

Adolescence Marred by Abuse: A Study of Ranjit Lal's Select Young Adult Novels

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Abstract

The literary category of Young Adult Literature (YAL) has witnessed an exponential rise in the recent decades. Its transformation from a publishing category to a seriously researched genre is emblematic of the increased recent attention directed towards adolescence. Although global YAL has been at the centre of increased critical engagement, Indian YAL still remains largely underrepresented in this corpus. The present study underscores its importance as it focusses on two young adult novels *Smitten* (2012) and *The Secret of Falcon Heights* (2014) by Indian writer Ranjit Lal. Furthermore, the paper argues that the Youth Lens is a useful tool in contextualizing these texts that are firmly rooted in the Indian socio-cultural landscape and address complex issues of power, abuse, authority as well as conflict. Additionally, the texts also deal with the sensitive issue of sexual abuse and the massive implications it has for the victims who grapple with fear, shame, shock and social ostracization.

Keywords: Adolescence, Young Adult Literature, Ranjit Lal, Sexual Violence, Youth Lens

Young Adult Literature has proliferated considerably over the past decades and witnessed growth in multiple arenas from the complexity of its subject matter to the utilization of varied narrative forms. Its trajectory has evolved from a trivialized publishing category to an actively researched literary genre. This shift reflects the increased interest directed towards understanding the biological, psychological and pedagogical needs of adolescents. Consequently, the boundaries of YAL have expanded and encompassed within their ambit a myriad range of theoretical frameworks that seek to offer a deeply nuanced understanding of adolescence with special focus on its representation in literary texts. This genre has, thus, emerged as a fertile ground for literary analysis especially when examined through theoretical frameworks that foreground the role of language, narrative voice, and adult-centric normativity that shapes the experiences of young protagonists depicted in the novels. Owing to these recent developments Young Adult Literature has been at the centre of increased critical engagement, however Indian YAL still remains largely underrepresented in this corpus. The present study underscores its importance as it focusses on two young adult novels by Indian writer Ranjit Lal to argue that the Youth Lens is a useful tool in contextualizing these texts that are firmly rooted in the Indian socio-cultural landscape and address complex issues of power, abuse, authority as well as conflict. This conceptualisation thus provides a strong alternative literary approach to understand adolescence in contrast with the traditionally conventional approaches of viewing adolescence as a universally similar and transitory biological stage. Additionally, the novels also deal with the sensitive issue of sexual abuse and the massive implications it has for the victims who grapple with fear,

shame, shock and social ostracization in certain cases whereas the perpetrators face no consequences for their turpitude. Sexual violence during adolescence impinges upon the character's sense of self and notions of their own bodily autonomy as it also destabilizes their identity.

The novel *Smitten* (2012) utilizes twin focalization to portray the nuances of abuse faced by Akhila and Sameer. While Akhila is forced into coercive sexual behaviour by her step-father, Sameer is the victim of intense bullying and physical assault by two sons of a cop in his neighbourhood. Through the course of the narrative both these protagonists tussle against their abusers and foster a bond between themselves that supports them at vital junctures. Akhila's father suffers a freak accident and falls to his death, though the details of the accident remain ambiguous, his death liberates Akhila from the monstrous trap she had been locked into. *The Secret of Falcon Heights* (2014) is set in a small mountainous fictional town of Pahadpur and weaves a cloak of mystery around the central character of Aranya, a teenager who is socially isolated while her companions are deadly birds of prey- falcons. When the siblings Sandeep, Manish and Chubbs on a visit to their Mita Masi's house cross paths with Aranya, they embark on a journey to unveil the mystery regarding her existence. Consequently, the truth behind Aranya's past is revealed, for she was sexually violated and vilified by the son of powerful local politician. The novel ends with the siblings saving their friend Parul from the goons and standing up for Aranya to fight for the justice that was denied to her.

Robert Petrone, Sophia Tatiana Sarigianides, and Mark A. Lewis in the 2015 article "The Youth Lens: Analyzing Adolescence/ts in Literary Texts." published in the *Journal of Literacy Research* introduce the concept of The Youth Lens. The present study utilizes this Lens to analyze the two novels namely *Smitten* (2012), and *The Secret of Falcon Heights* (2014) by Ranjit Lal. Ranjit Lal -an Indian author who has written extensively across the fiction and non-fiction categories with over thirty-five books to his name -through his direct, clear and honest writing style tackles taboo social issues to expose the dark underbelly of Indian society. The texts undertaken for the study deal with various social evils plaguing society.

