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History in Stories: Ranjit Lal's *The Battle for No:19*

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Abstract:

Children's literature is always seen in relation to the classic texts, retold myths, epics, folktales, and local legends. These myths, legends and epics were actually meant for the adults, but children also enjoyed it in the re-edited and retold forms. Children's literature was intended to give instructions and also to inspire young children, thus circling around the didactic concerns of children's literature. Young adult literature is typically regarded as realistic fiction for readers aged twelve to eighteen. These literatures dealt with adolescent issues like friendship between opposite sexes, love affair, adult concerns, puberty etc. Young adult literature is establishing its own space in Indian children's literature industry and authors focus on different issues like the multicultural, multilingual nature, the diasporic children etc. Ranjit Lal's *The Battle for No: 19* is analysed here in the light of concepts like gender and nationalism in India.

Keywords: Children's literature, young adult literature, India, gender and nationalism

History of children's literature in India is always read in parallel with the retold myths, folklore, epics, legends and stories about local heroes and heroines. There are other texts like *Panchatantra*, *Kathasarit Sagara*, *Jataka Tales* and *Brihatkatha* available for children in India. India boasts of *Panchatantra* as the oldest collection of tales meant for children. These tales are of high political wisdom and depth and it essentially targets adults. These myths, legends and epics were meant for the adults, but children enjoyed it in the re-edited and retold forms.

Children's literature as a genre gained momentum in India in the colonial period itself. It was partly due to the flourishing age of children's literature in Britain and partly due to the missionary works. There were translations from the western texts which were mainly religious stories about Christianity and the stories from the Bible. The earliest form of children's literature in India can be traced back to the magazine *Digdarshan* (1818) which was published by the British missionaries. *Cherupaithangalkku Upakarartham Englishil Ninnun Paribhashappeduthiya Kathakal* was published in the year 1824 by CMS Press Kottayam. These were adaptations of English stories without any cultural relevance to India or the "Indian culture".

After independence, there was a need for the texts exclusively for children without the colonial burden. Attempts are taken from the publishers and writers to produce genuine children's texts other than copied versions from the West. These texts had to portray the "Indian

diversity” more or less adequately or accurately. Generally, the portrayals of children in English language children’s novels are dutiful and courageous child characters that show heroic qualities. These fictional child heroes must inspire the real children of India and build a national consciousness.

Children’s literature is a thriving industry in India, but as a genre, it was never free from the burden of strong didacticism and moral values. Along with this, there was an attempt to stick with the theme of “Indian traditions”. Broken families, child abuse, friendship with the opposite sex and adolescent issues like menstruation, anxiety etc. were not seen as a good theme of children’s books. Books other than the prescribed texts are welcome only when they provide additional information to enhance the child’s knowledge. Activity, quiz and general knowledge books are usually preferred by parents to hone the children’s competitive edge. Parents or adults who generally purchased books for children selected books which gave preference to books that deal with the academic studies or stuck with inspirational stories. Books that dealt stories based on moral and cultural values also were given preference. Reading for pure entertainment is not much common among Indian children.

Changes are happening slowly and cautiously in the field of Indian children’s literature. Young adult fiction is establishing its space with different themes and issues that impinge the adolescent lives. Single-parent families, relationships with the opposite sex, teenage pregnancy and mental fears seem to be the preferred themes of young adult fiction in the US and UK. Indian young adult fiction is still in the budding stage and there are authors like Deepa Agarwal, Paro Anand, Deepak Lal, Shashi Deshpande, Ranjit Lal from India and diasporic writers like Bali Rai, Tanuja Desai Hidier, Mitali Perkins, Kashmira Sheth and Narinder Dhama.

The empowerment of girl characters and focus on a girl child’s journey is usually handled by women writers in India and Ranjit Lal’s *The Battle for No: 19* is an exception to this. Ranjit Lal’s *The Battle for No: 19* is a historical young adult fiction set against the backdrop of 1984 Delhi riot. After the assassination of Indira Gandhi in 1984, there was an anti-Sikh riot in Delhi. Puja, Sangita, Jaya, Ritika, Seema, Sheetal, Gauri and Payal are on their visit to Agra and Delhi. The girls are from the hills and when they are back from the visit they were attacked by a mob. Their Sikh driver and friend were brutally attacked and set on fire. The girls manage to escape and find a big house nearby as a temporary shelter. However, they realize that the big house is owned by a Sikh family and it, of course, places them in continued danger.

