et al., 2017, p. 569). How does it, then, affect young readers, queer or non-queer, to see queer characters so perpetually linked to death and suffering? Røthing (2008, pp. 258-259) explains that when students are repeatedly presented with stories of queer people struggling because of their sexuality, these stories remain in their minds as the only available representations of queerness. This is why Banks (2009, pp. 33-35) states that reading novels that include queer characters is insufficient in itself – teachers also need to consider what messages these novels present and what effects they have on the students. He further explains that as texts present us with values and representations of the choices available to us, teachers have the power to disrupt ways of thinking that lead to homonegativity and internalized homophobia through the novels they select for the classroom. One can certainly use books in which queer characters struggle, or die and are subsequently mourned by heterosexuals, to teach tolerance and sympathy, but sympathy is perhaps not what real-life queer people need – on the contrary, one should seek

to challenge the fatalism attached to queer lives (Hellesund, 2008, pp. 181-182). Browne (2020, pp. 19-20) suggests that novels which let queer characters mourn others, rather than being mourned themselves, can rectify the damage done by the ‘dead queer’ trope. This is why books with queer protagonists are indispensable – they center the queer perspective instead of viewing it, sympathetically, from the outside. Cart and Jenkins (2006, p. xx [20]) theorize that books with realistically portrayed queer characters can have a positive impact on young (presumably heterosexual) readers, acquainting them with queerness and promoting empathy rather than sympathy. Browne (2020, p. 20) explains that queer young adult literature has long grappled with this dilemma: On the one hand, painting a realistic picture of the world as heteronormative and, in certain places, homophobic, but on the other hand, presenting young readers with positive representations and affirmations of happy, fulfilled queer lives – mirrors that tell them something other than that queerness is incompatible with life.

Edelman (2004, pp. 30-31) states that in a heteronormative society, queerness and futurity – the hope of a happy future – are positioned as oppositional: As it can never produce children, the very symbol of future, to be queer is to resist futurity. Muñoz (2009, p. 1), on the contrary, asserts that “the future is queerness’ domain”, as it allows the hope of a future devoid of heteronormativity. Røthing and Svendsen (2009, pp. 240-242) propose that since school’s primary task is to prepare children for adulthood, teachers should keep queer students in mind and include queer representation when talking about topics like marriage or family. If no such representations exist in school, students may be left with the feeling that queerness and what is deemed ‘successful’ adulthood indeed are contradictory concepts.

2.3. Intersectionality

Kumashiro (2001, p. 11) asserts that sexuality cannot be understood as isolated from other identity markers. Intersectionality is the study of how different social categories, like age, ethnicity, class, ability, sexuality, and gender, intersect to affect how people are privileged or marginalized in society. An intersectional perspective views these categories not as mutually exclusive, but as reciprocally permeating one another and, in turn, creating complex social inequalities (Cho et al., 2013, p. 795; Collins, 2015, p. 2; Hancock, 2007, p. 3).

Intersectionality can be used as an analytical lens through which to view the surrounding world’s structures of power, privilege, oppression, and marginalization, and how they affect each person differently. Intersectional perspectives have often focused on people who

experience compound disadvantage based on several identity markers that each invite marginalization from society, for example poor, disabled women (Guittar & Guittar, 2015, p. 657).

Jiménez (2015, p. 419) asserts that recognition of bias is a prerequisite for change. In questions of privilege or oppression, considering only one of several relevant discourses, for example racism or homophobia, means accidentally reinforcing the power relations these discourses attempt to challenge (Crenshaw, 1991, p. 1282; Kumashiro, 2001, p. 1). In a Norwegian classroom, a queer female student belonging to the ethnic and cultural majority with a higher socioeconomic status will likely have very different experiences of identity affirmation than a queer student in the same class who does not share her gender, ethnic and cultural background, or socioeconomic standing. Treating these two hypothetical students as equally privileged or underprivileged based on them both being non-heterosexual, their one shared category, is inaccurate, because it negates the impact of the other categories they each belong to, as well as of the intersections between these. Furthermore, two students belonging to identical categories might still experience this differently.

There has been little mention of exactly *how* to study intersectionality, partly due to the complexity that arises from considering the full extent of a subject's multifaceted identity (McCall, 2005, pp. 1771-1772). Walby et al. (2012, p. 236) argue that the balance between fluidity and stability is a central dilemma: While the fluidity of categories must be acknowledged, they must also be considered stable enough to constitute meaningful operational units for analysis. McCall suggests three approaches with which to study intersectionality, the difference between them being how they understand and make use of categories. These approaches consider inter-, intra-, and anticategorical complexity. Firstly, examinations of intercategorical complexity strategically adopt social categories, seeking to elucidate the relationships between them to consider their interaction effects and how these affect the experiences of the individuals they are ascribed to (McCall, 2005, p. 1786; Walby et al., 2012, p. 227). Secondly, the intracategorical perspective considers particular intersections to illuminate the intragroup differences among the people belonging to them. It emphasizes that one individual can only ever represent one side of each of the multifaceted categories they belong to (McCall, 2005, pp. 1781-1782). According to Crenshaw (1991, p. 1242), sharing identity markers does not necessarily equate to sameness, and treating societal groups as homogenous can reproduce stereotypes and create tension within them. Finally, an anticategorical approach to intersectionality views categorization as reductive, and uses this

argument to question whether categories, as generalized social constructs, can adequately reflect the complexity of real-life experience (McCall, 2005, p. 1778). Queer theory, which at its core revolves around questioning and deconstructing normative categories and ideals (Parker, 2015, p. 189), might be interpreted as anticategorical. As will be addressed in the methodology section, this has implications for the method of this thesis.

2.3.1. Queer of color critique

Recent Norwegian studies have shown that unfortunately, and often incorrectly, non-white people are generally read as homophobic (Eggebo et al., 2018, p. 88; 2019, p. 38). In a United States based study, Guittar and Pals (2014, pp. 55-56) found that, while black respondents were less accepting of homosexuality than respondents from other racial groups, gender was a significantly more determining factor than race, with women generally more accepting than men. In addition to ignoring intracategorical complexity, the stereotype of non-white people as monolithically homonegative discounts the existence of non-white queer individuals. Jiménez (2015, p. 414) found that, in examining a selection of queer young adult literature, an overwhelming majority of the protagonists were gay, white males. As such, even in queer spaces dedicated to eradicating marginalization from the heteronormative society, Eurocentric perspectives are the most salient, reinforcing the invisibility of queer people of color.

Drawing on intersectionality, queer theory, feminism, and critical race theory, scholars have popularized the term ‘queer of color critique’, which investigates in particular the intersections of racial and sexual categories (Parker, 2015, p. 212). Hancock (2007, p. 3) asserts that from an intersectional perspective, all categories matter equally. The queer of color critique standpoint criticizes queer theory for its isolated focus on issues of sexuality and resulting erasure of other categories, and, like Kumashiro (2001, p. 11), sees queerness as inseparable from race, class, and gender (Ferguson, 2004, p. 4; Lakhani, 2020, p. 128). In other words, queer of color critique merges queer theory and intersectionality to illuminate the lived experiences of people belonging both to non-white minority groups and to the queer minority. Just as a black woman’s distinctive experience cannot be understood simply by adding the category of ‘black’ onto the category of ‘woman’, belonging simultaneously to a cultural and a sexual minority is an experience that cannot be fully understood from either one perspective. The categories are interrelated and affect each other to create a whole: Being queer shapes the experience of belonging to a cultural minority, just as belonging to a cultural minority shapes the experience of being queer.

Brockenbrough (2015, p. 28) reminds us that a sole focus on negative aspects of being a queer student of color negates the agency and unique insights these individuals hold. Queer people of color in Norway have explained that while on the one hand, their double minority status exposes them to exclusion and discrimination, on the other, it enables strong connections and kinship with others in similar positions (Eggebo et al., 2019, p. 103). As these students already exist at the intersections of multiple sources of marginalization from society, centering conversations about these individuals around difficulty contributes to a discourse of victimization (Eggebo et al., 2018, p. 10). This can, in turn, reinforce a fatalistic view on queer lives, with an added layer of fatalism attached to non-white lives. Queer of color critique seeks, therefore, to counteract the pathologization of queer people of color by examining which societal factors create this discourse of suffering (Brockenbrough, 2016, p. 287). While it is important to acknowledge the existence of compound marginalization, a focus on sympathy rather than empathy upholds the othering of queer students of color. Instead, teachers should seek to find stories which center their perspective and focuses on how they navigate the complexity of their intersecting identity markers.

According to Abustan and Rud (2016, p. 15), simply being supportive of queer students is not enough. Rather, teachers need to recognize how these queer students' individual identity categories create complex and differing wholes, and instead become 'allies of intersectionalities'. While it is near impossible to develop a collection of works diverse enough to provide each student with literary representations of all of their different intersecting identities simultaneously, that does not mean that one cannot try to be more inclusive when choosing literature for the English classroom. Without an intersectional lens, one might believe that all non-heterosexuals are equally affected by societal power structures, and that representing one, often white, queer character is enough to reflect 'the queer experience' back to the readers. With it, however, we recognize that we need books that can act as mirrors for queer students of minority backgrounds, because their experiences of being queer are often very different from those of their majority counterparts. In addition, books with queer and other minority representation can act as windows and sliding glass doors not only for majority students, but also for those students who belong to one, but not both, of the represented minority groups. Jeffries et al. (2022, p. 17) state that reading literature gives students opportunities to connect the characters' complex identities to their own, and thus explore the intersections between them. Additionally, helping students to recognize nuance in

their own and others' identities can open their minds to intracategorical complexity and help them build more affirming and inclusive communities.

2.4. Summary

The English classroom needs diverse young adult literature with queer representation to function as mirrors for queer students and as windows or sliding glass doors for non-queer students. Selecting good mirrors, windows, and sliding glass doors, and avoiding unintentional reproduction of harmful notions and stereotypes, requires awareness of certain issues pertaining to queer individuals and experiences to be able to consider how these are handled in the texts. For the purposes of this thesis, the issues for consideration are representations of the closet, queer fatalism, and intersectionality. The following chapter explains the novel selection criteria, discusses the study's limitations, details the search for secondary literature on the chosen novels, and summarizes the available secondary literature.

3. Methodology and Secondary Literature

3.1. Methodology

3.1.1. Novel selection

In attempting to raise awareness of issues to consider when assessing queer literature for recommendation or use in lower-secondary English classrooms, this thesis analyzes the novels *Like a Love Story* (Nazemian, 2019), *The Love and Lies of Rukhsana Ali* (Khan, 2019), and *You Should See Me in a Crown* (Johnson, 2020) in light of aforementioned concepts from queer and intersectional theory. As previously mentioned, Cart and Jenkins (2006, p. 1) define young adult literature as literature which is aimed at, features, is relevant to, and takes the perspective of young adults. These criteria were adhered to in the selection of novels for this thesis. Additionally, as this thesis examines *queer* representation, the protagonists needed to be depicted as such. To ensure quality, only award-winning titles were considered. As previously mentioned, a disproportionate amount of queer young adult literature is centered around gay, white males (Jiménez, 2015, p. 414). To avoid reproducing this imbalance, this thesis deliberately considers novels featuring non-white protagonists, two of which are female (discounting *Like a Love Story*'s third narrator, Judy, who is straight). As such, the works eligible for selection were award-winning young adult novels which featured queer protagonists of color and were published within the last three years (as the selection was made in 2022, this includes titles published in 2019). The three selected works were chosen through close readings of several relevant titles.

