

CASS MODEL REVISITED: A STUDY ON MAULIK PANCHOLY'S NOVEL

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Abstract

This study examines the construction of homosexual identity in Young Adult Literature (YAL) through close textual analysis of Maulik Pancholy's novels, *The Best at It* (2019) and *Nikhil Out Loud* (2022). Through qualitative close textual analysis, the research employs Vivienne Cass's six-stage homosexual identity development model, with emphasis on Identity Confusion, Identity Comparison, and Identity Tolerance stages. Intersectionality is employed to explore the impact of race, culture, and family on the protagonists' identity construction. Findings are: [1] The protagonists experience Identity Confusion through compulsive behaviours and inner conflict pertaining to their burgeoning queer identities, [2] Their social awkwardness and difficulty with performative roles map to Identity Comparison, as they navigate tentative self-discovery, and [3] both protagonists display elements of Identity Tolerance because they walk the line with community involvement and self-expression. Furthermore, the research concludes that queer youth of colour identity construction is deconstructed and complex, shaped by intersecting cultural forces and social expectations, thereby making Cass's model difficult to apply easily. This research makes a contribution to YAL studies by centring Pancholy's novels as rich contributions to intersectional queer representation, as vital mirrors to marginalized readers, and providing insight to larger audiences. It highlights the necessity to integrate intersectionality with classic psychological models to provide a more generalizable perspective on LGBTQ+ identity construction in contemporary literature.

Keywords: Young Adult Literature, LGBTQ+ identity, Vivienne Cass, Intersectionality, Gender Stereotype, Queer Representation

INTRODUCTION

Young adult literature (YAL) is written keeping in mind the readers whose age ranges from twelve to eighteen years. It provides entertainment value as well as shapes children's view of the world and is therefore crucial. Usually, the genre emphasises ideas like identity, belonging, and challenging social pressure. It gives young people a place to investigate difficult concepts and emotions, especially those connected to identity. In the recent years, YAL has portrayed many of the same social biases found in the real world through the narratives, limited and stereotypical views of gender, race, and sexuality. But in recent years, authors have been working to change this. Through more inclusive stories, YAL is now pushing back against outdated norms. The paper focuses on how Maulik Pancholy, in his novels *The Best at It* and *Nikhil Out Loud*, uses storytelling to challenge traditional gender roles and highlight underrepresented voices. Gender stereotypes are common beliefs about how boys and girls are "supposed" to behave. These ideas come from long-standing social and cultural traditions, often tied to patriarchy. For example, boys are expected to be strong and unemotional, while girls are expected to be nurturing and quiet. These strict roles leave no room for individuality. When teens refuse fit these roles, they often face bullying or rejection. A boy who is sensitive might be called "weak," and a girl who speaks up might be labelled "bossy." These stereotypes not only hurt individuals but also keep society stuck in primitive perspectives. They promote the idea that being heterosexual and cisgender is "normal," while anything different is considered the 'other'. In YAL, these ideas have often shaped stories, pushing LGBTQ+ and gender-diverse characters to the sidelines. More authors are at present writing stories that challenge these stereotypes. The paper explores the contribution of Pancholy to the efforts of the community by creating characters who are proud to be different.

In *The Best at It* (2019), Rahul is a gay Indian-American boy with anxious and doubt-ridden tendencies. In *Nikhil Out Loud* (2022), Nikhil is a theater actor turned gay and comes to terms with public scrutinization and familial pressure. Quite unlike traditional masculine ideals, these boys embody sensitivity and emotion and remain strong. Pancholy's novels afford readers an unusual glimpse of what it is like to be South Asian and queer in America today. To portray and reflect on the journeys of Rahul and Nikhil, the article cross refers to psychologist Vivienne Cass model of sexual identity development. The model identifies six stages that individuals tend to experience as they discover and accept their sexual orientation: confusion, comparison, tolerance, acceptance, pride, and synthesis. The model explains how