It is a searing portrayal of the riot where a group of eight school girls are pitchforked into mindless communal violence. These eight strong girls co-operate each other to survive and they also help Simi and Jogi who are the targets of the murderers. Helping the victims during riots is very rare and eight girls who are at their teens stand against the odds and fight for their life. This young adult literature creates a central space for girls and tries to portray the new Indian girl. In *The Battle for No: 19* the novel is shaped with a female value system which emphasises care, cooperation and “interdependence”. (49, Superle) Female value systems are shaped by the

principles of mutual love and co-operation whereas male value system focuses more on the individuation and autonomy.

It is through cooperation, intelligence, skill and strong nerves and body that the eight girls survive. It is cooperation among themselves that help them where each girl is contributing unique and valuable skills to the group. Every individual skill saves the group from the attack and life threatening situations. Seema observes each and everything and she realizes that a big mansion house will have a name board on the gate. She realizes that changing the name board from the Sikh to an aristocratic Hindu name would obviously save them. Sangita who is technologically brilliant immediately makes the necessary arrangement to change the names on the placard. It obviously saves them for a night from the violent mob who wandered the streets with a list of Sikh houses. Sheetal is brave and strong and is determined to save the group while Puja with her talent and archery skills is the life saver. Gauri loves cooking and she is fascinated by the big kitchen with modern amenities. She immediately thinks of cooking different cuisines and she is the nurturing lady of the group. She cooks and cares for the group to keep them healthy and strong. The individual qualities taken as a collective saves them as a group and from the group. They embody the principle of unity in diversity.

Ranjit Lal portrays them as cooperating, working and standing together through every challenge regardless of individual threats and struggle. The strong girls at their teens are terrified of their attackers and bravely act as one. The men in the mob make the gender sensitive comment that everyone carelessly does in a society about teen girls “a group of weeping, hysterical schoolgirls, who they could silence and squash easily with a slap or a blow”. (153) The taken for granted notion that women are not strong and they can be controlled by a slap or physical tortures is clearly visible in the comments of the men in the mob. Instead of weeping girls, the men face a “scheming demonic contingent” (153).

The identity and maturation of an Indian girl are seen, valued and complicated by her relationship within the family and also her duty towards the families. Michelle Superle is of the opinion that duty is a central concept in many of the works produced in India and it is due to the fact that Hindu society was traditionally structured around the idea of *dharma*, which required each person to do her or his duty. (50) *Panchatantra* stories also emphasise on doing one’s duty as the important component in one’s life. For the Indian girl, she has to find a balance between tradition and modernity and also to fulfil her duties towards the family and to society. Brave girls of the house no: 19 balance themselves in fulfilling their duty towards each other.

This gender-sensitive book maps the emotional journey of the girls, who draws on unknown reserves of courage and ingenuity to survive. For Puja, the central character, it is a journey towards self-realization. Puja in the opening pages of the novel contemplates how she wants to be herself. Puja is already deeply troubled by her uneasy relationship with her father, and she must battle fear, self-doubt and establish her identity of being a strong girl. She thinks:

But how could Papa, when he hardly saw her at as someone who lived and breathed and ate and drank and studied and slept in the same house. And Mama, always bemoaning her fate and still blaming her, sixteen years later, for coming out first and for the death of the 'prince' Ashwin, the twin who had followed her a few hours later but not made it beyond a day; for Mama not being able to have another baby (brother, of course). (2)

These lines literally portray the gender concern and the gender biased attitude of the Indian psyche. Puja belongs to an upper middle class family where her father is working for the defence and serves as a Major. Puja overcomes her unwanted status in the family and she accomplishes this by impressing her father with her archery skills.

The girls in the fiction are not dependent or independent; instead, they are "interdependent" (50) and work within the multitude of relationships like mutual love, care, compassion and cooperation. Lal's girls in the novel invent themselves during their stay in the abandoned house. There is a sisterhood between themselves and it is a collective effort from the girls that ultimately help them fight against the goons and succeed.

