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Re-imagining Indian Young Adult Literature: A Study

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Abstract:

The ebbing tide of empathy and awareness among the young adults in India is a concern that needs immediate attention. Literature should be constructed in such a way that the youth find in it a reservoir of knowledge and inspiration. It should aspire to channelize their potential for the bigger objective of nation-building. The Young Adult Literature (YAL) is a genre that gives the young adolescents a wider perspective and broadens their spectrum. It ushers then into a scenario where they can be introduced to the problematic aspect of everyday living and survival.

This paper intends to convey the basics of YAL to the readers and also draw the attention of the readers towards the issues concerning the growth of this genre in a profit-hungry consumer book market of India. The significance of this genre is unquestionable as it bridges the gulf between the young and the adult world. This also addresses the problems of youth and the unvoiced truths about their lives that often push them towards insanity and trauma. Re-imagining the Indian YAL can actually accentuate the productivity of the youth of our country.

Keywords: YA literature, trauma, nation-building, genre.

Too many adults wish to ‘protect’ teenagers when they should be stimulating them to read of life as it is lived.

– **Margaret A. Edwards**

This study re-imagines the role of young adult literature within the turbulent times we are living in. In India this genre has not yet attained maturity and needs to expand for addressing problems of the youth. International writers have been working on these issues, but in India mostly the focus is on fabulation, myths and other genres that are away from realism. Realism in literature

for the youth is a peripheral aspect in most novels. The real essence of literary production for adolescents should lay emphasis on the issues concerning the youth of today. As observed by Alice Trupe:

The genre of YA literature has thrived since the 1960s, though critical recognition and scholarly interest has lagged a bit behind the inventiveness of authors in the field. Today's YA literature features more complex plotting and motivation and more moral ambiguity than pre-1960s literature for teens did, and it is more likely to experiment with the novel form. Young readers need not be naive readers. The increasing sophistication of the genre has been recognized with an award specifically for YA literature, the Michael L. Printz Award, and the Young People's Literature category of the National Book Award. (Trupe vii)

“One day you will be old enough to start reading fairy tales again” (n. pag.) said C. S. Lewis. As we grow up many stories and tales surround our lives. The tales we read in our childhood and as a youth are deeply woven in our existence. The fairy tales and the fantasy tales that attract us as children even captivate us with their charm in our adulthood. Many of our nostalgic journeys in the past include these stories because of their timeless appeal. Those stories delighted not only young population, but also the adult readers. Some such enduring stories include *Panchatantra* that is a collection of fables, an ancient Indian text that treasures educational moral stories for the young and *Malgudi Days* (1943) by R. K. Narayan. Some stories and novels written by authors of international repute have a deep impact on our mind. These include *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (1865) by Lewis Carroll, *Oliver Twist* (1838) and *A Christmas Carol* (1843) by Charles Dickens, *Wuthering Heights* (1847) by Emily Brontë, *The Gift of the Magi* (1905) by O. Henry, even Gothic literature attracted young minds such as *Dracula* (1897) by Bram Stoker, *The Three Questions* (1885) by Leo Tolstoy and Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818). *Idgah* (1933) by Munshi Premchand, *Kabuliwala* (1892) by Rabindranath Tagore, *Sparrows* by K. A. Abbas and Ruskin Bond's *The Blue Umbrella* (1974) are some such unforgettable tales by Indian authors. We have grown up with these priceless stories that have always renewed our sensibility and refreshed our minds. In this regard Janet Alsup rightly suggests that:

However, something everyone seems to recognize is that literature is indeed powerful. It does do something to the reader, especially when the reader is engrossed in the reading process....Total engagement in a narrative world is

powerful and can create internal, personal narratives of self that, some argue, might guide a reader's behavior in the future. (5)

These stories cannot be erased from our minds because they had a lasting impact on us. They connect with our emotional side and teach us great lessons in self-respect, love, sacrifice, empathy and importance of humanity. We may not be able to extract the exact meanings, symbolism, satirical or allegorical element of a story, but the plain message is always easily grasped. We read *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* as an appealing fantasy and dream world narrative with a talking Cheshire cat and an extraordinary rabbit who behaves like humans, but as a youngster we did not read it as a Menippean satire, or as a parody of popular culture. *Gulliver's Travels* by Jonathan Swift was read as an adventure narrative and not critically decoded as a prose-satire, or a fictional travelogue full of political criticism. It is not that young people, or youth do not have the critical ability to understand the complicated nature of the stories, but during that tender age as they shift from childhood to adolescence their minds need to grasp literature with a different view and perspective. Their young mind creates a perspective that allows them to handle transition from childhood to adolescence in a smooth way. As time moves on young adults transform into individuals with a mature intellect, vision and perspective. It is as an adult that they finally begin to understand the underlying tone of irony, satire, metaphor, and black humour in the texts which they enjoyed reading as young adults. An adult perspective and wisdom captivates their interest. They are able to add meaning to what they read with a critical understanding as they grow. However, as youth we do not usually delve into the inner layers, or the sub-textual analysis of what we read.