individuals transition from uncertainty to self-acceptance. Although initially designed to expound gay men's experiences, the model is still effective at examining characters such as Rahul and Nikhil. Critics suggest that it fails to capture the varied experiences of women, individuals of color, and individuals in cultures with strict binary genders. The paper adopts intersectionality to bridge those gaps and examine how culture and race inform sexual identity development. It adopts close reading to interpret Pancholy's novels. The paper examines how characters develop, how the narratives progress, and what themes arise. Intersectionality, as it's known, is a theory that considers how identity components (such as race, gender, and sexuality) intersect, and it's central to this analysis. Rahul's challenges aren't solely about his gayness; he's confronted by cultural pressures born of his Indian heritage. Nikhil, conversely, contemplates going big-time, or rather, going big-time as gay. This analysis draws upon both Cass model and intersectional scholarship to argue that Pancholy's characters challenge gender stereotypes and infuse LGBTQ+ identity in teen literature. Pancholy's novels provide something still scarce in teen literature: queer South Asian characters. The novels matter not just to LGBTQ+ readers of color, however, but to anyone who wishes to educate themselves about varied forms of existing. The novels communicate that there's no fixed concepts of gender and identity. Applying these narratives to Cass model and to an intersectional framework, this research identifies the imperative to find flexible theories to account for the breadth of LGBTQ+ experience. Pancholy's novels confirm that diverse stories have the power to topple unhealthy norms and bring about change. Maulik Pancholy's *The Best at It* (2019) and *Nikhil Out Loud* (2022) are strong examples of how young adult literature can dismantle destructive stereotypes. By using characters that love themselves just the way they are, these works challenge conventional notions of what it means to be queer and masculine and proud.

METHODOLOGY

Two young adult novels by Maulik Pancholy, *The Best at It* and *Nikhil Out Loud*, are examined in this qualitative study. Investigating how LGBTQ+ identity develops in the teenage heroes of every narrative is the major focus. The study follows Vivienne Cass's Model of Identity Development as a guiding concept to accomplish this. Six stages of coming into a queer identity, confusion, comparison, tolerance, acceptance, pride, and synthesis, are described in this model. Although Cass's approach offers structure, the actual emphasis is on how the stories themselves depict the complex, frequently non-linear, road of queer self-discovery. These two books were selected since they both centre on self-discovery, cultural identification, and what it means to come out as LGBTQ+ while negotiating family and community expectations. Both protagonists are South Asian American boys who must balance their cultural upbringing with their emerging queer identities. *The Best at It* (2019) tells the story of Rahul, a middle-school student dealing with anxiety and fear about being different. In *Nikhil Out Loud* (2022), Nikhil, a 13-year-old voice actor, is suddenly pushed into the spotlight when his sexuality becomes public knowledge. The five-year gap between the novels also provides a useful opportunity to reflect on how queer representation in young adult literature may have evolved over time. The method used in this study is close textual analysis. Key scenes, dialogues, and character ideas were thus closely scrutinised and matched with various Cass' model stages. In *The Best at It* (2019), for instance, Rahul's fixation on succeeding in typically masculine pursuits like sports is connected to the stage of identity confusion. He tries to fit in by excelling at things deemed "normal," or "expected," since he doesn't yet know his emotions. *Nikhil Out Loud* (2022)'s quiet approach towards joining LGBTQ+ peer venues after being outed connects to the stage of identity tolerance, in which he starts exploring his identity but still wants to stay safe and private. The study examined closely how the characters' development was impacted by social level, family expectations, and cultural background. Rahul's Indian American background, for instance, gives his coming-out trip still another level of complexity. His fear of disappointing his family delays his capacity to accept himself entirely. Nikhil's popularity, on the other hand, means that he must face his identity publicly once he is out. This creates tension between feeling proud and feeling exposed, showing how messy and emotional identity development can be. In addition, the study compares the two novels to spot patterns or changes in how Pancholy writes about queer youth. It looks at how each story is told, the role of supporting characters, like the supportive grandfather in *The Best at It* (2019) versus Nikhil's emotionally distant parents, and how each story ends. These comparisons help show whether the author's approach, or the larger cultural conversation around LGBTQ+ teens, has shifted between 2018 and 2023.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Vivienne Cass' six-stage model of homosexual identity formation provides a robust framework for understanding the nuanced journey of sexual identity development. This model, foundational in both academic and counseling contexts (Degges-White et al., pp. 2, 4), elucidates the psychological and social processes individuals navigate. Nikhil's narrative excerpts offer a poignant illustration of these stages, particularly highlighting early phases of identity exploration and crisis. Building on earlier analysis, this section looks deeper into the Identity Comparison stage. It brings in more examples from Nikhil's story and introduces Rahul as another character dealing with similar struggles. Cass explains that during Identity Comparison, people "tentatively accept the possibility of being

