

ISSN 0976-8165

The Criterion



The Criterion

An International Journal in English

Bi - Monthly Refereed & Indexed Open Access eJournal

June 2014 Vol. 5, Issue-3

5th Year of Open Access

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Making a Mark: An Exploration of Young Adult fiction in *No Guns at my Son's Funeral*

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Abstract:

Literature, across the globe is witnessing the rise of a distinct and diverse genre specifically written and published for that group of Young Adults who fall into the age groups ranging from twelve to eighteen years. Broadly defined as Young Adult literature (YA), this new genre, hitherto underappreciated, has suddenly began to capture the attention of the authors, publishers and readers alike thus initiating serious debates upon remapping the contours of literature so as to include YA literature into the folds of mainstream literature. Despite initial setbacks, Young Adult literature is gaining momentum thereby making a mark in literary scenario with its multi-layered structure and multiple purposes. The main intention of this article is to explore the nuances and cadences of the phenomenal rise of young adult fiction and to analyse Indian writer Paro Anand's young adult novel *No Guns at my Son's Funeral* to provide a glimpse of the issues that some of the YA novels, especially in India, have been grappling with.

Keywords: Young Adult literature, Adolescence, Social issues, Identity.

'Adolescence', defined by World Health Organisation as the period covering from ten to nineteen years constitutes the most crucial as well as the most complex stage in an individual's life. It is an important and inherent turning point that marks a transition from childhood to adulthood. In other words, it is the period following the onset of puberty during which a young person develops from a child into an adult (Oxford Dictionary). As one's personality begins to bloom during this stage, adolescence is considered to be the most diverse and dynamic stage of human growth and development.

'Adolescence' is rightly characterised as the age of conflicts and confusions, angst and anxieties, as well as hopes and aspirations. Most of the personality of an individual gets shaped and altered during this stage. Adolescence is also the period of physical and psychological development. Further, it is the stage of developing social and cultural sensitivities and sensibilities. Cognitive abilities and abstract thinking gets sharpened at this level (S.R. Smith and L. Handler). Psychologists consider adolescence as also the period of identity formation. Eric Erikson, American Developmental Psychologist credited for coining the term 'Identity Crisis', notes that this stage of human growth, in fact, is marked by identity crisis. Naturally such multi layered and multi structured stage of evolution has become the subject of study and interest not only for Developmental Psychologists but also for Biologists and Social Scientists alike.

Adolescence, being a significant point in an individual's life has successfully captured the attention and imagination of a galaxy of writers across the globe. Literature, being the expression and exploration of life around us, has turned its focus on the dilemma and dynamics of this complex stage of human evolution. In fact, in the recent years, there has been drastic increase in the representation of adolescents in literature resulting in the growth of one of the most fascinating and spectacular bodies of writing called 'Young Adult' literature (YA). Such representations, apart from highlighting the issues concerned with teenage, are also generating serious debates and discussions, curiosity and concerns regarding the need for considering a separate genre of literature exclusively meant for young adults. The main intention of this article is to explore the nuances and cadences of the phenomenal rise of young adult fiction. In addition, an effort has also been made to analyse Indian young adult fiction writer Paro Anand's text *No Guns at my Son's Funeral* to provide a glimpse of the kind of issues that some such young adult novels, specifically in Indian literary scene, have been grappling with. The article tries to navigate through the myriad issues surrounding the gradual growth of young adult fiction by highlighting the positive shades that such a genre can create in the literary milieu as well as the mindset of its target audience.

Young adult novels differ from children's novels in the sense that the protagonists of YA are young adults who, as per Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA) of American Library Association fall into the age group ranging from twelve to eighteen years. Also referred as Juvenile Fiction, young adult fiction is an umbrella term used to indicate such novels that are penned and printed exclusively and extensively for young adults. However, young adult texts are becoming popular even among adult readers and literary critics. One of the 'reasons for these gains for YA literature is likely how these works speak to the greater human conditions, and not just to the specific teen experience' (Garcia xi)