While all three selected novels are published and set in the United States, they each portray different ethnic and cultural minorities; a newly arrived Iranian immigrant (Nazemian, 2019), a second-generation immigrant from Bangladesh (Khan, 2019), and an African American (Johnson, 2020). Although all recently published, the selected novels show different aspects of growing up queer in different communities at different times. While *Like a Love Story* details growing up in a time when homosexuality carried a correlation to a fatal disease, *The Love and Lies of Rukhsana Ali* and *You Should See Me in a Crown* both center the voices of contemporary queer teenage girls. However, the former takes place across continents and details the difficulties of belonging to a culture traditionally viewed as homonegative, and the latter portrays a high school setting where the protagonist is accepted by her family. Although *The Love and Lies of Rukhsana Ali* was published first, *Like a Love Story*, as a historical novel, is presented first to allow the thesis to follow the chronology of the novels.

3.1.2. Limitations

A significant challenge in the research process has been the limited amount of published secondary literature concerning the novels. This is likely due to their recent publication dates. However, this could also indicate that queer scholars are not considering young adult literature – or that young adult literature scholars are not considering queer titles. As all interpretations are my own, the subjectivity of the analysis poses another limitation. However, it should be possible to evaluate the texts according to both these and other interpretive devices.

The study is additionally limited by an inherent paradox. One of the intersectional approaches presented is the anticategorical approach, which considers generalized categories unfit to reflect the complexity of real-life experience (McCall, 2005, pp. 1781-1782). As stated by Walby et al. (2012, p. 236), the dilemma of fluidity and stability of categories is central within intersectional theory: Categories need to be considered fluid enough to encompass intracategorical difference, but stable enough to constitute meaningful units. Rejecting an anticategorical approach in favor of one that allows for analysis, this study makes strategic use of social categories and treats them as, while reciprocally permeated, relatively stable. As previously mentioned, due to a lack of indication to the contrary in the novels, the study bases itself on an understanding of gender as a stable and binary construct. Additionally, the term ‘queer’ is used interchangeably with ‘non-heterosexual’, implying another binary. In doing so, this thesis contradicts the rejection of normativity implied by much of queer theory, and in particular, that of Muñoz (2009, p. 1), who deems queerness intangible. As such, a limitation of this thesis is the tension between queer theory and an anticategorical approach to intersectionality on the one hand, and its strategic use of categories on the other.

3.1.3. Literature search

Searches for secondary literature published on the three novels were conducted through engines *Oria*, *EBSCOhost* and *Google Scholar*. No restrictions were made regarding publication dates or language. Primary searches for each novel included peer-reviewed articles only to ensure reliability, but yielded few results. In line with Bolderston (2008, p. 90), who recommends not discounting non-peer-reviewed literature in favor of a broad appraisal, a second round of searches was conducted without this specification. This second

round primarily revealed book reviews. All matches were examined, but reviews which only contained synopses, as well as recommendations without additional commentary, were excluded. In the case of *The Love and Lies of Rukhsana Ali*, which, except for a brief mention, has received no scholarly attention thus far, two book reviews and a *Q+A* with its author are included in lieu of peer-reviewed secondary literature. *Like a Love Story* has received the most significant scholarly attention, in the form of three journal articles by the same author, while *You Should See Me in a Crown* is analyzed in two master's theses. The available secondary literature is presented below.

3.2. Secondary literature

3.2.1. *Like a Love Story*

The three articles concerning *Like a Love Story* (Duckels 2021a, 2021b, 2022) examine representations of AIDS-related deaths in young adult literature. Duckels (2021a) explains that in young adult novels from the late eighties and nineties, these fictional deaths reinforced the implied connection between queerness and death, taking the perspectives of sympathetic heterosexual bystanders. According to him, books about AIDS which center the perspectives of queer protagonists, and not those of the heterosexual characters who mourn them, are important for the development of queer young adult literature (p. 425). In another article, Duckels (2021b, p. 309) argues that whereas a focus on negative aspects of queer life at first glance can seem detrimental to the cause, depictions of inner conflict, such as the closet or fear of infection, asserts the virtue of queer adolescence. One of these inner conflicts is seen in *Like a Love Story*'s protagonist Reza, as he grapples not with avowing his difference from, but with recognizing his *sameness* with, a character dying from AIDS (Duckels, 2021a, p. 432). Instead of reproducing the trope of queer deaths as otherizing tragedies, Duckels (2022, p. 9) argues that the novel is part of a new trend in queer representation which challenges the relationship between tragedy and queerness and, instead of shame, shines a light on queer solidarity, community, and pride in the face of death.

3.2.2. *The Love and Lies of Rukhsana Ali*

In a *Q+A* with her publisher (Scholastic Canada, n.d.), author Sabina Khan explains that the most salient theme in *The Love and Lies of Rukhsana Ali* is that of navigating different cultures simultaneously. As the protagonist, Rukhsana, is Muslim, South Asian, American,

and a lesbian, this places her at the intersection between several different identity markers. Khan explains that as these different identities are ‘at odds’ with each other, Rukhsana feels conflicted and othered by all of them (Scholastic Canada, n.d., p. 3). In the only peer-reviewed search match, the novel is mentioned in a list of works which counter stereotypes of Muslim women as submissive and oppressed (Burge, 2022). Ketcheson (2019) praises Khan’s diverse representations of Bengali culture, and points out the intracategorical differences in the Bengali characters’ reactions to Rukhsana’s sexuality as evidence that Khan does not ‘allow’ stereotypes. As previously mentioned, a character in the book, Sohail, dies in a homophobic hate crime (Khan, 2019, p. 274). Khan explains the twofold reasoning behind writing this event: Firstly, it paints a picture of how dangerous it is for Rukhsana, a queer person, to stay in Bangladesh; and secondly, it acts as the catalyst for her parents’ acceptance of her sexuality (Scholastic Canada, n.d., pp. 3-4). In their respective book reviews, Ketcheson (2019) considers Sohail’s death an unfortunate incident that contradicts the novel’s overarching theme of acceptance, whereas Zippan (2020) is of the opinion that Rukhsana’s parents’ subsequent change of heart, while satisfying to the reader, seems unlikely.

3.2.3. *You Should See Me in a Crown*

You Should See Me in a Crown has received some academic attention, mostly concerning questions of race rather than sexuality. Kessler-Pilgram (2021) analyzes the role of race and othering processes in three novels, among them *You Should See Me in a Crown*, in her master’s thesis, and writes that protagonist Liz contributes to her own othering by deliberately staying closeted to avoid the repercussions of coming out (p. 75). She further argues that while Liz suffers ‘double otherness’ on the basis of her sexuality and race (p. 71), the novel handles the topics of homophobia and racism too lightly, resolving Liz’s issues in a manner not reflective of the experiences of real-life queer people of color (pp. 76-77). Another master’s thesis (Neely, 2022) assesses the novel, as one of fifteen, in terms of multicultural representation. In contrast to Kessler-Pilgram, Neely considers its “controversial themes” surrounding racism, sexuality, and gender norms unfit for younger readers (p. 62). Moreover, the novel is included in a list of recommended novels reflecting the ‘multiplicities of black girlhood’ (Hines & Menefee, 2022, p. 70). In a panel discussion on intersectionality in texts, author Leah Johnson explained that her own intersecting identities informed Liz’s (Crawley et al., 2022, p. 82).

3.3. Summary

In presenting original analyses of hitherto undertheorized works, this thesis aims to contribute to queer scholarship on young adult literature. The study applies three theoretical concepts – the closet, queer fatalism, and intersectionality – to three young adult novels featuring queer protagonists of color. The purpose of this is to raise awareness of issues teachers should consider in order to select literature with the potential to act as windows, mirrors, and sliding glass doors for all students, counteracting the othering of queer students in particular. The following chapters analyze and discuss the novels in light of the theoretical framework.

4. *Like a Love Story*

4.1. Introduction

Like a Love Story (Nazemian, 2019) is set in New York in 1989, at the height of the AIDS epidemic. The novel alternates between three teenaged first-person narrators: Reza, a newly arrived Iranian immigrant terrified to accept his homosexuality; Art, an AIDS activist and photographer who is openly gay; and Judy, an aspiring fashion designer and Art's straight best friend, who falls in love with Reza. Another central character is Judy's uncle Stephen, also an activist, who is in the late stages of AIDS. As Reza and Art fall for each other, Reza's paralyzing fear of contracting HIV stops him from acting on his feelings, and he instead dates Judy to uphold an impression of heterosexuality. The novel contains a plethora of intertextual references to real-life eighties pop culture; most notably to pop singer Madonna, but also through Uncle Stephen's 'Queer 101' notecards, which he gives to younger activists.

In addition to being on *Time* Magazine's list of the best young adult books of all time (*Time*, n.d.), the novel was awarded a Stonewall Honor in children's and young adult literature (Gillis, 2020, p. 93), for 'exceptional merit' relating to queer experience (American Library Association, 2016), the year following its release. Both of the aforementioned achievements also apply to *You Should See Me in a Crown* (Johnson, 2020), which will be considered later in this thesis.

When selecting a text with queer characters, especially one that deals with AIDS, for classroom use, teachers should be aware of what representations of queerness their students are afforded. Considering the metaphor by Bishop (1990a, p. ix, 1990b, p. 3), what is the novel's potential as window, mirror, or sliding glass door? As previously stated, this analysis will focus in turn on how the novel deals with the closet and coming out, notions of queer fatalism, and how characters' intersecting identities affect their experiences.

4.2. The closet

The closet is a substantial presence in *Like a Love Story*. Even though only one of the novel's narrators, Reza, is closeted, the closet he occupies greatly affects all three protagonists. The reader becomes acquainted with Reza's homosexuality within the first few pages, where he describes that he buries this knowledge deep inside himself and has not yet disclosed it to anyone (Nazemian, 2019, p. 7). In an act of preterition, as defined by Sedgwick (1990, pp. 202-203), Reza alludes to his homosexuality as "what I know that I am" (p. 14). As

previously mentioned, Cart and Jenkins (2006, p. 1) describe the impact of discovering that ‘there are others like me’. When his stepbrother, Saadi, becomes the first person to name the unnameable, Reza is simultaneously terrified to be exposed and elated to find that he might not be the only one:

“... You better not be a fag,” he says. “One per school is more than enough.”

My heart races. Is it because this hairy beast has figured out in a few moments what my mother has not figured out in seventeen years? Or is it because I now know something about my new school that I would never have imagined in my wildest dreams that there will be someone like me there? (Nazemian, 2019, p. 11)

The other queer person in question is soon discovered to be Art. Considering the strategies of identity management identified by Griffin (1992, pp. 175-178), Art is ‘explicitly out’. Loud and unapologetic, he attends meetings with ACT UP, a political organization working to improve the lives of AIDS patients and end the epidemic, and photographs their protests. While Reza is scared, Art is defiant, and often angered by the heteronormativity that deems him different from others: Like the word ‘queer’ has been reclaimed by scholars in real life, he reclaims the slur ‘fag’ as purely descriptive of himself (Nazemian, 2019, pp. 343-344).