homosexual and examine its implications, leading to social alienation” (p. 2). Both Nikhil and Rahul go through this. Their experiences show how hard it can be to feel different. They struggle with grief, fear, and pressure to fit in. They also try to hide parts of themselves, which creates more pain. At this stage, people often feel different from their straight peers. That difference can cause emotional stress. Nikhil shows this when someone invites him to audition for the school musical. He replies awkwardly: “Oh. Well, actually . . . I’m sure DeSean will tell you all about it, but we put on a great musical every year! Everyone’s encouraged to audition! Do you have any interest in the dramatic arts, Nikhil?” (p. 32). His stammering reveals that he’s nervous. He’s curious about joining, but also scared. The musical could be a way for him to express who he is. But being involved might also draw unwanted attention. Cass says people in this stage often “compartmentalize identity” (p. 18). That means they test out being themselves in small, safe ways while still holding back. Rahul is going through something similar. He tears up a note, saying, “I spin around and press my back up against the door as though the note might magically reassemble itself” (p. 1). This action shows his inner struggle. The note may hold truths about who he is. By ripping it up, he’s trying to make those truths disappear. Cass explains that people in this stage often feel loss. Rahul is likely mourning the version of himself he thought he had to be. Being part of the musical only increases Nikhil’s discomfort. He says, “The tension between DeSean, Monica, Mateo, and me only grows. Except now I’m pretty sure it’s not just ‘cause I’m the lead, but because they all know that I’ve been horribly miscast, too” (p. 81). The word “miscast” has two meanings here. It suggests he might not be the right fit for his character. But it also shows that he feels out of place in general, like he’s pretending to be someone he’s not. Cass notes that people in Identity Comparison “recognize differences” (p. 2) that make them feel isolated. Nikhil feels like he’s being watched, judged, or not fully accepted. Rahul’s repeated destruction of the note, “I read the note again. Then I rip it up, over and over and over” (p. 2), is a sign of anxiety. The note holds meaning, but it also represents fear. Tearing it up again and again shows how stuck he feels. He’s caught in a loop, unsure of how to move forward. This matches what Cass describes: people in this stage often go back and forth between wanting to accept themselves and pulling away. Nikhil and Rahul haven’t moved past Identity Comparison yet. But their stories hint that change is possible. For Nikhil, being part of the musical might lead him to feel more comfortable in his skin. It introduces him to a creative group, which could be an early step into Identity Tolerance (Stage 3).

