

## Adolescent Literature: Theories and Praxis

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**Abstract:** 'What is Adolescent Literature?' - A question rarely contentious in discussion among the scholars, critics, theorists and intellectuals of literature. Is it written for the implied readers, for general readers or is it the mode of narration, characters, language or any other intertextuality that marks it as an 'Adolescent Literature'? Considering a few decades of literary tropes and criticism, one can understand, how it had been a major issue of critical discourse on the development of Queer Theory, Feminism, Structuralism and post-structuralism to attain the present status. The terms 'Children's Literature' and 'Adolescent Literature' are interchangeably used by most of the writers. Then- should we understand 'Children's Literature' is also about adolescent or 'Adolescent Literature' itself implies the literature for 'children'? Significantly, no literary texts are categorized as 'Infants' Literature', 'Children's Literature' 'Young Adult or Adolescent literature', 'Adult Literature' or 'Old-Age Literature'. British critic John Rowe Townsend raises somewhat similar problematic question, - "Surely Robinson Crusoe was not written for children, and do not the Alice books appeal at least as much to grown-ups?; if Tom Sawyer is Children's Literature, what about Huckleberry Finn?; if the Jungle Books are Children's Literature, what about Kim or Stalky? And if The Wind in the Willows is Children's Literature, what about The Golden Age? And so on." The implication of Townsend's argument is that no literature can be categorized based on any stage of human development. The prevailing trends to study such texts as either Bildungsroman or Entwicklungsroman are replaced in the post war practices. Of late, psychological study of human development after Sigmund Freud and G. S. Hall has aroused skeptical voices against the conventional study of the texts. Nevertheless, the publication of *The Catcher in the Rye* marks a new beginning in this strand of writing fictions. The production of Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* started as seminal text. Today, psychoanalysis, polyphony, heteroglossia, sexuality and power are some popular and dominating mode of studying such fluid literary texts.

**Keywords:** Polyphony, Heteroglossia, Bildungsroman, Entwicklungsroman, Psychoanalysis, Postcolonialism.

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### I. Introduction

Adolescence in literature has been represented in different forms of literary practices since the productions of literary arts in different phases of history. If we try to trace the representation of adolescence in accordance to the modern definition of the term 'adolescence'; then we find that even during the middle ages, prior to invention of printing press, it did exist in texts like *Beowulf* in the West or much earlier texts like *The Ramayana* and *The Mahabharata* in the East. There is hardly a literary form, be it poetry, drama, fiction, short story, ballad, where adolescence/adolescents do not appear in various design or as reinforcing elements. A reader may encounter the adolescents in abundance here and there in both subjective and objective narratives. But it has remained unexplored, unattempted, uncodified and neglected throughout its journey to postmodernists' texts. Even its theoretical outlook or rather a systematic study as a developmental stage is very recent one, until the psychologists foregrounded the importance of this phase in developmental psychology of homo-sapiens. In fiction, the writers, so called the 'Great Four Wheels' of English fiction- Richardson, Fielding, Smollet and Sterne represented their life-like adolescent protagonists in their fictions that paved the way for succeeding generations of both male and female fiction writers. It is however, one must accept the fact that female protagonists were hardly given an opportunity to drag the whole texture into a culminating point until Elizabeth Bennet in Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* consumed the larger part of the narrative. Today, when we have switched to the cyber age, there is hardly a nation, language or culture that has refrained from commodifying the adolescence in media, politics, psychology and literature. In literature too, remarkable paradigm shifts in both theory and praxis are observable since essentialists to the absolutists' convention. But adolescence continues to draw attention in every aspect of life. Adolescence is thus a hot topic, saleable, demandable, acceptable, and inevitable; occupies a larger space in discourse; especially in fiction. But it is also a very significant issue to confront whether the adolescent literature has attained its due status in today's insurmountable heaps of texts, theories and critical discourses.

In addition, another debatable issue is whether an adolescent literature does really exist. Many critics obliquely admit about impossibility of adolescent literature because an adolescent literature should revolve around adolescents and their issues but ironically the adults, children or grand/grannies are obvious or sometime even play a pivotal role in the entire design of the narrative. Hence, Townsend's comment validates such opinions when he says:

“Surely Robinson Crusoe was not written for children, and do not the Alice books appeal at least as much to grown-ups?; if Tom Sawyer is Children's Literature, what about Huckleberry Finn?; if the Jungle Books are Children's Literature, what about Kim or Stalky? And if The Wind in the Willows is Children's Literature, what about The Golden Age?; and so on.” (Essential: Kerin Lesnik- Oberstein; cited in Hunt 15)

Besides, if feminists' writings groomed out of the perceived sense of marginalization of women due to inadequate representation in male-authored texts, then there is also a space to interrogate on the validity of adolescent literature penned from an adult author. Doesn't the similar question of feminists' stir up in adolescent literature? Then - should an adolescent literature be written by an adolescent for the adolescents? Since 'relevance' and 'level of difficulty' are often associated with the literature authored by mature persons in comparison to those of adolescents; misreading is obvious in such texts. On the other hand, the texts written by adolescents develop the chances of deprivation because these texts may lack some significant codes. The foundational critical outlook which is complex in nature might be lacking in an adolescent to translate the text of an adult author to his/her comprehension. Peter Hunt in this case may be considered justifying the fact through his opinions- “It may be correct to assume that child readers will not bring to the text a complete or sophisticated system of codes, but is this any reason to deny them access to texts with a potential of rich codes?” His opinion is self-validation and thought provoking as well.