4.2.1. The closet’s effects on others

While Art is explicitly out of the closet, Reza employs the strategy of ‘passing’ (Griffin, 1992, pp. 175-178). Denying his attraction to Art, he romances Judy to uphold the illusion of heterosexuality. In this way, the closet hurts not only Reza, who presents an inauthentic version of himself to his friends, but also Art and Judy. Stephen, who has been explicitly out for as long as the three teenagers have known him, reveals that he, too, dated a girl in his youth, desperate to prove his heterosexuality and escape bullying (p. 325). In other words, for both Stephen and Reza, maintaining the closet is a strategy of protection that necessitates dishonesty, and, thus, damages relationships.

Judy, excited at the prospect of her first romantic relationship, is angry with Saadi when he taunts her with his suspicion that Reza, her boyfriend, is gay. Although she might also subconsciously suspect this, she tries to convince herself that Saadi merely assumes Reza’s sexual orientation based on his non-conformity to societal norms of heterosexuality – primarily, his growing infatuation with singer Madonna. While Saadi’s suspicions eventually do turn out to be correct, Judy seems to reject heteronormative ideas when she excuses his

asexual behavior with her: “He’s probably just scared, or shy. Lots of straight men like Madonna. Saadi is such a stereotype himself that he can only think in stereotypes” (p. 169). When Reza eventually comes out to Judy, he begins by acknowledging the transparency of his closet: “Judy, you know what I’m about to say” (p. 212). Reza employs the strategy, as explained by Guittar (2014, p. 393), of disclosing an affinity instead of an identity: “I like men”. Uncharacteristically, Judy seems to apply heteronormative notions to the situation as she thinks, “How could I have been so blind to all the signs right in front of me?” (Nazemian, 2019, p. 213). The revelation that Reza likes Art, not Judy, leads to the three of them falling out. Reza later reflects, “My own life is one big lie I’ve shielded people from because I’ve been too afraid to hurt them” (p. 224). In reality, the lie, and not the truth, is what hurts the people around him the most. As Cart and Jenkins (2006, p. xx [20]) describe as typical, the novel does use coming out, and people’s reactions to it, as a dramatic turning point. However, although it initially leads to conflict, Reza leaving the closet ultimately resolves rather than destroys. By staying in the closet, he hurts his friends: Judy, by lying to her, and Art, by denying his feelings for him. By leaving it, he fosters a friendship devoid of lies with Judy and enables a romantic relationship with Art.

4.2.2. Closeted families

... life for gay people is inherently unfair, because most gay people are born into families that just don’t get them at all. And that’s the *best-case* scenario. The worst cases... being abused, kicked out of the house, thrown into the streets. (Nazemian, 2019, p. 22, emphasis in original)

In the quote above, Art laments his own parents’ reaction to his coming out. Although they neither disown him nor kick him out of the house, his mother implores him not to tell anyone (p. 23), his father bribes him with a large donation to an AIDS charity to stop the embarrassment of his son showing his face at protests (p. 70), and Reza, as his boyfriend, is not allowed into their home (p. 295). When Art steps out of the closet, his parents step inside it, taking over the role as concealers of his sexuality. This is true for several parental figures in the novel, as will be revisited below. Ultimately, Art’s coming out damages his relationship with his parents, who do not appear to change their beliefs as the novel progresses.

As stated by Brockenbrough (2015, pp. 36-37) and Narvesen (2013, p. 74), many queer people choose to stay closeted in certain parts of their lives to keep important relationships

intact. Although his supportive older sister, Tara, coaxes him out of the closet by revealing that she knows and accepts him (Nazemian, 2019, p. 222), Reza initially wishes to remain closeted, for fear of how his mother, Mina, might react. On several occasions, he imagines his coming out leading to her certain death, and as such, in his view, the closet protects them both from harm. When he eventually does come out to her, he is unable to utter the word, again instead opting to disclose an affinity: “I’ve always liked boys” (p. 264). Mina’s first reaction is denial, insisting that Reza’s sexuality is a phase and that he is confused. Then, like Art’s parents, she steps into the closet previously occupied by her son, asking him not to tell anyone else. Reza’s stepfather, Abbas, later privately applauds his courage and assures him that while his mother needs time to digest the news, she will understand. Her reluctance to accept his sexual orientation, in Abbas’ view, is rooted in two kinds of fear: fear of the unknown and fear of her child being harmed. “She hasn’t been exposed to people like you, or to gay rights. ... She’s scared life will be difficult for you, scared you could get sick” (p. 391). A key difference between Reza’s mother and Art’s parents is that, while the latter remain intolerant and ashamed – in the closet – for the duration of the novel, Mina attends Stephen’s memorial service, where she expresses both her sympathy for Reza’s loss and a wish to understand him better (pp. 392-398). As will be discussed later, Stephen’s death appears to be the catalyst for this change.

Stephen’s closet is also inhabited by others. With the exception of Judy, his closest family members keep his predicament hidden. His mother neither visits nor calls him, even on his deathbed, and his sister, Judy’s mother, lets a friend’s assumption that he is dying of cancer stand uncorrected, explaining that she feels no need to disclose Stephen’s true ailment to people she assumes would not understand (p. 84). Not correcting erroneous assumptions, depending on whether one considers it to be lying or omission, can be interpreted as either a passing or covering strategy on Stephen’s behalf, something that strongly contradicts Stephen’s own openness about his sexuality and diagnosis. One can argue that although Art, Stephen, and, eventually, Reza are all explicitly out of the closet, they are closeted by proxy, as their families are, to varying degrees, still in it.

Judy’s mother joins a protest Stephen is not well enough to attend near the end of his life, and sits with him on his deathbed – like Tara is of Reza, Stephen’s sister is supportive of him in the absence of his mother. As he lays dying, Judy reflects: “He’s the most honest, kind, and courageous man I know, and soon he’ll be dead because of those very qualities. Dead because he dreamed himself into existence. Because he lived in truth” (p. 372). Here, while praising

his virtues (Duckels, 2021b, p. 309), Judy implies a causal relationship between Stephen's coming out and his premature demise. The notion of causality between homosexuality and death is prevalent in this novel, and will be discussed in further detail below.

4.3. Queer fatalism

I knew that I liked it when boys' swim trunks fell. But the fact that this would kill me, this was something I did not know until that moment. Until *Time* magazine informed me that I would die soon. I've been living in fear ever since. (Nazemian, 2019, p. 8)

When Reza spots a magazine depicting young men with lesions dying from AIDS, he makes the first connection between homosexuality and death. From this point on, he seems to have accepted that he will meet an early demise: He believes he will never reach his mother's age, and despite never having touched another boy, he is scared his blood might be contagious. For this reason, he stays closeted and celibate as a protective measure, as he imagines his death would kill his mother: "I need to live, and to live, I can't ever be what I know that I am" (p. 14).

Art, like Reza, seems to have internalized the narrative, as mentioned by Bersani (1987, p. 211), of gay men as diseased killers: "Who will love me when all they'll see when they look at me is the possibility that I may kill them?" (Nazemian, 2019, p. 24). In a time when dying men are the only available representations of adult homosexuality, the prospect of infection stops both Art and Reza from acting on their desires. Art, thinking of Stephen and his late partner, reflects, "They give me hope that someday I'll find someone to fall in love with. And yeah, maybe that person will die, or maybe I'll die, but isn't that better than never loving?" (p. 106). Love, to him, means accepting the possibility of contracting a deadly disease. This is in keeping with the widespread belief at the outset and height of the epidemic in the 1980s that AIDS was either innate to, or a result of, male homosexuality (Altman, 1982; Bersani, 1987, p. 211). For Art and Reza, at this moment in time, the notion of 'queer as fatal', as described by Ahmed (2017), actually rings true – their homosexuality really could be incompatible with adulthood.

4.3.1. Stephen as 'the dead queer'

Stephen, Judy's uncle, is a character steeped in fatalism from the beginning of the novel: His partner and most of his friends have already died from AIDS, and because he, too, is infected,

the same fate awaits him. When Reza repeatedly declines invitations to weekly movie nights with Art and Judy at Stephen's apartment, Judy correctly interprets his reluctance to meet Stephen as fear of infection. However, she is of the mistaken impression that this fear might be a product of homonegative attitudes (p. 164). In reality, it does relate to homophobia, but of the fearful, internalized kind: Reza fears that Stephen represents a window into his own future. As Duckels (2021a, p. 432) argues: He is not scared of their difference, but of their similarity.

When faced with only a few painful days left to live, Stephen regains control over his destiny by committing suicide. As mentioned above, Duckels (2022, p. 9) positions the novel within a new trend of queer representation which challenges the link between queerness and tragedy. While said link is overwhelmingly present in the book, Stephen dying on his own terms makes him an agent rather than a victim, empowering him rather than evoking sympathy. As pointed out by Browne (2020, p. 13), in many novels, a queer character's death works to elicit growth in heterosexual characters. This novel is no exception. As previously mentioned, Stephen's sister joins a protest he is too ill to attend himself – arguably her first act of allyship – once it becomes clear that his death is impending, and Reza's mother first expresses dawning acceptance on the way to his memorial service. The trope of the dead queer continues here: A queer character dies, and straight characters are better for it. However, as is encouraged by Browne (2020, pp. 19-20), when Stephen dies, the perspectives of *queer* mourners take center stage. Although the novel does feature straight growth in the face of queer death, one can argue that Stephen's passing serves a more important function: For Reza, losing Stephen drives his decision to finally sleep with Art. In a way, seeing someone he cares about die from AIDS pushes him to engage in the very behavior that might expose him to the illness. It seems that Reza finally comes to terms with their sameness, and just like Stephen expresses that “getting AIDS helped free him from the last remnants of shame inside him” (p. 111), his death and legacy do the same for Reza. Here, queer death enables queer life.

4.3.2. Queer futurity

In one of his 'Queer 101' notecards, Stephen acknowledges the struggles of being queer in school, while also expressing hope for a more inclusive future:

There may be no harder place to be queer than high school, a place of bullies and slurs, a place steeped in rituals of heterosexuality. ... Maybe someday high school will

change. Maybe someday there can be two homecoming queens, maybe someday girls can ask other girls to the prom ... (Nazemian, 2019, pp. 216-217)

This message of futurity provides affirmation for Reza and Art, but also potentially for young queer readers who, more than thirty years after the novel's events, face homonegativity in their school environments. Stephen's predictions will be revisited in the chapter on *You Should See Me in a Crown* (Johnson, 2020), a novel which revolves around growing up queer in high school in the present day.

In the final chapter, set in 2016, an adult Art provides a message of hope to the reader: Although he is HIV positive, modern medicine has kept him healthy. Here, the causal relationship between infection and death is broken. However, another relationship is strengthened – that between homosexuality and hate crimes – when he references the fear and grief related to a real-life shooting at a queer nightclub (p. 412). This will, unfortunately, also ring true in a Norwegian context, given the targeted shooting at a gay nightclub during Oslo Pride in 2022 (Benjaminsen & Rød, 2022). Although AIDS is no longer a discernible threat to queer lives in the Western world, hate is. The last chapter also provides a welcome break from the theme of death by revealing that Reza went on to have a husband and children – as Edelman (2004, pp. 30-31) put it, the very symbol of futurity. Here, both the notion of queerness as temporary and adolescent, and that of its incompatibility with adulthood (Browne, 2020, p. 3), are disrupted.

4.4. Intersectionality

Alternating between narrators belonging to different identity categories, *Like a Love Story* provides its own intersectional lens. The three protagonists' differing intersecting layers of identity allow for exploration of intercategorical complexity, which, as described by McCall (2005, p. 1786), involves strategic use of categories to consider their interaction effects. Although Art and Reza share their gender and sexual minority status, Art, like Judy, belongs to the ethnic and cultural majority. As mentioned earlier in this thesis, intersectional analysis presupposes the notion of identity categories as reciprocally permeated, rather than as mutually exclusive (Cho et al., 2013, p. 795; Collins, 2015, p. 2; Hancock, 2007, p. 3). Considering Reza's, Art's, and Judy's identity markers and intersections thereof, one can examine how their shared and unshared categories affect their experiences.