The text is graphic in detailing the treatment of violence and also thought to provoke. During the 1984 Delhi riots, Sikhs were brutally attacked after Indira Gandhi was assassinated by her Sikh bodyguards. Lal's treatment of violence is simultaneously matter-of-fact and thought-provoking and he warns against communal violence. His descriptive scenes are based on the actual events of the riots. Shortly after the text starts the Sikh driver - Kartar Sing who is also a good friend of the eight girls is attacked by a mob. Kartar sing is portrayed as heroic by Lal through his efforts in helping the girls escape even when he is tortured and he urges the girls to get out from the jeep and run. The text opens with the gentle act of saving the girls' lives where the same man is disastrously burned alive because of the difference in religion. It also shows that in spite of differences the disasters could be overcome and it is Kartar Sing's urge that saves the eight girls from the violent mob of men. When the girls stand in union to attack the violent mob the principles of unity in diversity and resistance of communal thinking are illustrated in the novel.

There is an inter-religious friendship all through the novels and while the city of Delhi is burning with communal violence the girls in the mansion are accepting and befriending the householder's two Sikh children. Taking responsibility of the children actually makes their own survival crucial and the group bravely decides to protect the children. They are eventually rewarded and the children help them in many ways. At the end of the novel, it is shown that the girls and their families maintain a strong relationship with the children and their families. This ideological message is the core of the unity in diversity that India is proud of. Payal, one among the eight girls, thinks of marrying Jogi, the Sikh boy and the intercultural acceptance is well portrayed towards the end of the novel.

Child characters in children's fiction are generally placed superior to adults mainly because of their innocence and open-heartedness. Since the children are the future, only they can act collectively to pave way for social transformation. Lal's *The Battle for No: 19* celebrates intellectual and physical abilities, capacity of acceptance, intercultural friendships, cooperation, and strength in differences. The children also understand the adult hypocrisy and Puja, the central character contemplates:

A five thousand year old civilization, so quick to lecture the world about its own greatness and belief in ahimsa, and their barbarism! Some progress we've made, some civilization we've produced, some lessons we've learnt since 1947! Why did adults always, but always, preach one thing and practice exactly the opposite – and think that no one has noticed. (60-61)

In a country like India inequality – class, caste and gender based and communal violence is a question of life and death. India uses the concept of “unity in diversity” as a cultural characteristic of the nation and India is multicultural rather than monocultural. India's diversity is tremendous and the multicultural space is the true character of Indian nationality. The girls in the novel make use of Sangita's south Indian background and deal the rioters with the Tamil language. Lal's “battle” is to elicit social harmony even if it is on a microcosmic level. There is a common strand of tolerance and belief within the system and also within fellow human beings, even though the customs and traditions run deep within the people.

Lal's *The Battle for No: 19* is about eight middle-class girls. Every central girl character in young adult fictions - whether they are adventure stories, mysteries, school stories and fantasies – are from a middle class or even upper middle-class families. The diasporic young adult fiction also tells the story of middle-class Indian girls. Gender is one of the most decisive factors in India and the class structure doesn't make much difference to the identity of being a woman or girl. Puja, the central character is an army Major's daughter and she has an unwanted status at home. Puja's father who is a Major never understands why she has to learn archery and what is the use of studying all these being a girl? At the end of the novel, Puja impresses her father with her archery skills and saves her father's and young Soni's life by giving a sharp aim against the man who tried to kill them. Immediately after this Puja's Papa comments: “No damn son would have had the guts to attempt a shot like that.” (178) It is still seen and valued how manly the action is. It comes from the conditioned mind of a gender conscious Indian male.

The new Indian girls are always successful in tackling their problems, solving it and overcoming the hurdles in their ways. Lal's fiction also focuses on the middle class new Indian girls and like other young adult fictions the author doesn't give a space to the class and caste struggle that India still faces. It is a story about eight powerful middle-class Indian girls and in the context of India the middle class or upper class define the parameters of existence. *The Battle for No:19* is a story about India's history – how India treated gender, how the people from the margin never appeared in the literatures, and how the characters became the part of popular

culture. The text is at the same time promising that it conveys a strong message. Children through cooperation and friendship achieve goals in their life and fight against the hurdles in their life. Despite their differences, the children in the young adult fiction *The Battle for No: 19* try for a space where there is social equality and help in nation building.

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