Nikhil’s journey focuses the nonlinear, lifelong nature of coming out, as framed by Cass. His early-stage conflicts, ripped paper symbolizing fragmentation, relocation anxieties reflecting tentative community-seeking, mirror the model’s theoretical progression. While the provided excerpts focus on initial stages, they highlight the utility of Cass’ framework in parsing identity formation struggles. For practitioners, this model offers a roadmap to support clients through validation, resource connection, and narrative reframing, ultimately fostering resilience and synthesis. Vivienne Cass’s model of homosexual identity formation highlights a crucial stage, Acceptance. In this phase, individuals begin to cautiously explore LGBTQIA+ communities as a way to reduce isolation. At the same time, they must confront internalized shame and self-doubt (Cass, 1979; [13, p. 4]). This stage often brings emotional conflict. People seek comfort in others while still struggling with their own fears. Nikhil’s story reflects this struggle. His experiences show how both positive and negative interactions influence how he sees himself. Through analyzing these moments alongside Cass’s theory, we can better understand how hard, and how important, it is to accept one’s queer identity. In the acceptance stage, individuals try to balance who they are with what society expects from them. Often, this means looking for LGBTQIA+ spaces to feel less alone ([13, p. 4]). Nikhil starts doing this, though very cautiously. We see his uncertainty in how he interacts with his peers and in his private thoughts. On page 81, he talks about feeling tension with his theater group: “I’m pretty sure it’s not just ‘cause I’m the lead, but because they all know that I’ve been horribly miscast, too.” Here, Nikhil is aware that others see him as out of place. The word “miscast” becomes a metaphor. It doesn’t just mean he’s not right for the role in the play. It also suggests he feels like he’s pretending in real life, trying to be someone he’s not. This shows the deep conflict between his public image and private identity, which is common in this stage of identity development. Cass says that rejection from others can make internal stigma worse ([13, p. 4]). For Nikhil, the judgment he feels from his peers makes him question where he belongs. He doesn’t feel fully accepted by straight spaces or queer ones. This creates a feeling of being stuck in between, trapped in what Cass calls a “liminal” state. If this rejection continues, it can stop him from moving forward in his journey of self-acceptance. A key part of the acceptance stage is learning to face your feelings, even the painful ones. Nikhil has a moment of quiet reflection early in the story. He reads a note while “half hidden behind [his] locker door” (p. 3). This moment matters. The locker is a symbol, it’s both a public and private space. Just like Nikhil, who is not fully out but also not fully closeted. The note represents his hidden emotions. Unfolding it means he’s starting to admit things to himself. This reflects what Cass describes as the importance of emotional experiences ([13, p. 4]). Even when he’s alone, Nikhil is taking a small but brave step toward accepting who he is. Still, personal reflection isn’t enough. Cass emphasizes that people need real connections with LGBTQIA+ communities to turn acceptance into confidence ([13, p. 4]). But Nikhil hesitates. He’s scared of rejection. When his theater group seems to judge him, it makes things worse. Again, he thinks he’s been “miscast.” This reinforces his fears and keeps him in a loop of self-doubt. Nikhil’s story begins to shift when he connects with Rahul. While their relationship isn’t fully explained in the text, Rahul clearly plays a supportive role. His acceptance of Nikhil becomes a turning point. According to Cass, positive relationships with other LGBTQIA+ people help individuals feel validated and less alone ([13, p. 4]). Rahul

gives Nikhil a different kind of mirror, one that reflects back his worth, not his shame. This idea connects with sociologist Erving Goffman's concept of "identity validation" (1963). Goffman explains how people who are often marginalized need affirming relationships to push back against societal stigma. For Nikhil, Rahul might be the first person who makes him feel like he belongs. That sense of belonging helps him challenge his internalized fears and start seeing himself as whole. Nikhil's story also reminds us that identity growth isn't a straight path. It's messy. Even when he finds support, like in the locker scene or through Rahul, he still struggles. The tension with the theater group continues to bother him (p. 81). This back-and-forth is typical of the acceptance stage. Cass describes it as "tentative" and full of "ambivalence" ([13, p. 4]). That means people feel unsure and may take one step forward and two steps back. Nikhil's role in the school play adds another layer to this. Being a lead actor means putting on a performance. This parallels his real life, where he feels pressure to play a part that doesn't match who he truly is. His public role makes it harder to live as his authentic self. The constant pressure to conform shows how systems, like school or society, can make the acceptance process even harder. Nikhil's story shows how identity is shaped not just by sexuality, but by other factors too. As a person of color, he might feel even more out of place in spaces that are mostly white or straight. Cass's model doesn't focus much on these intersecting identities. But Nikhil's experience points to the need for a more inclusive approach, one that reflects the reality of people who face multiple kinds of marginalization (Crenshaw, 1989). Theater also plays a powerful role in Nikhil's self-discovery. On stage, he experiments with identity. Performance becomes a metaphor. Just as he plays different roles in drama class, he's trying to figure out which role feels true in real life. Art becomes a space for him to explore, reflect, and maybe even heal. Nikhil's journey through the acceptance stage is filled with emotional ups and downs. He tries to connect with others, reflects on his feelings, and faces rejection and support. His phobia of being "miscast" highlights the difficulty of living between two identities. Still, Rahul finds strength in the quiet reading of the note and in his support. Though Nikhil's narrative gives complexity to this stage of development, Cass's model helps explain it. It emphasises how real acceptance relies on the people and systems surrounding the individual as well as on the person. Good relationships are important. Inclusive environments count. And knowing how vulnerability, art, and race interact with queer identity will help us better assist young people like Nikhil.