When Art and Judy argue after it is revealed that the former is involved with Reza, Art attempts to explain to Judy that because he is gay, everything he feels is “wrapped in fear and shame” (Nazemian, 2019, p. 252), and, thus, falling in love is a very different experience for him than for her. He claims that Judy’s heterosexuality grants her immense privilege which prevents her from understanding his struggle, while Judy argues that Art’s gender and higher socioeconomic status outweigh the disadvantages he faces because of his sexual orientation. Judy feels that Art uses his queerness to avoid responsibility for her heartbreak:

He apologized, but the apology was trumped by how sorry I am meant to feel for him because he’s gay. And that pisses me off even more, because no one in the world has given him more support and sympathy than me. (Nazemian, 2019, pp. 254-255)

Recognizing one’s own biases, according to Jiménez (2015, p. 419), is essential to achieve change. It seems, here, that Judy and Art are incapable of recognizing how their views of the situation are affected by their different intersecting layers of privilege and marginalization. In addition, Judy seems to mistake Art’s plea for empathy for one for sympathy, which, as previously mentioned, reinforces the victimized discourse attached to queer lives (Eggebo et al., 2018, p. 10).

4.4.1. Queer and of color

Reminded of Crenshaw’s (1991, p. 1242) claim that ignoring intracategorical differences reproduces stereotypes, and Brockenbrough’s (2015, p. 28) assertion that a sole focus on the disadvantages of existing as a queer person of color is unfortunate, we turn to consider the way in which the novel complicates the stereotype described by Eggebo et al. (2018, p. 88; 2019, p. 38) of cultural minorities as more homonegative than their majority counterparts. As previously mentioned, queer of color critique sees sexuality as inseparable from other categories like race, class, and gender (Kumashiro, 2001, p. 11; Ferguson, 2004, p. 4; Lakhani, 2020, p. 128). Art and Reza, the two queer narrators, are both boys from relatively wealthy households, so Reza, making a sweeping generalization, initially believes that their differing cultural backgrounds are what makes Art more confident in his sexuality: “Maybe his parents support him unconditionally, cheer him on no matter what. I bet they do. That’s what American parents are like” (p. 54). As previously mentioned, this is shown not to be true: Art’s parents continue to disapprove of his lifestyle, while Reza’s mother and stepfather’s approaches to his sexuality are more dynamic. Even Judy can be interpreted as

subscribing to the stereotype when she suspects that Reza's reluctance to be near Stephen and Art is rooted in homonegativity (p. 164) – although it is not explicit whether this concern is based on his ethnicity or on his perceived heterosexuality.

Further challenging the stereotype's accuracy, intracategorical complexity between two characters of a similar age and cultural background is shown twice in Reza's family. Firstly, while his stepbrother Saadi feeds Reza's internalized homophobia with frequent taunts and by reminding him that in Iran, he would be killed for his sexuality (p. 288), his sister Tara shows support. As will be revisited below, the role of the sibling in all three novels analyzed in this thesis is one of unwavering acceptance. Secondly, Reza's parental figures' reactions to his coming out also differ. As detailed above, his mother is in denial for a while before slowly coming to terms with Reza's sexuality, while his stepfather expresses his support and excuses her behavior as fear of the unknown, claiming that Iran has no history of 'this' (p. 391). This, in addition to Saadi's statement that "homosexuality is luckily a problem that Iranians don't have" (p. 12), is evidence of what Reza perceives as the impossibility of being simultaneously gay and Iranian:

"How could I not know my own son is like this?"

Like this. I'm like this. It suddenly hits me that there is no word for gay in our language. No word for coming out. In the language my mother speaks, I literally don't exist. (Nazemian, 2019, p. 265)

Queer individuals from ethnic or cultural minorities exist at the intersection between two identity markers which both invite marginalization from society. Moreover, these identity markers create a complex identity vulnerable to negativity from others who belong to one, but not both, of the categories. Enduring both homophobic and racist name-calling, Reza experiences compound marginalization. Nevertheless, his experience cannot be summarized by adding 'Iranian' onto 'homosexual', as the facets of his identity mutually affect one another – Reza's experience of being queer is permeated by his belonging to a cultural minority. This complexity is also experienced by Jimmy, Stephen's friend who is also suffering from AIDS. When asked if it bothers him to be stared at for his visible illness, Jimmy states that due to his other marginalized identity markers, "white ladies were staring scornfully at my queer black ass long before I had AIDS. I'm used to it" (p. 150). The character of Jimmy constitutes an example of the challenges and unjustness queer people of color have faced in lamenting the fact that white men are disproportionately favored in clinical trials for AIDS treatments (pp. 278, 360). In the last chapter, Jimmy is revealed to still be

alive, having survived long enough to receive effective treatment. With this example, the novel does what, according to Brockenbrough (2016, p. 287), queer of color critique seeks to do: It disrupts the pathologization of queer people of color.

4.5. Conclusion

This chapter has considered the representations *Like a Love Story* provides to young readers; specifically, how it deals with the closet and coming out, how it reproduces or disrupts notions of queer fatalism, and how its characters' intersecting identities affect their experiences. What mirrors does it offer young queer readers, and what kinds of window or sliding glass door can it be for non-queer readers? In other words: What should educators be aware of when contemplating this novel for classroom use or recommendation?

The novel presents a multifaceted perspective on the closet. Reza positions himself inside it for protection, both for himself and for others. His strategy of passing means lying to and inadvertently hurting his friends. On the one hand, coming out of the closet is shown to be a liberatory act for Reza. On the other hand, Art's coming out causes damage to his familial relationships. By depicting both outcomes, the novel navigates the difficult balance, as described by Browne (2020, p. 20), between realistic and uplifting portrayals of queer life. The closet is shown as a complex construct which, even after its owners come out, is often inhabited by others, in the ways they continue to hide their non-heterosexuality. As mentioned above, Art explains that many queer people experience more severe consequences when they leave the closet than he did. This will be explored in the following chapter on *The Love and Lies of Rukhsana Ali* (Khan, 2019).

The novel reproduces and disrupts notions of queer fatalism in different ways. As the action plan stipulates (Ministry of Culture and Equality, 2023, p. 21), the novel provides a window for all young readers into an important event in queer history – the AIDS epidemic. Suicide, hate crimes, and AIDS are all present in the story, and fear of infection is a constant in both of the two queer narrators' minds. Stephen's death does lead to heterosexual character development, continuing the trope of queer characters being most useful when dead. However, his death also causes another *queer* person's growth. Homosexuality is, as was realistic at the time in which the novel is set, constantly linked to death and suffering, but the book also presents messages of futurity. As Røthing and Svendsen (2009, pp. 240-242) implore teachers to be mindful of, the novel includes representations of successful queer

adulthood for young queer and non-queer students alike. Balancing between authenticity and positivity, readers will find different queer fates represented: Stephen succumbs to illness, but Art, Reza, and Jimmy prevail. Readers are reminded that even though HIV infection is now treatable, queer lives are still at risk of violent hate crimes, and the fight for equality and safety is far from over.

The novel displays both inter- and intracategorical differences in its portrayals of people existing at the intersections of different categories, providing ample windows, mirrors, and sliding glass doors for different readers. From an intercategorical stance, Art and Judy struggle to see beyond their own disadvantages to recognize the privilege their other identity markers provide them with, while Reza's experience of being queer is greatly, albeit mostly negatively, affected by his cultural identity. Although a potential mirror for queer students of color who find their struggles navigating complex identities echoed in Reza, the novel lacks representation of queer people of color who consider their minority background a strength, leaving the impression that Reza manages his identity *despite* this. Upending the stereotype of cultural minorities being less tolerant of homosexuality, however, the novel portrays two families reacting very differently to their sons coming out. Furthermore, from an intracategorical standpoint, readers are reminded that sharing categories does not necessarily equate to sameness. *Like a Love Story* gives diverse representations of queer lives, centering not only one, but two queer people's perspectives – recognizing that, as Jimmy says when talking about queer representation (Nazemian, 2019, p. 298): “Perspective matters”.

5. *The Love and Lies of Rukhsana Ali*

5.1. Introduction

Set in modern-day United States and Bangladesh, *The Love and Lies of Rukhsana Ali* (Khan, 2019) details the aftermath of the accidental coming out of teenaged lesbian Rukhsana. After being discovered kissing her girlfriend, Ariana, by her mother, Rukhsana is taken to her parents' home country of Bangladesh under the false pretense of visiting her ailing grandmother. In reality, Rukhsana's parents seek to cure her homosexuality through arranged marriage, and intend to trap her in Bangladesh until she is wed to a suitable husband.

The novel has been shortlisted and commended for a number of awards. In addition to being one of YALSA's 2020 Quick Picks for Reluctant Young Adult Readers (American Library Association, 2020), it has received commendations for the South Asia Book Award for Children's and Young Adult Literature, for accurate and skillful portrayal of South Asians (Book Connections, n.d.-b; South Asia Book Award, 2023), and the Rainbow List, for significant LGBTQ content (Book Connections, n.d.-a). The latter of these is shared with *You Should See Me in a Crown* (Johnson, 2020), the third title this thesis will consider.

Choosing a novel with heavy topics such as arranged marriage and child abuse for classroom use requires acute awareness on the teacher's behalf not only of the themes' appropriateness, but also of the messages the book conveys to the students about the identities it represents. This chapter attempts to develop an understanding of this by exploring the novel in light of each of the research questions in order: How does the novel deal with the closet and coming out? How are notions of queer fatalism reproduced or disrupted? How do the characters' intersecting identities affect their experiences?

5.2. The closet

The Love and Lies of Rukhsana Ali exhibits one of the worst-case scenarios offered by the character of Art referenced in the discussion on *Like a Love Story*: abuse. When Rukhsana's parents discover that she has a girlfriend, they react with anger and physical violence; her mother by hitting Ariana and calling Rukhsana 'sick' and 'disgusting' (Khan, 2019, pp. 85-86), and her father by hitting Rukhsana and blaming himself for letting her have too many 'free-thinking' American friends (pp. 89-90). As is the case in many queer young adult novels (Cart & Jenkins, 2006, p. xx [20]), Rukhsana's accidental coming out works as the novel's dramatic turning point, the consequences of which change the trajectory of her life.

While out to her friends and younger brother, Rukhsana is initially in the closet with her parents, actively hiding and lying about this part of her life through the identity management strategy Griffin (1992, pp. 175-178) identifies as ‘passing’. Like Reza in *Like a Love Story*, Rukhsana considers doing what Brockenbrough (2015, pp. 36-37) and Narvesen (2013, p. 74) suggest many queer people in less accepting communities do: stay closeted with their families while living openly with others. Before her accidental outing, her plan is to wait until university to live openly with Ariana without telling her family back home. When Ariana, who is otherwise explicitly out, expresses her frustration at having to keep their relationship in the closet, Rukhsana reflects:

Who could blame her? Was I ever going to have the courage to face my parents? I thought I had the perfect plan. We would go to Caltech together and be far away from home, so no one in Seattle would know about our relationship. But was that really how I wanted to live my life? In the shadows, hiding away the person I loved? (Khan, 2019, p. 30)

Considering Brockenbrough’s (2015, pp. 36-37) proposition that coming out as an act of liberation is a westernized ideal, as well as Richards’ (2016, p. 50) assertion that the intersectionality of an individual’s identity complicates decisions of coming out or staying closeted, Rukhsana’s reflections may ring true for young readers living at the intersections of seemingly incompatible identities. As will be revisited later in this chapter, Rukhsana’s preferred solution to this conundrum is to separate the two parts of her identity.