Young Adult fiction, that has its roots in American cultural context is now slowly but gradually entering the literary arena of other countries as well. YA fiction began to enter into the literary shelves during the First World War. Young adults hitherto ignored or clubbed either with children or with adults began to make their appearances as protagonists in literary narratives. They started occupying central space in the texts as the texts began to orbit around the unique universe of the teenagers and their tensions. Some of the classics produced in 19th century like Charles Dickens's *Oliver Twist* and *Great Expectations*, Alexandre Dumas' *The Count of Monte Cristo*, Robert Louis Stevenson's *Kidnapped* etc. revolved around the lives and experiences of the young protagonists. *Nancy Drew* and *Hardy boys* series had teenagers as shrewd detectives keen on solving complicated and mysterious cases. However, the credit of having laid firm foundation for young adult fiction especially in the West indeed goes to the publication of works like J.D.Salinger's *Catcher in the Rye* (1951), William Golding's *Lord of Flies* (1954) and S.E.Hinton's *Outsiders* (1967). Since then, young adult fiction, nevertheless, with many ups and downs has been making a mark both in terms of publication and readership. The publication and instant popularity of J.K.Rowling's fantasy novel series *Harry Potter* and Stephenie Meyer's *Twilight* series revolving around the romance between a teenager and a vampire have reaffirmed the position of YA fiction. 'A fascinating trend in the publication and growth of young adult literature is the advent of crossover novels-books that

appeal to both teens and adults. Three big crossover series- J.K.Rowling's *Harry Potter*, Stephenie Meyer's *Twilight* and Suzanne Collin's *The Hunger Games*- began this sudden surge and are duly recognised not only for their literary appeal but also for their ability to generate sales among teens and adults alike' (Kaplan,31)

However, YA fiction is not merely confined to vampires and fantasies, mysteries and teenage attractions but it is diverse enough to include and focus upon wide range of themes that are related to young adults. Issues of identity and sexuality, teenage tensions and growing up problems, friendship and family relationships, psychological complexities and socio cultural set up that governs and moulds the personality of the youngsters are some of the aspects addressed by young adult fiction . Search for identity and identity crisis is a recurrent theme in young adult novels. 'The trope that all young adult literature has in common is the search for identity' (Kaplan, 12). Graphic novels, Science fiction, Problem novels, memoirs and dairies, mysteries and myths, fantasies and Bildungsroman or coming of age novels are the popular sub genres of young adult fiction. Among these loosely defined sub genres, the 'Problem Novels' that address the personal and social issues concerning the teenagers tend to be the most conspicuous ones.

Across the globe, the literary world is divided in its opinion about giving serious considerations to YA literature. Critics give credit to publication houses for popularising YA literature. It is a known fact that the marketing strategies of the publication houses rule the market and mindset, tastes and preferences of both the readers and the authors. The mad mania, wide publicity and hype being attached to Harry Potter series and the expectation it builds up among the readers all over the world clearly demonstrates the fact. Many harsh critics allege that YA fiction is didactic and lacks diversity. It is also claimed that the issues dealt by YA novels are very superficial and YA narratives as such has no depth and therefore it does not deserve serious attention and critical consideration. This is also the main reason why many are sceptical about the future prospects of YA novels. Still there is a view that YA fiction that has been rising like a new star will die soon. Misconceptions that YA fiction is all about vampires and ghosts, teenage fashions and infatuations are still in the air. The notion that YA novels deal with unrealistic and artificial world are also being commented. Many critics have felt 'that virtually no theoretical criticism attaches to young adult literature as such. Theorists in the wider field of children's literature often discuss young adult titles without distinguishing them as a separate group and without, therefore, indicating how theoretical issues in young adult literature might differ from those in literature for younger children.'(Hunt, 4) But, the success saga that began with *Harry Potter* and *Twilight* series followed by varied gamut of literature duly focussed on various issues of teenage characters has, in fact, initiated the critics to discuss and debate on remapping the contours of literature so as to include YA fiction into the folds of mainstream literature.