Critics such as Maria Nikolajeva and Roberta Seelinger Trites foreground power as a cornerstone in Young Adult Literature that directly affects the lived experiences of the adolescents. Power dynamics between adults and adolescents are always unfavourably titled towards the adults which leads to the 'Othering' of the youngsters. This adult normativity is what is termed as "aetonormativity" by Nikolajeva. (8) She argues "Still, nowhere else are power structures as visible as in children's literature, the refined instrument used for centuries to educate, socialize and oppress a particular social group." (9) Since YA literature is viewed as a natural extension of children's literature, these concerns remain valid as adult inscribed norms govern adolescent's lives and hence make them vulnerable as well as susceptible to abuse due to this imbalance of power. The abuser in both the texts holds considerable power in the family and society exploiting that very power to manipulate and silence the victim into submission. However, even though both the texts start with this premise, Lal overturns this by portraying his adolescent characters as ethically charged agents who despite intense scrutiny and pressure from the adult governed society fight against the injustice inflicted upon them.

The novel *Smitten* (2012) with its subtle strength explores the sensitive as well as taboo issue of sexual abuse perpetrated within the ambit of one's family. The space of the family, traditionally governed by adult norms needs to serve as a nurturing ground for the

adolescents. The text however subverts this as the space of the family itself becomes a site of contestation and struggle for the young female protagonist of the novel- Akhila Handa. M Senthil argues that in “most cases, sexual abuse is part of an overall family pattern of dysfunction, disorganization, and inappropriate role boundaries” (379). Akhila’s family dynamics appear strange to the readers, her mother is intensely withdrawn prone to frequent debilitating bouts of depression as well as migraine, her younger brother Sumit is characterised as being a bit slow as “... his brain didn’t get enough oxygen when he was born or something like that, so he’s a bit different and slower than most kids.” (38) Her father is overtly affectionate to a point of concern. Throughout the text, lines such as “... Mr. Handa beamed, put his arms around her and kissed her cheek.” (25) and “He leant across and game me the six-kiss routine.” (42) suggest how his ostensible caring behaviour takes the form of physical displays of affection that Akhila is embarrassed of and are inappropriate for her age.

An especially crass element in the novel is that of the six-kiss routine, which Akhila is forced to perform, even though she is a fifteen-year-old who is clearly embarrassed by it. Samir on seeing it happen for the first time is bewildered as well and notes, “... went up to her father and kissed him: once on each cheek, once on the chin, once on the forehead, once on the tip of the nose and once on the mouth. He hugged her tight and kissed her back, kiss for kiss. It seemed to be some sort of family-bonding thing.” (10) These dynamics eventually reveal the perversity of familial relations, when the adults in power misuse their authority to further their own vested self-interests. The father figure in the text is morally depraved and ethically corrupt willing to use the ‘Othered’ status of young Akhila against her to silence her into submission. The withdrawal of a trusted caregiver from Akhila’s life leaves a void that is filled by a perverted individual, who though ostensibly claims to care for her wellbeing, yet his only aim is to fulfil his twisted desires through the body of the adolescent.

Ranjit Lal in the novel challenges the normative social and cultural markers of adolescence as the protagonists- Akhila and Sameer are aware of the abuse being perpetrated in their immediate surroundings and take steps to safeguard themselves while being interpellated in the adult power structures. Through the course of the text, Akhila tussles with confusion, denial, shame and fear as the realization dawns on her that she is being sexually abused by her step-father. The role of her trusted confidante is taken up by Sameer, her neighbour and himself a victim of physical abuse directed towards him by the sons of a powerful cop. Sameer and Akhila try various methods to save themselves. While standing up against their bullies, they show “...sheer lunatic bravery.” (58) They are not meek passive recipients of the abuse rather they act as active agents involved in finding a safe way out, while still unable to break free from the adult inscribed norms. They struggle within the ambit of these aetonormative principles and attempt to gain agency in a space that stifles them. The intervention against Akhila’s father by Sameer who despite being an adolescent himself in this case represents the voice of reason and justice. In a bid to help Akhila he tries to upend the adult monopoly of her father in the novel, and is met with extreme resistance as well as threats. He is outrightly told, “What I do in this bedroom with my children is my business and only mine.” (100) The questioning of adult authority by adolescents provokes a defensive reaction that leads to adults intensifying their control over the youngsters often resorting to pressure tactics to enforce submission. Instead of engaging with these young voices the authority figures double down on them to silence them into complicity within the very structure they sought to question.

The Secret of Falcon Heights (2014) deals with the intense ramifications of sexual abuse faced by the young adolescent Aranya, who suffers societal ostracization and isolation

after being the double victim of sexual violence followed by vicious slander perpetrated against her by her abuser. Forced into reclusion and relocated to the fringes of the society, Aranya's sole companion becomes a falcon that she nurtured from a hatchling.