The books available for young adults vary in themes and narrative styles. From grandiose fantasy tales, to pulp fiction and adventure series and from graphic novels to thrillers and rose-tinted romances, the genre adheres to all tastes. It has, however, been, realized that youth are rapidly drifting towards fictional pieces that lack literary merit and pulp fiction in the present themes. The young adult literature (referred as YAL from here on) does not satiate the quest of young people in India for substantial reading material. Innumerable YAL is being written, but most of it aims for a steady market growth rather than quality elevation. Monetary pursuit has compromised the quality YAL that is being made available. Romance, teenage infatuation, betrayal and other such amorous detours are central to most of the literature being produced. The sphere of YAL has greatly narrowed in recent times as compared to the latter part of the

20th century. The YAL produced in India during those times catered to the literary interests of everyone without the age barriers. The emotive value, level of empathy, ideals of compassion and morally high attitude of the narratives gave the readers a purpose to read and comprehend those texts. The didactic spirit and meaningful lessons of such stories mentored the young minds and channelized the youthful energies positively.

Not all contemporary YAL in India is meaningless. Writers like Devika Rangachari, Paro Anand, Andaleeb Wahid, Nidhi Chanani, Himanjali Sarkar, Rupa Gulab and Shabnam Minwalla have greatly contributed to the genre of YAL in recent decades. We need to devise ways in which we can educate the Indian youth about sensitive issues and concerns without overburdening their minds and draining them emotionally. We need to make them aware of the realities of life before they get trapped into a nexus of hyperreal situations and virtual lifestyle.

The problem faced by YAL in India cannot be studied in isolation; these problems are unanimously faced by writers and consumers across the nation. The readership base and sphere of Indian YAL or desi YAL is relatively narrow because of certain factors. Interest of youth in reading YAL varies from region to region. Some cities have high percentages while others are low. Many young people do not have access to YAL due to dearth of resources. They are either economically underprivileged or have no time to read as they work for long hours to earn their livelihood. Reading is a luxury they cannot afford. While analyzing the Indian situation the condition of such underprivileged youth cannot be negated. Though there are school libraries, but access to these is only available to those who can afford formal schooling. Rest of the schools in villages and small towns do not accommodate libraries or study rooms. Reading via android applications and other virtual modes has made the process convenient for many who do not like carrying hard copies. Thousands of e-editions can be easily treasured in these applications and accessed when needed. Bookstores, however, have suffered in this context as they are now less crowded as compared to earlier decades. Readership is also low as many young people have abandoned reading as a pastime or leisure pursuit, they prefer to engage in other social networking platforms for entertaining themselves. The café culture, clubbing, online dating, have not promoted anything positive in India.

The underprivileged class has no access to quality reading resources. They cannot access the libraries or buy books to read. Electronic resources are also obscure for a majority. Hence a dominant section of the society is deprived of reading YAL in their adolescence. Though at school

level these young people get to read certain books prescribed in their curriculum, but beyond that they rarely get the opportunity of reading prolific writings with myriad issues of importance. It must be our aim to allow the underprivileged to avail the facility of reading by making books available to them at a cheaper price, used books should be donated and the government should take drastic steps in opening libraries in every non-urban region so as to allow young minds to read fine literature and be a part of the nation-building process. Instead, with a very few exceptions productive book-reading sessions, group discussions, story-telling (dastangoi), and other literary activities have become obscure. They are confined to annual literary festivals and some book fairs that are organized in urbanized settings. The coffee-table critical analysis of literary classics, literary enthusiasm at school/college level, weekly book-reading sessions have all lost luster. In her introduction Janet Alsup rightly asserts that:

Therefore, the study of literature, and perhaps especially young adult literature, has the potential to change students' lives, particularly those who might be disenfranchised by dominant society....economic and cultural structures have an even more difficult time creating a sustainable identity than teens who belong to dominant social, ethnic, or racial groups....Perhaps young adult literature, with its settings, events, and characters which attempt to mirror the "real" lives of students, might encourage disenfranchised teen readers to enter narrative worlds when much anachronistic, classical literature leaves them feeling disconnected from school reading. (13)

Affinity towards pulp-literature, chic-literature and romantic fiction among youth has restricted many writers of Indian YAL to write books with other substantial and rich themes. The young need to know about the literary standards of quality literature, instead of being lost in the maze of romantic stories that take them away from the realities of life and mainstream concerns. The genre of desi (local) YAL needs to renew its boundaries and expand its margins. Like the foreign writers of YAL, the Indian writers need to include obscure themes that arouse the curiosity of young readers. They need to experiment with genres to create YAL that is realistic multi-layered, appealing, meaningful and value-oriented. More focus should be laid on themes that help in the production of literature that fosters nation-building and instills Indian values, ethics, empathy and awareness in the youth. An adolescent who suffers dramatic physiological changes and teenage angst must not be allowed to succumb to reading literature that jeopardizes his or her

sanity and draw them towards filthy pursuits that poison their young mind with unnecessary and obnoxious ideas. Topics that need more work in Indian YAL include:

1. Conflict in Kashmir/Tribal conflicts/Naxalite/Maoists
2. LGBTQ
3. Feminist issues related to Patriarchy
4. Crippling economy
5. Unemployment
6. Poverty/Abuse of people
7. Misogyny
8. Sex trafficking
9. Drug abuse
10. Terrorism (Violence & Angst)
11. Sexuality
12. Communal violence/Riots/Political violence
13. Celluloid fantasy as a corrupting agent
14. Physical beauty standards of the West
15. Phone addiction & dangers
16. Environmental degradation
17. Character building/identity crisis etc.
18. Importance of values, traditions, simplicity
19. Impact of mass media on people
20. Urbanization that replaced community or neighbourhoods
21. Our democracy, radicalism, diversity and expression
22. Social structure, prisons, correction and partition
23. Malnutrition
24. Mercy
25. Dying agriculture farming
26. Domestic helps
27. Prejudice/Indifference
28. Spirituality
29. Survival

30. Panchatantra/Old tales revisited

Some illustrious examples of the emergence of YA literature in India include *Oxygen Manifesto* by Atulya Misra, *Whither Rural India? Political Economy of Agrarian Transformation in Contemporary India* edited by A. Narayanamoorthy, IVM's new Podcasts series (Agla Station Adulthood), *The Monsters Still Lurk* by Aruna Nambiar, *Ahalya's Awakening* by Kavita Kané, *Animalia Indica* edited by Sumana Roy, and *Mothering a Muslim* by Nazia Erum. Indian YAL fantasy books include *The Game World Trilogy* by Samit Basu, *Cult of Chaos* is a graphic novel by Shweta Taneja, *The Devourers* by Indra Pramit Das and *Aliens in Delhi* by Sami A. Khan. Many YAL pieces from other countries can inspire our youth in a positive way. As the themes explored in those narratives resonate with our concerns, we can derive great lessons from those texts as well. Globally acclaimed books such as Patricia McCormick's *Cut* (2000) and *Sold* (2006), Alex Sanchez's *Rainbow Boys* (2001), John Green's *Looking for Alaska* (2005), Elizabeth Scott's *Living Dead Girl* (2008), Cecily von Ziegesar's *Gossip Girl Series* (2002-2011) and Neil Gaiman's *Stardust* (1997) are inspiring the readers.

The YAL genre in works of international authors has certainly extended beyond the contours of conventional writing. It exceeds the margins while handling complex issues and blurs the fine line between YAL and adult fiction. However, a safe distance is still maintained to keep the interest of the young readers intact. Disturbing issues of drug abuse, human sex-trafficking, sexuality, death, dysfunctional families and wars are dealt with caution. Critics censure what seems inappropriate, but allow facts and important realities to be conveyed so as not to tamper with the didactic aim of literature. Parents and guardians of youth want their children to have a view of the real life without any filler, so as to make them responsible and educated future citizens. Creation of moral identity is a by-product of YAL. Aliel Cunningham in "Engaging and Enchanting the Heart: Developing Moral Identity through Young Adult Fantasy Literature" affirms that:

Over the past few decades, parents and educators alike have begun anew to address yet another aspect of education that is lacking in a purely rationalistic mode of education—that of developing the character or moral identity of the child. Morals are hard to argue from a logical standpoint. They are hard to deduce from a mathematical formula. They are slippery things, changing their form from culture to culture. But there they remain, from Aristotle's time until now, essential

to the well-rounded education of future generations in every culture around the world. (Alsup 111-112)

YAL is a tool that facilitates learning during the most important years of a person's life. Naguib Mahfouz's novel *Palace Walk* (1990 trans.) is one such novel that opens a window into a foreign culture for readers across the globe as it portrays the life of an Egyptian family. Khaled Hosseini's *The Kite Runner* (2003), though often categorized as historical fiction is an appealing read for youth as well as adults, Rafik Schami's translated text *A Hand Full of Stars* (2012 trans.), originally penned in German is yet another prolific piece of literature that has unanimous appeal. Some prominent examples of global YAL include *A Stone in My Hand* (2002) by Cathryn Clinton that is a story of a Palestinian adolescent in search of liberation, *The Jumping Tree* (2001) by Rene Saldana Jr., *The Tequila Worm* (2005) by Viola Canales, *The Lord of the Rings* by J. R. R. Tolkein and *Northern Lights* (1995) by Philip Pullman.

Re-imagining and re-defining the structure of YAL in India will definitely enhance its global appeal and give it an international platform. The expansion of YAL will benefit the youth in India and other South-Asian nations because most of the issues of youth are similar and coincide at some or the other point. As a genre YAL needs to be inclusive of the issues that it previously overlooked or negated. There should be freedom of expression and no boundaries for authors who aim to verbalize the realities of life as it really is. The emotional and psychological issues of the youth must be prudently and compassionately dealt in YAL. They must not be pushed into a sphere of emotional chaos, confusion, load of expectations and fear of failure. An amicable approach is always successful in explaining the youth about potentially difficult issues and bringing a positive change in their thinking process. The YAL should be a promising genre that leads the youth towards a better future by addressing issues related to life in a new way, allowing the creativity of the readers to breed freely, not imposing guilt or burden of adult life needlessly on them and voicing their concerns judiciously.

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