Despite initial setbacks and mixed critical opinion, young adult fiction is gaining greater momentum. YA novels are multi-layered and can serve multiple purposes. The genre has recognized young adults as active readers rather than passive receivers. It has bridged the gap

between childhood and adulthood by exploring and analysing the keen issues solely concerned with youngsters. Rather than adopting flashback technique wherein a grown up person becomes nostalgic about his youth and constructs stories through memory, the young protagonists in YA fiction become an integral part and the story is revealed from their mouth as well as from their point of view. It is their experiences that they share with the readers and it is to their world that we are taken into. One of the most important roles of YA fiction is that it gives ample opportunity to the young adults to ruminate over diverse issues and define their roles in life. In the recent years the genre is getting critical attention and systematic study. YA fiction till recently shunned as 'merely second category of - child like story telling - didactic in nature-and unworthy of serious literary evaluation, when, in fact, it is really an overlooked and underappreciated literary genre that has only recently begun to attract the critical attention that it deserves' (Daniels, 78).

YA novels particularly since 2000 have managed to gain serious attention. Issues handled by YA authors and reception as well as response to them from the readers are being problematized by the academicians and scholars. The mechanism behind the production, circulation and consumption of YA novels is being examined to understand the growth, development and the future of YA fiction. Courses are being offered in many Universities about young adult novels. Several studies have shown that YA novels can help in inculcating study habits among the unwilling readers and can also act as a major step in introducing the students into the acts of analysing and appreciating literary classics. Feminist, psycho analytical studies, post structuralist, post modern and other theoretical approaches have not only been providing in depth study of YA fiction but have also broadened its dimensions. Representation of class and culture, gender and race, identity formation, impact of cyber world and other technological innovations on a teenager's life and his surroundings are getting wider attention from the researchers. Many YA novels have been adapted into films and television serials further popularising the genre. Thus, 'as the literature has developed, so has the study of that literature' (Hunt, 4).

It is against this broader background that a study has been attempted to analyse young adult fiction in India particularly with a special reference to Paro Anand's novel *No Guns at my Son's Funeral*. Since the turn of the century, young adult literature is gaining greater momentum in India peppered by the increasing interests of publishing houses in this upcoming genre and also by the kind of publicity being given. Young adult novels in India have been exhibiting greater ingenuity not only in terms of themes but also in terms of subjects handled and issues dealt with. Graphic novels and fantasy novels are steadily climbing the ladder of success. Indian superheroes and mythical characters set in the past, present and future have been brought to the centres of such novels to provide greater picture of Indian milieu and sensibilities. Further, R.K.Narayan's classic *Swami and his Friends*, Ruskin Bond's coming of age novel like *The Room on the Roof* have always been the favourites of children, youngsters and adults alike. *The Room on the Roof*, written when Ruskin Bond himself was a teenager narrates the exciting experiences of a sixteen year old orphan boy Rusty who runs away from his strict guardians to feel every essence of Indian life.

Apart from these, many young adult novels in India explore some of the social, political and emotional issues pertaining to Indian society through the eyes and experiences of the teenage protagonists. Some of the novelists have been successful in handling extremely serious and sensitive problems like the conflicts and confusions of young adults as they encounter such issues as that of terrorism, female infanticide, communalism, alcoholism etc., and their reaction and responses towards it on one hand and on the other, their struggle to find space and identity in the adult world. Paro Anand's *No Guns at my Son's Funeral* (2005) and *Weed* (2008) deal with terrorism while Ranjit Lal's *Faces in the Water* (2010) takes up the issue of female infanticide revealed through the shocking narration of a young fifteen year old boy Gurmi as he learns ugly secrets about his own well respected Diwanchand family. Gurmi's search for the magical well in the family farmhouse leaves him with a horrible discovery of the much guarded family secret that all his female siblings and cousins were dumped in the so called magical well soon after their birth. Along with the boy, the readers also enter into the magical world of the faces in the water. The novel sharply criticizes the killing of the girl children which is still prevalent in many parts of the country. Gurmi's efforts to break this inhuman tradition of his family make him an enlightened teenage crusader against the evils of the society. Ranjit Lal's another novel *Smitten* (2012) raises the issue of sexual abuse within the family against the backdrop of growing friendship between the two teenage characters Samir Gill and Akhila whereas as Deepa Agarwal's *Caravan to Tibet* (2007), set in nineteenth century is yet another coming of age novel with the young protagonist, fourteen year old Debu's determination and courage to search his father who is lost in one of the treacherous passes of Tibet. Debu's refusal to accept the plight of his father instigates him to join the next caravan to the dangerous mountains of Tibet. The lessons of life that he learns from his adventure and travel experiences make the novel not only interesting but also provide kaleidoscopic view of the culture and landscape of Tibet. Young adult novels, concentrating on the social issues and burning problems of contemporary Indian society can be thus both educative as well as entertaining. 'One of the important roles such literature plays is that it gives young readers an opportunity to contemplate daunting and uncomfortable issues from a safe distance, define their role in life and learn that each of us possesses abilities to make a difference in the world'(Agarwal).