CONCLUSION

The Best at It (2019) and *Nikhil Out Loud* (2022) by Maulik Pancholy tell moving tales about finding your own voice. Pancholy illustrates how bigger social forces shape personal identity by means of the characters of Rahul Kapoor and Nikhil Shah. His work closely relates to ideas like intersectionality proposed by Kimberlé Crenshaw and Cass' model of gay identity development. Pancholy questions preconceptions and investigates what it really means to belong by combining personal development with more general political issues. The conflict between what society expects and how one sees oneself runs at the centre of both tales. Rahul's trip in *The Best at It* (2019) mirrors what Cass describes as the "acceptance stage." People start to embrace their queer identity at this point, usually while still battling shame and uncertainty. Rahul, a gay Indian American lad, is under pressure from the dominant standards around him as well as from the customs of his family. Aiming for perfection and cultivating compulsive behaviours helps him to manage. These actions reveal the emotional toll hiding who he is causes. Rahul starts to embrace himself, though, with time and help. His connection with his grandfather becomes a crucial turning point. Though they don't talk openly, the quiet support he receives helps Rahul feel less alone. Even small gestures of acceptance from family can make a big difference.

Nikhil's story in *Nikhil Out Loud* (2022) also shows how fragile the acceptance stage can be, especially for someone facing more than one kind of marginalization. As a queer Indian American teen who loves theater, Nikhil feels like he doesn't belong. According to Cass's model, these kinds of negative experiences can slow down the process of identity integration. Still, Nikhil has moments of quiet courage. In one scene (p. 3), he hides behind a locker door and opens a note. This small action symbolizes the start of accepting himself. These moments, though private, are meaningful steps forward. Pancholy's stories are also deeply intersectional. This means they look at how different parts of a person's identity, like race, sexuality, and culture, combine and influence their experiences. Crenshaw's work helps us understand this. Rahul isn't just dealing with being gay. He's also navigating the pressure to be the "perfect" Indian American student. That makes his journey more complex. Nikhil, too, pushes back against the stereotypes around South Asian masculinity. His love for dance and theater goes against traditional expectations in his community. By following their passions, both characters challenge what it means to be masculine, successful, and Indian. The stories also challenge conventional wisdom about gender. According to Rahul's narrative, masculinity does not have to look one way. He boldly expresses his own self when he goes to a dance with a lad. By means of his passion for dance, Nikhil challenges the notion that some activities belong only to specific genders. These events reflect feminist and queer theories—that of Judith Butler's, which hold that gender is something people express rather than something they are born into. Pancholy's work also powerfully raises awareness of LGBTQIA+ young people of colour. Mainstream books still feature few queer South Asian characters, particularly in tales meant for younger readers. Pancholy offers these readers something worth by centring Rahul and Nikhil: representation. For those who

need to see themselves, these tales provide a mirror; they also provide a window for others to learn and connect. That kind of representation counts politically as much as emotionally. It challenges the notion that there is only one way one might be queer.

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