5.2.1. The family closet

Although they argue that she is asking them to “accept something that is completely against [their] beliefs” (Khan, 2019, p. 100), the primary motivation for Rukhsana’s parents’ resistance seems to be fear of judgment. Terrified of reactions from their families in Bangladesh, as well as from the Bengali diaspora in their hometown of Seattle, parents Zubaida and Ibrahim plead with Rukhsana to stay closeted:

“Rukhsana, you have to think about us too,” said Mom. “What are we supposed to tell all our relatives back in Bangladesh? That we let you run around and now you’re a lesbian? ... How can I even utter this word to them?” (Khan, 2019, p. 99)

Like the parental figures in *Like a Love Story*, Rukhsana’s parents move into the closet once she is thrust out of it, and, like Art, Rukhsana continually rejects their attempts to control her.

When Zubaida tries to make Rukhsana reevaluate her decision to attend university in California, she demonstrates their core difference: “Mom, I can’t make important life decisions based on what people might say” (p. 23). Considering Hellesund’s (2008, p. 115) statement that heteronormativity produces shame, it is interesting that Rukhsana never appears to feel ashamed of her sexuality, despite being held accountable for her family’s honor within a heteronormative community which looks down upon not only homosexual, but also interracial, relationships. On the contrary, in line with Burge’s (2022) classification of the novel as one that defies stereotypes of Muslim women as submissive, and in stark contrast to Reza’s inner struggle in *Like a Love Story*, Rukhsana is self-assured in her intention not to meet the expectations her family sets for her. When asked where she intends to find a suitable husband, she sarcastically references the opening line of the classic *Pride and Prejudice* (Austen, 2002): “Apparently, it is a truth universally acknowledged that a single Bengali girl of marrying age must be in want of a husband” (Khan, 2019, p. 40). Although not all readers may spot this parallel, Rukhsana’s parents swallowing their pride and overcoming their prejudice is what ultimately allows the family to step outside the confines of the closet.

Perhaps because a friend claims to have cured her own son’s homosexuality (p. 88), Zubaida seems to believe that Rukhsana’s sexuality is treatable. In line with the trope described by Cart and Jenkins (2006, p. 4) of young women’s lesbianism being remedied through marriage, Zubaida and Ibrahim decide that the best course of action is to bring Rukhsana to her grandmother’s home in Dhaka, Bangladesh, to peruse suitors. Although Ibrahim expresses doubt about their plan, Zubaida convinces him by reminding him of two things: Firstly, that if someone finds out, they will be humiliated; and secondly, that people “get killed for these kinds of things here” (Khan, 2019, p. 118). Not only worried for her child’s safety, she is also concerned about the implications for the family’s reputation.

5.2.2. Out of the closet

When her family follows her home to Seattle after realizing that she has escaped Bangladesh, Rukhsana is astounded to find her parents apologizing for their actions. As will be detailed below, their change of heart is uncovered to be largely motivated by their shock at the murder of Sohail, Rukhsana’s husband-to-be. Informing Rukhsana that they now wholeheartedly accept her, her mother and aunt begin initiating conversations about her sexual orientation, explaining that they “don’t know anything about lesbians” (p. 306). After having been ashamed and terrified of coming out of the closet, Rukhsana’s family members make a

conscious effort to step out of it. In addition to joining a South Asian LGBTQ support group, they express interest in issues pertaining to her sexuality, like her options for having children with a female partner (pp. 318-319), disrupting the notion presented by Edelman (2004, pp. 30-31) of queerness and futurity as oppositional concepts. On the novel's last page, Rukhsana expresses the joy she feels at her family's now "unconditional acceptance" (p. 332). As Sohail's death is the catalyst for this acceptance, however, it can be discussed whether it is, indeed, unconditional.

5.3. Queer fatalism

When Rukhsana is outraged at her mother's revelation that she will not be leaving Dhaka until she is married, her father, Ibrahim, experiences a panic attack and is taken to hospital. Zubaida blames Rukhsana for the incident, implicating that her queerness has fatal consequences: "This is all your fault, Rukhsana. If you hadn't been so selfish none of this would have happened" (p. 135). When Rukhsana repeatedly makes it clear that she does not intend to marry, Zubaida locks her in her room, sedates her and hires an exorcist to expel what she believes is a demon causing her same-sex attraction. As explained by Browne (2020, p. 18), the trope of the dead queer suggests that characters' queerness needs to die for them to grow up. Here, Zubaida literally attempts to 'kill' Rukhsana's homosexuality in order for her to develop into an appropriate version of adulthood. After the 'exorcism' is complete, Ibrahim requests that the door to the closet is locked forever:

"Rukhsana," Dad began, "we are so happy that you are okay now. This was a very difficult time for all of us, but now we can put it behind us and never speak of it again. That is very important, do you understand?" (Khan, 2019, p. 204)

This incident is exemplary of the abuse Rukhsana experiences at the hands of her parents. Although she refuses to accept arranged marriage as her fate and continues to envision a happy future with Ariana, the reality is that her coming out has harrowing consequences, her homosexuality being blamed for her own and others' suffering. To her parents, whether an American influence or a demon, her homosexuality is a malevolent outside force which needs to be eradicated. As such, for Rukhsana, queerness – and her refusal to relinquish it for her parents' sake – is, if not fatal, then at least dangerous.

5.3.1. Sohail as ‘the dead queer’

The most prominent example of queer fatalism is found in the character of Sohail, one of Rukhsana’s prospective husbands. Once again, a character’s coming out is used as a turning point: Sohail reveals to Rukhsana that he, too, is gay (p. 218). Publicly agreeing to marry each other, but instead plotting to leave Bangladesh together while their families are busy preparing for their wedding reception, their alliance affords them the chance to escape their families’ heteronormative constraints and live freely with their respective partners. Although her own unintentional coming out leads to her being subjected to abuse and forced to marry, and as such represents a kind of fatalism, Sohail’s coming out represents futurity for Rukhsana – paradoxically, their heterosexual union enables her homosexuality.

Despite initially symbolizing futurity, Sohail soon instead becomes the embodiment of the notion of ‘queer as fatal’: After flying home alone as he fails to show up to the airport on their wedding day, Rukhsana is informed that Sohail has been found dead in the streets of Dhaka, brutally murdered by a group of men in a homophobic hate crime (Khan, 2019, p. 274).

As detailed above, Rukhsana’s parents change their minds regarding her sexuality and relationship with Ariana after returning to Seattle. Zubaida confirms that it was, indeed, Sohail’s demise which motivated her drastic change of attitude: “... it breaks my heart every day to know that it took Sohail’s death to open my eyes” (p. 301). As previously mentioned, the author herself has stated that Sohail’s death was written to function as a catalyst for Zubaida and Ibrahim’s change of heart (Scholastic Canada, n.d.). In this novel, the trope of the dead queer is reinforced in the strongest sense. Not only do heterosexual characters happen to grow from the loss of a queer character, as, according to Browne (2020, p. 13), is often the case in literature – the queer character’s death is written with this specific purpose in mind. Sohail is, quite literally, most useful when dead. In what could be interpreted as a metacommentary on the novel’s fatalistic trope, Rukhsana addresses the absurdity of this situation to her parents:

“My God, Sohail had to die before you could even try to understand me. Do you not see how screwed up that is? That a decent human being has to die because people like you can’t understand and accept him for who he is?” (Khan, 2019, p. 290)

As previously mentioned, Ketcheson (2019) calls Sohail’s brutal murder a contradiction of the novel’s message of acceptance. Although his death affords Rukhsana her happy ending, and, as such, allows for queer as well as heterosexual growth, his example stands as a

distressing reminder of how dangerous it can be to exist as a queer person in less accepting environments. With the abuse Rukhsana endures and the tragic death of Sohail, the stories of both queer characters of color in this novel are interlaced with violence – upholding the pathologized configurations, as explained by Brockenbrough (2016, p. 287), of the particular intersection between sexual and ethnic or cultural minority.

5.4. Intersectionality

As argued by Beach (1997, pp. 73-74), for young adult literature to have the desired effect of disrupting stereotypes and generalization, it needs to contain culturally diverse and authentic representations of the cultures it portrays. For non-Bengali readers, this novel is a sliding glass door into another culture. As Ketcheson (2019) writes in her review, it paints a vivid picture of Bengali cultural expression in its frequent and rich descriptions of food, clothing, art, and traditions. Ketcheson further argues that due to the varying reactions to Rukhsana's coming out, the novel refuses stereotypes. Considering the particular stereotype of cultural minorities as homonegative (Eggebo et al., 2018, p. 88; 2019, p. 38), however, Rukhsana's parents can be said to reproduce it in their reactions. At the same time, intragroup differences within the Bengali communities in both Dhaka and Seattle simultaneously disrupt it, as Rukhsana finds allies in both places. As such, in line with the intracategorical approach presented by McCall (2005, pp. 1781-1782), this novel demonstrates that people can only ever represent one facet of the categories they belong to.

5.4.1. Challenging stereotypes

On several occasions, Rukhsana is made aware of her own stereotypical notions of other Bengalis. Her cousin, Shaila, is hurt by Rukhsana's erroneous assumption that, due to her Muslim faith, she must be homophobic:

“You just assumed that because I live here and I pray five times a day that I'm also close-minded and judgmental.”

I shook my head, but there was a ring of truth in her words. I did assume that most people who observed the rules of my religion would judge me harshly. That's why I'd never confided in my Bengali friends in Seattle. I'd never really thought about it, but now I wondered. Was I just as judgmental as my parents? (Khan, 2019, p. 148)

Rukhsana is further confronted with her internalization of the victimized discourse around queer people of color, as described by Eggebø et al. (2018, p. 10), when Sohail challenges her assumption that living as a queer person in Bangladesh is much more dangerous than in the United States (Khan, 2019, p. 222). As previously mentioned, Jiménez (2015, p. 419) postulates that recognition of one's own bias is a prerequisite for meaningful change. Repeatedly confronting her unconscious biases during the course of the novel, Rukhsana challenges her one-sided view of Bangladesh and Bengalis as homophobic, allowing her to merge the previously forcibly separated parts of her identity.

5.4.2. Gender

Applying an intercategorical lens (McCall, 2005, p. 1786), one can consider how the characters' genders affect the choices available to them. Reminiscent of the brother-sister relationship between Reza and Tara in *Like a Love Story*, younger brother Aamir is Rukhsana's ally from the start. However, while Aamir is allowed to relax and focus on schoolwork, Rukhsana is expected to contribute to the household. When she complains that she, too, has schoolwork to do, her mother reminds her of the differing expectations for daughters and sons. As the daughter, Rukhsana is responsible for her family's reputation:

“Rukhsana, I've told you before. Daughters and sons are not the same. You have the power to honor our family's good reputation. But if you're not careful you could also be the one to stain it. And it is my job to make sure that does not happen.” (Khan, 2019, p. 11)

In another interesting parallel to *Like a Love Story*, in Rukhsana's family as in Reza's, the father figures are more inclined to accept their children's homosexuality than the mothers are. As previously mentioned, Ibrahim has his doubts about their plan to arrange Rukhsana's marriage, and her uncle Maruf, disagreeing with wife Meena, reminds the family that even in Bangladesh, being gay is “not the end of the world” (p. 52). This example contradicts Guittar and Pals' (2014, p. 56) finding that women were more tolerant of homosexuality. However, considering Zubaida's view of women as the bearers – or potential destroyers – of family honor, one might understand why the women in Rukhsana's family are less accepting of divergence. After the loss of Sohail, Zubaida suddenly changes her views on gender roles as well as homosexuality: Rukhsana is allowed to relax while Aamir is ordered to help with the dishes (Khan, 2019, p. 303).

5.4.3. Queer *or* of color

As mentioned above, Rukhsana manages what she perceives as irreconcilable parts of her identity – her Bengali culture and her sexuality – by keeping them separate. Refusing the intersection, she instead lives two distinct lives. This is exemplified in the way she lies about her whereabouts to her mother, telling her she is studying whenever she attends parties, and washes her hair after cooking to avoid smelling of Bengali food to her American friends (pp. 9-10). One can argue that Rukhsana, in addition to her sexuality, alternately keeps her American and Bengali cultural identities closeted.

As detailed by Richards (2016, p. 48), explicitly out queer individuals often inadvertently become representatives for all queer people. Although Rukhsana tries to make her Bengali identity invisible when with her friend group, she is their only window into the culture, and as such, inadvertently becomes their sole representative for all Bengalis: “You have no idea how hard it is to constantly feel like you have to represent your entire culture. And to try and juggle all these expectations” (Khan, 2019, p. 325). Her friends’ unnuanced perception of Rukhsana’s cultural background, exacerbated by her secrecy surrounding it, means that they have a limited understanding of the difficulties she faces as a double minority:

“I don’t know why you can’t just tell your parents,” Jen said, her eyebrows knitted together in irritation. “I mean, it’s the twenty-first century, I think your parents will get over it.”

“Yeah,” Rachel chimed in. “I mean, what’s the worst they’ll do? Ground you?” I pushed back a hysterical laugh as I listened to them. They really had no idea. (Khan, 2019, p. 47)

Rukhsana’s plan to escape Bangladesh and subsequently cut ties with her family in order to live openly shows that she has not considered the possibility that the two facets of her identity could coexist. There is no doubt in Rukhsana’s mind that once she flies back to Seattle, her connection to the Bengali community will be irrevocably broken (pp. 258-259). Like Reza in *Like a Love Story*, she perceives her cultural identity to directly oppose her sexual minority status: “It was as if there were two parts of me, but they would never fit together” (p. 126). While in Bangladesh, Rukhsana breaks up with Ariana, citing their cultural differences and wanting to spare her the pain and hardship of dating someone whose family disapproves (pp. 232-233). After her return, they reconcile. Rukhsana divulges the details of her stay in Dhaka,

and Ariana admits that she “couldn’t understand why [Rukhsana] didn’t just leave”, before realizing that loving Rukhsana means accepting all parts of her, “not just the part that’s like [herself]” (p. 305).

After reuniting in Seattle, as mentioned above, Rukhsana’s family accompanies her to a meeting with a support group for South Asian families of LGBTQ children (p. 315). Although this sudden turnaround from complete denial to enthusiastic support may, as Zippan (2020) writes, seem unrealistic, it does challenge the previously mentioned stereotype of minority groups as homophobic (Eggebø et al., 2018, p. 88; 2019, p. 38) in giving readers a representation of a family who not only accepts, but celebrates, a queer person’s identity. While the representation of queer community in *Like a Love Story* is based on sexuality alone, in this novel, readers find a window into the solidarity and kinship experienced between individuals who simultaneously belong to both sexual and cultural minorities, as mentioned by Eggebø et al. (2019, p. 103). In finding a specifically South Asian LGBTQ support group, Rukhsana’s family members become what Abustan and Rud (2016, p. 15) call ‘allies of intersectionalities’ – recognizing that her identity as a lesbian and that as a Bangladeshi reciprocally permeate one another to affect her experience of both. With this happy ending, Rukhsana’s view of her intersectionality as an impossibility is finally disrupted. This provides queer students of color with mirrors, and students who belong to only one, or neither, of these identity categories with windows, of a good life at the intersection between sexual and cultural minorities. Nevertheless, the fact that this is afforded through the brutal murder of a queer character problematizes the novel’s otherwise happy ending.

5.5. Conclusion

This chapter has explored *The Love and Lies of Rukhsana Ali* in light of the research questions, examining representations of the closet and coming out, reproduction and disruption of queer fatalism, and the effects of intersecting identities on characters’ experiences.

The closet is presented as a complex constellation. As an isolating structure, it prevents Rukhsana from living at the intersection of her identities and instead forces her to separate them. As an identity management structure, it allows Rukhsana to protect herself from the ramifications of her sexuality becoming known to her family. Like in *Like a Love Story*, a family is shown to step into the closet once their family member steps out. In its

configurations of the closet, this novel can affirm difficulties queer students of color may face in managing openness, while at the same time providing a representation of an explicitly out queer person of color, as Rukhsana ultimately becomes.

As stated by Banks (2009, pp. 33-35), including queer narratives will not in itself disrupt heteronormativity or homonegativity in the classroom. Through awareness of what kind of windows, mirrors, or sliding glass doors a book provides to its readers, teachers can choose novels which disrupt rather than reproduce stereotypes. This novel provides two contradictory messages regarding queer fatalism. Firstly, it presents happy queer futures as a possibility, even when part of a cultural minority. Secondly, however, through the examples of Rukhsana and Sohail, it implies that queer people of color are hurt or killed – and that if they survive, their future comes at a cost. It can therefore be argued that this novel provides an unfortunate mirror to queer students of color that implies a causal relationship between queerness and death.

Johnson et al. (2017, p. 569) remind us that the impression left by a book depends on the identity of its reader. Therefore, even if lacking as a mirror, the novel can be apt as a window or sliding glass door in another respect. To students who do not share Rukhsana's identity markers, the novel provides representation of queer people of color, acquaints the reader with aspects of Bengali culture, and displays intracategorical differences to disrupt the stereotype of non-white people as unitarily homophobic. In terms of intercategorical complexity, it shows how differing identity markers can affect perceptions of others, both in the ways Rukhsana and her friends are confronted with their preconceived notions of Bengali culture and in the way her parents grapple with their prejudiced view of homosexuality.

According to Cart and Jenkins (2006, pp. 171-172), historically, books containing queer characters have often assumed the perspective of heterosexuals. Although Rukhsana is portrayed as a lesbian, the author herself, Sabina Khan, does not identify as queer (Scholastic Canada, n.d.). As such, the book is written from a heterosexual's perspective. However, this does not indicate that straight authors cannot write queer books, or, by extension, that straight teachers cannot use queer books in their teaching – rather, it highlights the need for awareness of issues and harmful stereotypes pertaining to homosexuality in order to avoid unintentionally reproducing these notions in the classroom.

6. *You Should See Me in a Crown*

6.1. Introduction

Set in Indiana in the United States, *You Should See Me in a Crown* (Johnson, 2020) follows teenager Liz, a high school student in a town where prom is the event of the year. When she fails to receive a scholarship to her late mother's alma mater, Pennington College, Liz decides to run for prom queen and attempt to win the prize money instead. This uphill battle is complicated by Liz's outsider status: Black and queer in a predominantly white and heteronormative environment, she is unpopular among her peers. Yet another complication arrives when Liz falls for new student and fellow prom queen contender Mack – at a time when, if she is to secure the crown, Liz cannot afford to come out of the closet.

The book has received favorable reviews and won several awards. Along with *Like a Love Story*, it is included in *Time*'s selection of the best 100 young adult books of all time (*Time*, n.d.) and has won a Stonewall Honor for exceptional merit in children's and young adult literature (Brilliant Books, n.d.; American Library Association, 2016). Like *The Love and Lies of Rukhsana Ali*, it has been commended for the Rainbow List (Book Connections, n.d.-a) and selected as one of YALSA's Quick Picks for Reluctant Young Adult Readers the year following its release (American Library Association, 2021). In addition to these credentials, it was a finalist in the LGBTQ young adult category for the 2021 Lambda Literary Awards (Lambda Literary, n.d.).

With a queer person of color in a heteronormative school environment as its first-person narrator, *You Should See Me in a Crown* is perhaps the novel out of the three selected with the highest real-life relevance to students in Norwegian classrooms. What kind of mirror can it be for students who belong to sexual and ethnic or cultural minorities, and what kinds of window and sliding glass door can it be for others? To answer this question, this chapter examines *You Should See Me in a Crown* in relation to the research questions: How does it deal with the closet and coming out? How are notions of queer fatalism reproduced or disrupted? How do the characters' intersecting identities affect their experiences?

6.2. The closet

There may be no harder place to be queer than high school, a place of bullies and slurs, a place steeped in rituals of heterosexuality. ... Maybe someday high school will

change. Maybe someday there can be two homecoming queens, maybe someday girls can ask other girls to the prom ... (Nazemian, 2019, pp. 216-217)

Revisiting the above quote from *Like a Love Story*, the events of which precede those of *You Should See Me in a Crown* by more than thirty years, one can argue that Stephen's wishes are yet to be fulfilled. At Campbell high school, prom rules include a strict dress code, which details that girls must wear dresses, boys must wear tuxes, and gender-nonconforming individuals must adhere to the attire appropriate for their biological sex. In addition, the school enforces, in a quite literal sense, what Rich (1980, p. 11) describes as compulsory heterosexuality: Same-sex couples are not allowed to attend prom together (Johnson, 2020, p. 39). As such, the heteronormativity that perforates this school environment consists not merely of implicit notions, but also of explicit policy. Considering Hellesund's (2008, p. 115) argument that societal heteronormativity imposes shame upon non-heterosexual individuals, it is not difficult to understand why Liz experiences a "weird feeling of *otherness* that sometimes hits [her] in waves so strong they threaten to pull [her] under" (Johnson, 2020, pp. 7-8, emphasis in original).

6.2.1. Liz's closet

While both of the other novels identify their protagonists' sexualities within the first chapter, readers of *You Should See Me in a Crown* do not receive any confirmation that Liz is anything but heterosexual until chapter thirteen (p. 109). According to Cart and Jenkins (2006, p. 171), due to the innate curiosity and awareness of sexuality in young adult readers, young adult literature without explicit reference to a queer character's sexuality is illogical. However, as will be further discussed later in this chapter, the specific nature of Liz's queerness is never revealed to the readers. Considering Griffin's (1992, pp. 175-178) four identity management strategies, Liz is initially difficult to place. Although she expresses that before her campaign, she has "never tried to hide it" (p. 109), no one except for her close friends and family is aware of her sexual orientation. Out of the four queer narrators whose perspectives this thesis has analyzed, Liz is the only one whose coming out does not evoke negativity from family members. In fact, it does not evoke anything: "No one baked me a cake, no one threw me a party. It just was" (p. 109).

As previously mentioned, Kessler-Pilgram (2021, p. 75) claims that Liz contributes to her own othering by staying in the closet. This stance neglects to acknowledge the protective

qualities the closet can have for queer people in less accepting environments such as Campbell. It is doubtful that coming out would lead to Liz being *less* othered by her peers. This is exemplified when Liz's best friend, Gabi, expresses skepticism at Liz becoming friendly with newcomer Mack, due to circulating rumors about her sexuality:

“I mean honestly, has she not thought about how this will affect her in the race? She has a *pride flag* hanging up in her locker and everything.” She waves her hands around her face. “People love drama, a little novelty, but they won't vote for her if they think...” ... “Like, Liz, it's different for you! Nobody would ever guess that you're into girls. I mean, you hide it so well.” (Johnson, 2020, p. 109, emphasis in original)

As argued by Kessler-Pilgram (2021, p. 74), Gabi here commits a microaggression towards Liz; firstly, by disparaging Mack for being open about an identity marker they share, and secondly, by praising Liz for being closeted. It seems that her acceptance of Liz's sexuality is based on its invisibility. While the protagonists' parents are seen to step into the closet in the other two novels, it seems that Gabi here inhabits Liz's. As seen in the above quote, Gabi purposefully avoids using specific terms to refer to non-heterosexuality, further contributing to a discourse of secrecy and shame around it. This discourse seems to be internalized by Liz, who, while on a date with Mack, talks about her sexuality without naming it: “You should know that nobody outside of my best friends knows I, um. Well, that I'm...” (Johnson, 2020, p. 158).

In running for prom queen, Liz is forced to conform to Campbell's strict heteronormative ideals to stand a chance against her fiercest competitor, Rachel. Her friends insist on helping her achieve her goal, dressing her in traditionally feminine clothing and urging her to pretend to be dating her male friend Jordan – in short, making her “into someone worth paying attention to” (p. 54). During the competition, Liz actively takes steps to hide her sexual orientation. Employing the strategy of ‘passing’, as described by Griffin (1992, p. 175-178), Liz deliberately closets herself to maintain her chances of winning:

When we step outside, I reluctantly let go of her hand. The parking lot is mostly empty by the time we reach it, but I feel like it's better not to chance it. Still though, our knuckles brush as we walk, and while neither of us says anything, the moment is heavy with something unnamable. (Johnson, 2020, pp. 185-186)

Mack assumes that the secrecy around their relationship is necessary for reasons of personal safety (p. 159) – an assumption that Liz does not immediately correct. In reality, Liz stays

closeted due to the belief that coming out would diminish her chances of becoming prom queen and winning the prize money, jeopardizing her place at Pennington. Liz and Mack break up when Liz finally divulges this information (p. 210), but later reconcile as Mack realizes how important the prize money is to Liz (p. 249).

6.2.2. Consequences of coming out

As Cart and Jenkins (2006, p. xx [20]) describe as typical of queer young adult literature, the novel uses a character's coming out as a dramatic turning point. The pivotal moment comes when Rachel, frustrated that Liz's candidacy is gaining popularity, deliberately outs her to stop her from winning:

The bodies around me seem to halt on command, everyone going stock still as they see the massive rainbow flag hanging from the glass. In the center of it is a sloppily painted crown that looks dangerously similar to the ones on my posters and buttons. And written on top of it and beneath it in bold block letters the color of blood: LIZ LIGHTY IS ONLY QUEEN OF THE QUEERS (Johnson, 2020, p. 252)

Unexpectedly, the outing turns out to have the opposite effect. Proving intracategorical differences within the student body at Campbell, classmates publish messages of support to social media (pp. 284-285), and Liz is ultimately, in part by popular vote, crowned prom queen (p. 322). As previously mentioned, explicitly out individuals often find themselves defined entirely by, or becoming inadvertent representatives for, their entire category (Hellesund, 2008, p. 144; Richards, 2016, p. 48). In Liz's case, however, these perceived disadvantages of being explicitly out work to her advantage. As she is forced out of the closet, Liz becomes a symbol of the change the younger generation in Campbell want to make in society – sans Rachel, who is kicked out of prom for her actions (Johnson, 2020, p. 317). Liz wins not *despite* her sexual orientation, but, as it seems, *because* of it.

6.3. Queer fatalism

As previously mentioned, Duckels (2021a, p. 429) points out that as traumatic loss often sets character development in motion, it is a popular theme in coming-of-age literature.

Furthermore, the deaths of queer characters, in particular, have traditionally been used as catalysts for development in heterosexual characters (Browne, 2020, p. 13), and thus, Banks

(2009, p. 35) suggests that queer characters' usefulness lies in the growth that other characters experience when mourning their loss. In both of the other novels, a queer character dies, and other characters grow from the experience. Furthermore, the queer characters' deaths are connected to their sexuality: In *Like a Love Story*, Stephen's suicide is a way out of his agony due to a disease primarily associated with male homosexuals, and in *The Love and Lies of Rukhsana Ali*, Sohail is murdered by homophobes. In this novel, however, the notion of 'queer as fatal' (Ahmed, 2017) is disrupted in several ways. It is the only novel out of the three analyzed in this thesis which does not feature a queer person's death. Instead, it does what Browne (2020, pp. 19-20) suggests could challenge the connection between queerness and fatalism – it centers the perspective of a queer character who is mourning, rather than being mourned.

6.3.1. Sickness and health

After their mother's premature death from sickle cell anemia, Liz and her younger brother, Robbie, live with their grandparents. Opposing the view of queer individuals as inherently diseased (Bersani, 1987, p. 211), the only queer person in Liz's immediate family is also the only healthy one, as Robbie has inherited the disease that killed their mother. When he is hospitalized, Liz rushes to his bedside, blaming herself for prioritizing her campaign over his health. Robbie, who first suggested that Liz should run for prom queen (Johnson, 2020, p. 20), reminds her of what she has gained by competing (p. 280) – namely, Mack – and why the crown is still important: She needs the money in order to attend Pennington and achieve her dream of becoming a hematologist and working with sickle cell patients (p. 19). Far from useful when dead, Liz is portrayed as potentially useful against death itself. The novel does feature a link between queerness and death, in that Liz and Mack, the only queer characters, are both "in the Dead Mom Club" (p. 119). In this way, the novel reimagines the connection between queerness and death by centering not only one, but two queer characters who have experienced the personal growth that often follows grief. The trope of the dead queer is turned upside down in that the ones who are 'useful when dead' are two (presumed) heterosexuals, allowing two queer characters to connect based on their shared trauma.

6.3.2. Queer as adolescent

“Now y’all can date who you want and wear what you want, and people will leave you be. They may think what they wanna think, but they won’t do the kind of stuff they used to do back then.” (Johnson, 2020, p. 294)

In the above quote, Liz’s grandmother argues that Campbell is a better place now than in the past. While queer people are allowed to live more openly in parts of the world today, and as such, times have changed for the better, this stance minimizes the struggles that still apply to queer individuals in heteronormative societies. Furthermore, the idea that queer people are left to do as they please is repeatedly disproven throughout the novel. Aside from Gabi’s comments and the forced outing, which Mack deems a hate crime (p. 254), the school denies students the option to take same-sex dates to prom, and the principal tries to disqualify Liz from the race once her sexual orientation becomes public knowledge (p. 256). While Liz’s sexuality is not fatal to her, it is believed to be fatal to her campaign. Moreover, as prom can be considered a rite of passage marking the transition between adolescence and adulthood, prohibiting same-sex couples from buying couples’ tickets to the event reinforces the notion described by Browne (2020, p. 3) of non-heterosexuality as something adolescent, unbecoming adults.

6.4. Intersectionality

Considering intercategorical complexity (McCall, 2005, p. 1786), it is clear that many of Liz’s struggles are specifically ascribed to her ethnic minority status. Growing up black and poor in a predominantly white and affluent area, and even enduring racially based microaggressions like having her hair pulled (Johnson, 2020, p. 65) and being likened to ‘the help’ (p. 180), it is understandable that Liz does not wish to add yet another degree of separation by coming out. As she says herself: “When you already feel like everything about you makes you stand out, it just makes more sense to find as many ways to blend in as you can” (p. 5).

6.4.1. Rejecting categorization

As previously detailed, McCall (2005, p. 1778) explains the anticategorical approach to intersectionality as a stance which sees categorization of individuals as reductive, and therefore views categories as inadequate operational units to analyze social phenomena. This

novel, as the only one out of the three considered in this thesis, can be argued to entertain an anticategorical stance to intersectionality in Liz's approach to her sexuality. Although she expresses that she is not straight, Liz seems to reject specific labeling beyond this. At first, she refers to an affinity – being 'into girls' (Johnson, 2020, p. 109). According to Guittar (2014, p. 393), many choose this strategy either to purposefully reject the use of labels or to account for the fact that their sexuality is not an entirely stable concept. It is not made apparent why Liz does not label her sexuality – although from a constructionist viewpoint (Saxey, 2008, p. 6-7), one can argue that by not naming it, she keeps it uncemented.

Liz later refers to herself as 'queer' (Johnson, 2020, p. 210). This word can, according to Meyer (2007, p. 15), denote any sexual orientation that is non-heterosexual. Thus, the reader is left unaware of whether or not Liz, in addition to being 'into girls', is similarly 'into boys'; as this is the default in her environment, it would not necessarily need mentioning. One can argue that she is portrayed to be, as it is heavily implied that Liz finds her male friend Jordan attractive. On one occasion, she expresses that he is "almost too cute to stare at for more than a few seconds at a time" (Johnson, 2020, p. 7), and on another, she "can barely remember how to breathe" when she sees him shirtless (p. 201). Although she is defined as divergent from the heterosexual majority, not defining Liz's sexuality beyond 'queer' means that the specifics of her orientation stay ambiguous to the reader. While Art and Reza identify as 'gay' (Nazemian, 2019), and Rukhsana as 'lesbian' (Khan, 2019), Liz can be perceived as taking an anticategorical stance, seeing more specific categorization of her sexuality as unnecessary. The effects of this refusal to categorize are twofold. On the one hand, it can provide relatability – mirrors – for a larger audience: As 'queer' is a much less exclusionary term than for example 'lesbian' or 'bisexual', anyone outside the heterosexual matrix (Butler, 1990, p. 208) will be able to see their experiences of difference from the norm reflected in Liz. This way, the novel can give more readers what Cart and Jenkins (2006, p. 1) uphold as impactful: the feeling that 'there are others like me'. On the other hand, not explicitly labeling Liz's sexuality can also have the opposite effect. Intentionally keeping her sexuality vague can be interpreted as a closeting practice – one could argue that Liz is 'implicitly out' to the reader. By not explicitly naming her sexuality, the novel denies underrepresented minorities, such as lesbian or bisexual readers, specific representation.

6.4.2. Inviting categorization

The character of Mack utilizes categorization to a larger degree. While Gabi praises Liz's lack of visible divergence from the norm, Mack acknowledges her difference and validates her feelings of otherness: "I know it must be tough being one of the only black students at Campbell" (Johnson, 2020, p. 130). When Liz explains her wish to stay closeted, Mack empathetically responds:

"I get it. I totally get it. This isn't the most tolerant place on Earth, for sure. And I bet it's even harder for you because you're not only queer but you're also black, and I've been reading a lot of Kimberlé Crenshaw, so, like, *intersectionality* and all that definitely makes it harder. I mean, it's not ideal, of course, but your safety—"
(Johnson, 2020, p. 158, emphasis in original)

Here, Mack implies that she is familiar with how different categories intersect and produce compound marginalization. However, by assuming that her identity as both black and queer automatically means that it is unsafe for Liz to come out, Mack fails to recognize one of Crenshaw's (1991, p. 1242) points: that treating everyone who belongs to the same intersection as if their experiences are identical, and thereby ignoring intracategorical complexity, in fact reproduces simplistic stereotypes about the societal group in question. As previously explained, associating queer people of color first and foremost with difficulty creates a discourse of victimization which undermines their agency (Eggebo et al., 2018, p. 10; Brockenbrough, 2015, p. 28). While Mack affirms Liz's intersectional identity by acknowledging the compound marginalization attributed to her intersection, this expression of sympathy contributes to a view of Liz as someone to be pitied. As previously mentioned, Jeffries et al. (2022, p. 17) uphold that recognizing nuance in one's own and others' identities helps create affirming communities. By applying her own preconceived notions of queer people of color as a homogenous group to Liz as an individual, Mack's attempt at allyship instead has the unintentional effect of reinforcing Liz's othering.