A pivotal moment in the text is when Aranya is stranded alone in a heavy downpour due to a flat tire, no one stops to help her. Even though she is spotted by the other central character, Sandeep's family, they drive past her without a hint of concern or sympathy, which baffles him. Even though Aranya did not ask for help, her eyes reflect the agony of being denied basic human courtesy. Sandeep notes, "Her jaw was taut, her chin stuck out defiantly, rain streaming off it, but there was anguish in her eyes, the same devastated, hollow anguish I had seen in Papa's eyes when Mom passed away." (53) The initial narrative shrouds her existence in a mystery that invites unravelling and consequently the three siblings -Sandeep, Manish and Chubbs, who on a visit to their relative's house in the neighbourhood take it upon themselves to solve the mystery regarding Aranya's seclusion.

When viewed through the Youth Lens, Aranya's character is depicted as being devoid of any societal or familial support, cut off from her peers, managing the responsibilities of her household alone while also caring for her sick mother. On an individual level, she rebels against society by trying to reclaim her space back by visiting the local café in a bid to send a message to her abusers that she is not afraid of them. She survives filthy name calling, her father's subsequent death after the scandal and the gross injustice meted out to her yet remains kind enough to help Chubbs to bring her home after a nasty fall. The novel further discusses the idea of victim shaming and prejudice in small communities surviving on rumor mongering rather than attempting to find the truth. Consequently, the gang of abusers roam free without impunity, socializing among the elite section of that very society, all while assuming a garb of innocence and hunting for new victims. Sailesh, the person primarily responsible for Aranya's abuse is "... the local political bigwig's son...His father practically owns the whole of Pahadpur. He's a VIP." (91) This reveals the effect of power politics on the construction of reality and massive influence over which version of reality gets to be socially acceptable.

Jyothi Sadasivam opines that "Contemporary English language children's fiction in India has moved beyond the traditional notion of childhood as an idyllic state of innocence that needs to be shielded from the harsh realities of life." (1005) The novel thus addresses this pertinent social issue of childhood as well as adolescence being marred by the ugly reality of sexual assault. Indian YA authors no longer view adolescence as utopian or untouched from external realities rather these appalling societal issues inform much of their work. The youngsters are portrayed as negotiating with these issues as active engaged participants and not passive spectators. While being interpellated in aetnormative power structures, the adolescents are provided with a space to exercise their own agency and help protect their peers. Furthermore, such narratives aimed at a young audience help raise awareness and break silences around abuse.

Roberta Seelinger Trites in her seminal work *Disturbing the Universe: Power and Repression in Adolescent Literature* (2000) suggests that "... in the adolescent novel, protagonists 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; government; social constructions of sexuality, gender, race, class; and cultural mores surrounding death." (3) In the text, the dominant social narrative is biased against Aranya, wrongly believing her to be dangerous

and someone to be feared. The community hence pushes Aranya to the fringes and imposes this perspective on Sandeep and Manish as well.

The imposition of this dominant perspective reflects the power of institutional and social forces on the lives of the adolescents. The characters are thus left to navigate a complex environment with multiple power dynamics at play that construct the way meaning is generated and how reality is interpreted. To break free from the tyranny of imposed narratives is the first step in reclaiming personal agency. As the novel progresses, the siblings learn to negotiate the levels of power and witness the truth beyond the socially constructed narrative. In doing so, they rebel against the norms dictated by adult authority figures to mark the shift from an existence of passive acceptance to one of active renegotiation. The siblings through their actions recognize Aranya's humanity shrouded behind the veil of stigma, shame and discrimination to bring to light the sexual abuse and consequent emotional trauma inflicted upon her. The first reference to Aranya in the novel is especially revealing for she is called a "chudail." (57) Although she was abused by Sailesh and his friends, the entire town became complicit in inflicting the emotional trauma by denying her humanity and villainizing her.

Ranjit Lal effectively brings the adolescent voice at the forefront of discussion in his works and deals with the aftermath of exploitation in a deeply mature manner. While both the texts revolve around sexual violence, the lived realities of the protagonists differ from one another which reflects the pervasive nature of violence against young people. Akhila confronts the grim reality of being victimised in her own household and Aranya contends with societal injustice alone. The solidarity offered by Sameer in *Smitten* and by Sandeep, Manish as well as Chubbs in *The Secret of Falcon Heights* reaffirms the dignity of the girls. They also offer support and camaraderie to contest against the antagonists as well as against the very system that creates such perversity in humans. Though the situations are different the battle to reclaim agency and fight against injustice remains the same. The novels thus reflect the indomitable human spirit to survive against all odds. Lal weaves through these stories of abuse the unbreakable thread of resilience that propels the choices of the young protagonists in the fight against injustice. When adult power structures fail to protect the adolescents, the battle to reclaim agency becomes of utmost importance. The works analysed thus, represent the intricacies of sexual violence perpetrated against adolescents and explore the nuances of power dynamics that shape the lives of these young characters.

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