One such novel that addresses the most elusive and complicated problems of the present day-that of terrorism, which impacts especially the mindset of a teenager- occupies larger space in Paro Anand's novels *No Guns at my Son's Funeral* and its sequel *weed*. *Weed* narrates the plight of a young boy Umer and his mother who struggles hard to prevent her children from treading the path of violence unlike her husband. However, it is in *No Guns at my Son's Funeral*, that the devastating effects of terrorism are meticulously discussed. Being described as a "compelling story of child being born into unrest," *No Guns at my Son's Funeral* depicts the harsh realities of terrorism and militancy in the valleys of Kashmir. Paro Anand, a performance story teller and a record holder for making the world's longest news paper with children, here presents the life of Aftab, a young Kashmiri boy who leads a dual life. Anand's experiences while working with the children in difficult circumstances especially in Kashmir gives her an authentic edge to penetrate deeper into the psyche of young minds under duress.

In fact, it is her exposure to the harsh realities and experiences of the teenagers gets highlighted in the manner she handles her teenage protagonists.

No Guns at my Son's Funeral nominated for the IIBY (International Board on Books for Young People) honour list in 2006, as the best book for young people from India and translated into Spanish and German provides minute details of the working of a young teenager's psyche. Aftab, the central character, is different during the day for he lives in the world of normalcy with his family and friends but in the night he secretly sneaks into the world of violence and bloodshed to prove his loyalty towards his hero Akram whom he admires "like the older brother he didn't have, but longed for. Akram, so handsome, so tall, so sure of himself...who wore his battle scars like medals. Akram, who people said, was not a Kashmiri, but actually a firangi.."(P 3)

Aftab is like any young teenager who wants to be himself. In a hurry to prove his way, what Aftab cannot realise is the danger involved in the bloody path he had chosen. He is also too young and innocent to discover the true colours of Akram. It is this innocence that Akram utilises and exploits to fulfil his militant mission "use them while their dreams are bigger than their knowledge."(P 9)Paro Anand is at her best in the way she describes Aftab's fascination and adoration for Akram whom he compares to Hrithik Roshan in *Fiza* with "AK 47 in his powerful arms, muscles ripping, jaws clenched...(P 5)".The childhood fantasies and fascinations, awe and admiration, combined with the crave to do something sensational mars the life of not only Aftab but also many young teenagers like him who are drawn to terrorism being lured by atankavadis with the "promise of money and martial arts training and weapon"(P 2)Aftab, throughout the novel lives under the illusion that Akram and himself are 'freedom fighters' and liberators. Such is his blind faith in Akram that he doesn't even mind considering his Ammi an enemy for she was not with the cause. Without understanding her concerns, he visualises himself as "hero", "the anonymous militant reported in the national dailies" (P 20).To his horror he finds that even his teenage sister Shazia is also lured by Akram and she has also been a part of his secret militant mission.

The novel also explores the issues of identity. Akram feels no guilt at the deaths that had occurred at his hand and also at the manner in which he was making Shazia, Aftab and other teenagers as scapegoats for his mission. Akram himself is a young man trying to wipe out the label of 'coward' and establish his own identity by trying to form his own militant gang Kashmir Azadi Group. It is into this group that he goes on recruiting youngsters so that they can "do fighting (P 71) fully aware and conscious of the risks that he was pushing them into. Such is Aftab's blind faith in Akram that he even gets ready for a dangerous mission to avenge the death of other members of the group just to win Akram's "shahbash" while Akram is aware of the fact,

"For he knows that for the child, there will be no next time. And in spite of himself, his training, he is sorry."(P 159)