American library association divides the adolescent literature into three broad categories: “Books written Specifically for Adolescents” “Books written for General Trade Market which have Adolescent Heroes and Heroines” and “General Books of Interest to Young Adults.” (cited in Trite 7) Hence, an adolescent literature focuses on adolescent heroes and heroines that has got market value and particularly interest the adolescent readers. This hints about specific set of things which is common and popular among adolescents- food, clothing, music, typical behavioural tendencies in such literature.

In order to understand the adolescent literature, the historical development of this strand of writing is very important. The two most commonly used terms to mean adolescent literature are – *Entwicklungsroman* and *Bildungsroman* as a related term. Both the terms imply about the novels of maturation process. The distinction between these terms is that- *Entwicklungsroman* narrates the story of a protagonist who does not reach the adulthood in the end whereas the protagonist of a *Bildungsroman* grows to be an adult. Again, *Entwicklungsroman* is a novel of growth or development but *Bildungsroman*, is often regarded, as “apprenticeship novels.” (G. B. Tennyson; cited in Trite 11) According to him, the term *Bildungsroman* is associated with Wilhelm Dilthey who defines the genre – “first there is a cultural goal, which is the complete unfolding of all natural qualities; then, there is the clean path toward that goal . . . in sum, the movement in the *Bildungsroman* is a reasonably direct line from error to truth, from confusion to clarity, from uncertainty to certainty” from as the Germans have it, “Nature to Spirit”. Many critics identify Goethe's '*Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship*' (1795-1796), as the first *Bildungsroman* novel. According to Jerome Buckley, in a *Bildungsroman*, a child grows in rural setting, restricted from parents and school, leads him to some urban places where he/she undergoes at least two romantic experiences, soul searching or initiation. But in *Entwicklungsroman*, the protagonist's initiation is incomplete and ends up before attaining prescriptive norms of an adult. Some of the examples of Anglophone *Bildungsroman* as identified by Buckley are- *David Copperfield*, *Sons and Lovers* and *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*. Much before G. Stanley Hall popularized the term 'adolescence' through his epoch making publication in 1905, the writers like Dickens, Yonge, Cooper in Britain and Twain and Alcott in America, wrote novels depicting youth as protagonists that particularly appealed the teenage readers. In the same vein, the readers of the first half of the twentieth century witnessed some writers such as Montgomery, Kipling, Merriwell and Robinson who produced novels delineating youth in a maturation process. However, the impact of World Wars that stunned the generation had an adverse effect, subversively changed the outlook and representation of adolescents in both literature and media. With a temporal change of history, the three publications in the post war period- *Seventeenth Summer* (1942), *The Catcher in the Rye* (1951) and *The Outsiders* (1967) pioneered a new genre within the adolescent literature. These fictions not only changed the thematic development but also diversified the genre itself. The simple initiation process and soul-searching are replaced with more complex, psychological, alienation, social incompatibility, irresoluteness of the adolescent characters. The conventional mode of story-telling became outdated and a new mode of play with time and space started to appear in the adolescent fictions. Accordingly, the mode of contesting the adolescent literature started to transform. Mere judgment of a fiction as either *Entwicklungsroman* or *Bildungsroman* had turned out to be almost obsolete. The rise of deconstructive approach, after Derrida, significantly diversified the views of literary theorists and critics. Postmodernist's texts thereafter sought to determine a cultural self-legitimization. The Eurocentric ideologies are questioned at the advent of multicultural and transnational bearings. Especially the early twentieth century texts created room for psychoanalytical approach based on Freud, followed later on by Lacan and Jung. Foucauldian judgement based on sexuality and power dynamics, Bakhtin's carnivalesque, polyphony or heteroglossia gradually grappled into the writings both in narratives and critical discourses. Significantly, the practices of theorization and genres of writing became intensified.

The grooming of *Bildungsroman* in the nineteenth century gradually takes a turn in the modernist's texts such as Franz Kafka's *Metamorphosis*, Marcel Proust's *Remembrance Things Past*, Thomas Mann's *The Magic Mountain*, Musil's *The Man without Qualities*, and Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. These novels did castaway the plot of development and thronged in displacement, arrested development, 'