

S. Archana

PhD Research Scholar

Department of English

PSG college of Arts and Science

Coimbatore, Tamil Nadu, India

archusarvesan938@gmail.com

Dr. S. Vanitha

Assistant Professor of English

PSG college of Arts and Science

Coimbatore, Tamil Nadu, India

vanisubu@gmail.com

Cynical Stance and Self-Decadence: A Probe on the Significance of Social Adherence in

Laurie Halse Anderson's *Speak*

Abstract

Life without obstacles would always be a dream. It is in the hands of an individual and the society to make the life to be more interesting and worth living. Born as a human every one can survive but living the life amidst all the obstacle matters. To live the life to the fullest one must be prepared to face whatever comes in his way. Though life is beautiful, it is not easy as it seems. Struggles are the part and parcel of life and it is also a road that is filled with ups and downs and to reach a destination one should dare to travel along. Some may find life to be simpler and other may find it complicated as it depends on the fact how one

perceives it. Man has a natural urge to lead a life associated with others for his existence and survival and hence he is known as the social animal. Every child depends on their parents for his growth and livelihood up to some point in his life and the capacities that are inherent within an individual develops only in the society. *Speak* by Laurie Halse Anderson describes the importance of social ties in one's life and how far an individual could deteriorate himself if left unnoticed and warded off by the society.

Key words: Life, Individual, Society, Struggles, Self-Deterioration

Society does play a significant role in providing ample number of opportunities in the development of the personality of an individual. So it is obvious that the foundation of the happy life is possible by maintaining a state of equilibrium between the relationships surround us. Be it a childhood, teenager or the adulthood each phase of life is equally important as the other because it gives a chance to evolve to be a better person with the experiences. Society has its own sets of values that help an individual to incorporate the values and the ethics to become a better human being. Humans possess a natural urge to connect with others emotionally and the interpersonal relationships play a vital role in providing an individual with long lasting positive vibe which would help them to perceive the world in an optimistic way. "Their social motivation begins with the need for affiliation defined as a desire to establish social contact with others" (McAdams, 1989). Each and every phase of the life is important and the most significant and the confusing phase is one's teenage. It is a phase where a person work towards becoming an adult, an independent person and a first step away from their comfort and safe zone i.e., family. This is a phase where a person undergoes a lot of stress and they also have an urge to get attracted to the things that are very appealing to them without even analyzing the aftereffects of it. By this attitude a lot of teenagers get stuck into some kind of problem and they are pushed to the extreme of even

losing their life without prior consultation with others. But in some cases people act too judgmental and without knowing the actual reason behind a problem with a person they just corner them instead of giving them moral support. It is in the hands of the family and the society to analyze what is going on inside a person based their inappropriate attitudes and should help and guide them in appropriate path. If left unnoticed they have the chance of becoming the threat to their own life and also to the society.

The depression, the anxiety and the strong emotional distress they undergo due to the traumatic event may lead them to develop the attitudes like hopelessness, loss of interest in day to day life, need for isolation, withdrawing reflexes, rebellious behavior, pessimistic outlook on the society, anger, guilt, sadness and irritation for no proper reason etc., Some of the other important and the most disturbing attitude they instill within themselves is the act of being cynical and the trust issues that could even take them to the extreme of deteriorating one's self.

Speak written by Laurie Halse Anderson is a realistic fiction about a high school teenager named Melinda Sordina, who was a freshman in Merry weather high school. Throughout the novel she suffers with depression that was caused due to the traumatic event took place earlier in her high school. Denial of her friends and that everyone in her school hated her affected her a lot than that of the bitter experience she had. Apart from the society she also faced problems in her home due to the lack of communication between her and her parents. These denials and that nobody was there to sort out her problems made her mute by totally isolating herself from the outer world and she gradually got a tendency of fear of speaking out.

Melinda once along with her friend was enjoying a summer party and there were lot of people unlike her with big lips, big earrings and blue jeans and the high class and the sophisticated look made her feel like a little kid among them. She is naturally a type of girl

who is not used to these kinds of parties and she felt lonely as Rachel, her best friend left her all alone and found her way to fit in the party. Melinda had no idea of what to do and she just tasted the beer and walked through the crowd to find a place that was comfortable. Later that night while all others are partying she was all alone. Making use of this her high school senior named Andy Evans was found talking and flirting with her. He was handsome and Melinda in her teenage phase was bubbling with enthusiasm and was much excited. She adored him by the way he looks with good hair, tanned muscle and straight white teeth. Picking a prom dress and finding a date and developing an own identity would be a most teenagers dream and Melinda though shy was no exception. She allowed him to flirt with her and this made her feel so good. "He took my hand and pulled me close to him. I breathed in cologne and beer and something I couldn't identify. I fit in against his body perfectly, my head level with his shoulder. I was a little dizzy – I laid my cheek on his chest" (*Speak*, 134). She was happy and proud that she got a boyfriend who would be there for her at the good and bad times.

While some teenagers dream of a pleasant and the peaceful life to start a new phase of their life, there are people in the other hand, who use their strength and others weakness to manipulate others to achieve what they needed. The high school teenager who was flirting began to exploit her slowly and began harassing her. Melinda who was enjoying his company with a dance startled by his moves and had a thought that something bad is going to happen. She tried a lot to scream for help, but Andy Evans who was physically stronger than her never let her to scream and she got raped and all her dreams and the trust she had on him completely shattered. Melinda, now helpless was unaware of what to do and that she got no other way called the cops. As soon as the cops arrived the party ended and some the school students who were partying got arrested. After this incident not even a single student in the entire school was ready to ask the reason behind her act on that day and even her best friend

Rachel with whom she spent half her childhood never made a move to help her out. But on the contrary everyone in the school treated her indifferently. “Rachel’s face – so angry – in mine. Someone slapped me. I crawled out of the room through a forest of legs. Outside, the moon smiled goodbye and slipped away” (*Speak*, 136).

The indifferent attitude of the friends surrounding her made her feel insecure and it gave rise to the general distrust on the society that there are no such thing called being for one another during the worst times. All these awful experiences she had and the treatment of society towards her made her more pessimistic. This gradually made her to become a cynic and she started believing strongly that there is nobody in the world to help her out to get rid of the traumatizing experience she faced. She ended up trusting none. The statement “It is easier not to say anything. Shut your trap, button your lip, can it. All that crap you hear on TV about communication and expressing feelings is a lie. Nobody really wants to hear what you say” (*Speak*, 09) clearly brings up the inner feelings she developed due to the society’s judgmental notion. There are many such instances that portray the cynical attitude of Melinda.

The other instance was during a rally where Melinda was with Heather, her only companion and she introduced Melinda to some of the other friends of her and Melinda felt uncomfortable as she knew that all of them would for sure offend her for the act during the party that night. As Melinda predicted, they began to ridicule and charge against her. Not even a single student in the group was ready to support her. Though she was aware that Heather wouldn’t help her, the fact that she didn’t defend her made her feel pathetic, “for a moment she looks like she will defend me. No, no, she won’t . . . I close my eyes. Breathe breathe breathe. Don’t say anything. Breathe” (*Speak*, 28). Soon after the traumatic event she needed someone to be there for her to support mentally and tried a lot to move along with her friends and the classmates but on the contrary everyone looked at her as a mad girl and made

fun of her. This act of them had drawn her to the extreme of making her feel that it is worth being alone than trying to fit in where she reciprocated only hatred. The utmost disturbing thing was that she even doubted her parents and became completely mute and never wanted to open up.

The impression that people are self-centered and that they are numb towards others emotions made her pessimistic and skeptical. The self decadent attitude of Melinda is also seen in many instances throughout the novel. Once when Heather her only companion invited her to sleep in she accepted it blindly though she isn't interested. After going to her home she admired every part of her room and wondered why she couldn't be organized like her. Later that night they both had a conversation about the musical coming up and Heather suggested that they both could do it together. Though she was least interested with the idea she simply nodded her head and never created her own space and had no guts to reveal what she wished. "My job is to nod or shake my head, to say "I know what you mean . . ." (*Speak*, 33). The other instance was when David Petrakis the one whom she admires a lot had invited to his home to have a celebratory Pizza. Deep in her heart she was very much impressed with the idea of him and wanted to be a part of it, but her distrust over others made her to deny his invitation and just gave him an excuse by telling that "Nope . . . I don't do parties. No thanks. I trot excuses: home-work . . ." (*Speak* 131).

The cynical stance of Melinda in *Speak* eventually creates an unwillingness to trust others and to the extreme of losing her own self. When a person is under a state of trauma, they establish a strong tendency to be connected with the closed ones rather than being alone so as to vent out the suppression in their mind and Melinda is no exception. Throughout the novel it is apparent that some way or the other she tried seeking the attention of others and that she got no attention from the closed ones made her cynical which eventually deteriorated her real identity. Humans as a social being possess a natural propensity to connect with

others emotionally and the interpersonal relationships plays a significant role in providing an individual with safe haven. So it is evident that an individual's adherent towards the society and the bond they share within the relationships do play a significant role in making an individual emotionally stronger and in creating a society that is devoid of commotion and violence.

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