Paro Anand tries to draw our attention to the fact how absence of proper guidance and direction can deviate teenagers from right path. Aftab, Akram and Shazia are directionless

youth who are too young to handle the situation that they themselves have created. Akram's sudden death is unbearable for Aftab. He acts instantly and hurries to avenge his death by blasting the market place. The bomb kills not only Aftab but also many more children and people around him. The shocks are too much especially for Shazia with both brother and her lover Akram meeting violent deaths. As Aftab's body is lifted to be buried and the military men draw their own weapons, Aftab's Ammi cries out,

“No! There will be no Guns. There will be no Guns at my Son's Funeral.(P 169)”

Paro Anand dedicates Afterword for the description of Shazia's mindset after the birth of her son from Akram. She has now realised the cost of blind faith in a wrong ideology. She sums ruthlessly an eternal question haunting her about her son “will he follow his father's footsteps?” She cries out a big “No”,

“Her son, her precious son..will not ever hold a gun in his tender hands. His feet will never walk the killer's path. His father's path. Never...There will be no guns at my son's funeral.”(p 172)

Paro Anand ends her novel with an anonymous girl's prayer from Baramullah,

“Whatever else happens let there be peace.”

Paro Anand's *No Guns at my Son's Funeral* gives a vivid picture of the harsh realities of many youngsters being drawn into the dark dungeons of bloodshed and vicious circles of violence from which there is no escape. The novel is an eye opener for it portrays painfully the angst and anxieties, false ideologies and fantasies, media influences and peer pressures that haunt a teenager's life. The novel serves multiple purposes. It can be read as a classroom text to teach the young teens about the terrific world of terrorism and the false romantic notions associated with it. The novel also addresses the issues of identity crisis as is evident in case of both Akram and Aftab. The dangers of hero worshipping as revealed through Aftab and that of infatuation as in case of Shazia are worked out in detail by the Paro Anand. The novel also highlights the helplessness of the parents who are made to suffer throughout their lives because of the one fatal step of their children. Throughout the novel Aftab betrays his Ammi for the sake of a third person. In addition to these issues, the text highlights the love and affection, care and concern that the parents shower on their children and their eventual despair at the incorrigible mistakes of the children. *No Guns at my Son's Funeral* is in every sense a young adult novel for in the 'adolescent novel protagonist must learn about the social forces that have made them what they are. They learn to negotiate the levels of power that exist in the myriad social institutions within which they must function including family; school; the church; govt; social constructions of sexuality, gender, race, class; and cultural mores surrounding death. (Trites, 3).

Many might shun young adult fiction including its various sub genres as a product of popular culture and marketing strategies of publication houses. Many might have described it as shallow and trivial but young adult fiction has definitely begun to take its steps in the world of literature. While many have celebrated the entry of YA novels, some have lamented its

arrival and have dismissed it as pulp fiction. Few have even predicted that YA fiction, particularly in Indian context is short lived and it will be eroded with the tide of time without leaving any significant imprints. There is also a prediction that it is just one more influence entering India- a fashion and a fad that is attracting the teenagers and once the interests and inclination of the young adults changes, the prospects of this genre also changes. Whatever may be the criticism and comments; nevertheless, YA novels especially since the beginning of 21st century have been successfully reaching its target audience and have also been adorning the literary shelves of book stores and many youngsters. 'Traditional and cultural constraints have made the development of a modern young adult literature difficult in India, hence the very applicability of the term is debatable in the Indian context' (Rangachari). But the genre is slowly becoming the darling of both the writers trying to experiment with new styles and themes and also among the young readers expecting innovative and more creative reading experiences. Young adult fiction in India is still young and has still a long way to go. Many of the young adult fiction writers themselves are young and the publishing houses are keen on promoting them. The future prospect of the genre no doubt seems bright and promising. Paro Anand sums up the mood thus;

"In 2005, when my YA book, *No Guns at My Son's Funeral...* was going for print, I was full of trepidation. We even changed the title to the much-watered-down Kashmir, The Other Side of Childhood, got covers printed, and then went back to the original name. Today, YA writing is ready to take on bolder issues, and I do not feel as nervous. My next book is a YA graphic novel with a rather non-linear, complex plot, and I am not worried at all."

Whether YA fiction is just a short lived phenomenon or will it survive to shine with new experiments and versatility is left to the test of time. However, Young Adult fiction is surely making a mark in the contemporary literary horizon.

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