6.4.3. Unresolved issues

When losing Mack makes her realize what she is sacrificing by running for prom queen, Liz speaks out against Campbell's "antiquated ideals" through a poster and a social media post calling for a more inclusive environment (Johnson, 2020, pp. 230-233). As mentioned in the secondary literature section, Kessler-Pilgram (2021, p. 76) argues that the larger issues of

homophobia and racism present in the novel are scarcely deconstructed. Though Liz's challenging of the Eurocentric and heteronormative ideals at Campbell eventually leads to her victory, the school's overtly homophobic rules are not shown to change, and while Liz and Mack buy matching corsages as an act of resistance, they are still not allowed to attend prom as a couple (Johnson, 2020, p. 307). Thus, it seems that Stephen's wish of a more inclusive future for queer students (Nazemian, 2019, pp. 216-217) is slow in forthcoming.

Another issue left unresolved is Liz's own prejudice against the white majority. In addition to deeming them poor dancers (Johnson, 2020, p. 319), she explains: "Aside from Gabi's mom, I don't really eat anything that my friends' parents make, for the sake of my palate. ... You can never be too careful when it comes to eating white folks' food" (pp. 102-103). While Rukhsana (Khan, 2019) is forced to confront and alter her preconceived notions of others, Liz is not. As mentioned above, Gabi applauds how Liz 'passes' as straight (Johnson, 2020, p. 109) – in essence, her difference from Gabi's internalized stereotypes of queer people. One can argue that Liz carries the same attitude towards Gabi regarding her cultural majority status. While Gabi's prejudice is given a moment of redemption when she interrupts a meeting in the headmaster's office to call out the school's blatant homophobia and urge him to reconsider the decision to remove Liz from the competition (pp. 256-258), Liz's prejudice is left uncontested.

6.5. Conclusion

In accordance with the research questions, this chapter has considered configurations of the closet and coming out, notions of queer fatalism, and intersecting identities in *You Should See Me in a Crown*.

The closet is portrayed as having multiple functions. Although a consequence of the shame imposed upon queer individuals by her heteronormative environment, as a protective entity, it allows Liz to compete for the crown. As in the other novels, the protagonist's coming-out moment is a dramatic turning point: Coming out, albeit involuntarily, enables Liz to inspire change in her community. Navigating the balance described by Browne (2020, p. 20) between realistic and positive portrayals of queer life, the novel gives non-queer readers a window into the shame and difficulty associated with growing up queer in a heteronormative (and, in this case, homonegative) environment, while providing a message of futurity in the way Liz is celebrated by her peers once out of the closet.

The novel offers a welcome disruption of queer fatalism. For students, queer and non-queer, a story where a queer person of color is celebrated can be a refreshing change from stories of suffering. Reversing the stereotype of queer characters as most useful when dead, the novel redefines the link between queerness and death by centering two queer characters who are mourning losses of their own, rather than being mourned to develop other characters. Furthermore, by making a queer character the only healthy member of a family, and even positioning her as a potential provider of futurity for her ailing brother, the novel upends any notion of queer people as inherently diseased.

Of the three queer protagonists of color considered in this thesis, Liz is the only one whose family accepts her without question, disrupting the notion of non-white people as homonegative. Liz is marginalized in her community due to her categories of race and class, and struggles to publicly identify with yet another marginalized category. Her rejection of labels implies an anticategorical stance to intersectionality, which simultaneously provides mirrors for a wider audience and denies explicit mirrors to certain readers. As previously mentioned, Neely (2022, p. 62) considers the novel's 'controversial themes' unfit for young readers. However, as readers find representations of the choices available to them in literature (Banks, 2009, pp. 33-35), Liz's challenging of Campbell's institutional homophobia stands as a powerful example to young queer students that change is possible.

7. Conclusion

With the aim of providing lower-secondary English teachers with an understanding of considerations to make when assigning or recommending texts with queer representation, this thesis has analyzed three queer young adult novels in light of concepts from queer and intersectional theory. The research questions were:

- 1) How do the novels deal with ‘the closet’ and coming out?
- 2) How are notions of queer fatalism reproduced or disrupted?
- 3) How do the characters’ different intersecting identities affect their experiences?

This conclusion answers the research questions, restates the study’s limitations, and suggests implications for practice and future research.

7.1. Representations of the closet and coming out

The selected novels represent varying configurations of the closet, with some common factors. Protagonists Reza, Rukhsana, and Liz are all closeted to some degree at the beginning of their respective stories. The novels all portray staying closeted as a deliberate strategy utilized for different reasons – protection from infection, maintaining personal safety, or winning a competition – refuting the idea described by Rasmussen (2004, p. 145) of closeted queer people as disempowered. In all three novels, in line with Cart and Jenkins (2006, p. xx [20]), the coming-out moment is pivotal. Balancing between uplifting and realistic representation, differing reactions are portrayed, ranging from immediate acceptance to abuse. A common theme in all three novels is that queer characters’ closets live on after they leave it, as other characters step into them instead.

As previously mentioned, many queer individuals, especially those of color, opt to remain closeted in certain parts of their lives to maintain relationships with less accepting individuals (Brockenbrough, 2015, pp. 36-37; Narvesen, 2013, p. 74). In all three novels analyzed in this thesis, the queer narrators are explicitly and happily out by the end of the novels – Reza, of *Like a Love Story*, is even portrayed to be a married father. Although this provides readers with much-needed representations of queer futures, emphatically disrupting the idea that openness and successful adulthood are incompatible concepts (Banks, 2009, p. 35), it also implies a coming-out imperative (Rasmussen, 2004, p. 144). As such, these three titles could

be argued to coincide with the ‘westernized’ ideal that the only happy queer future is an openly queer future.

7.2. Reproduction and disruption of queer fatalism

The novels reproduce and disrupt queer fatalism in different ways. Reinforcing both the notion of ‘queer as fatal’ (Ahmed, 2017) and the idea that queer characters are most useful when dead (Banks, 2009, p. 35), *The Love and Lies of Rukhsana Ali* features a queer character dying for the purpose of heterosexual characters’ growth. While *Like a Love Story* features a queer person’s death, the novel centers how this loss develops other queer characters. As protagonist Reza is revealed to have married and fathered children, the idea of queerness and futurity as oppositional (Edelman, 2004, pp. 30-31) is refuted. Simultaneously, the connection between homosexuality and death is upheld as the novel reminds readers that queer people are still targets of violent hate crimes. *You Should See Me in a Crown*, however, rejects queer fatalism entirely. As the only novel not to feature a queer character’s death, it instead centers a queer character mourning a family member, flipping the trope of the dead queer on its head. Furthermore, protagonist Liz is a symbol of queer futurity through her challenging of the heteronormativity permeating her community.

7.3. Intersecting identities

The intersecting identity markers of the protagonists in all three novels affect their experiences as queer individuals in different ways. Common for all of them is that belonging to a cultural minority complicates the decision to come out. While Art and Reza of *Like a Love Story* experience the same fear of infection, Reza, like Rukhsana of *The Love and Lies of Rukhsana Ali*, is burdened by the belief that his cultural and sexual identities are incompatible. Liz of *You Should See Me in a Crown* experiences othering on behalf of her race, leading her to stay closeted to avoid the compound marginalization coming out as queer would invite. Furthermore, a tension between intercategory and anticategory perspectives is represented in Liz and Mack’s differing worldviews.

Thoroughly disrupting the stereotype of non-white people as homonegative (Eggebo et al., 2018, p. 88; 2019, p. 38), all three novels demonstrate intracategory complexity in depicting differing reactions, including family members from non-white minority backgrounds who accept, and even celebrate, the protagonists’ queerness. Moreover, the

novels provide readers with varying representations of queer of color existence. While *Like a Love Story* and *You Should See Me in a Crown* both disrupt the pathologization of this intersection in their representations of the survival of queer people of color, *The Love and Lies of Rukhsana Ali* portrays this particular intersection as one interlaced with violence: Out of its two queer characters of color, one's happy future is afforded only through the other's death.

7.4. Limitations

Central limitations of this study include the limited amount of secondary literature published on the chosen novels at the time of writing, as well as the subjectivity of analysis. Another limitation is the tension between queer theory and the anticategorical stance to intersectionality on the one hand, and this thesis' deliberate use of categories such as genders and sexualities as relatively stable analytical units on the other. Lastly, as a theoretical study, this thesis does not explore the possible effects of utilizing these texts in the classroom. This might, however, prove an interesting empirical study.

7.5. Implications for practice and future research

In providing students with representations of various experiences similar or different from their own, centering characters living at the intersections of both sexual and ethnic or cultural minorities, these three novels can acquaint readers with the complexity of these intersections and counteract the invisibility of queer people of color. In keeping with the curriculum (Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training, 2019b), these representations can let students explore diversity and challenge prejudice and cultural bias. Considering the government's action plan (Ministry of Culture and Equality, 2023), which proposes increasing knowledge about, and acceptance of, queer people of color, as well as illuminating queer history, art, and culture to the public, the novels analyzed in this thesis can be used as tools in fulfilling these incentives. Moreover, in line with the action plan's proposition to assess the need for increased competence in schools, this thesis suggests three concepts for teachers to familiarize themselves with to be able to select queer literature appropriate for the lower-secondary English classroom.

The thesis illuminates the three novels' respective strengths and weaknesses as what Bishop (1990a, p. ix, 1990b, p. 3) calls windows, mirrors, and sliding glass doors. While *Like a Love*

Story acquaints readers with queer history, humanizing the AIDS crisis, it presents living at the intersection between queerness and cultural minority as a disadvantage. *The Love and Lies of Rukhsana Ali* provides complex representations of Bengali culture, but reinforces queer fatalism entirely by interconnecting both of its queer characters with violence, abuse, and death. *You Should See Me in a Crown* portrays a queer character being celebrated for, rather than despite, her divergence from the norm, but simultaneously fails to resolve the character's own prejudice toward others. This suggests a need for multitudinous queer literary representation in the classroom. Additionally, it might suggest a need for further analyses of queer young adult literature, considering both the concepts presented in this thesis and other issues relating to queer experience.

The study highlights the need to critically analyze the literature one considers for the classroom or for recommendation. Lower-secondary students are in formative years, and their values and senses of self are greatly influenced by the representations teachers and media make available to them. While queer representation is vital to acquaint students with queer perspectives, this thesis underscores how important it is for teachers to be able to make informed choices about this queer representation in order to avoid unintentional reproduction, and students' subsequent internalization, of harmful notions or stereotypes. Presenting students with books which center queer perspectives and disrupt stereotypes might not be the ultimate solution to the homonegativity and othering queer individuals face in schools and in society. However, given the immense effects literature can have on its readers as windows, mirrors, and sliding glass doors, it could be a good place to start.

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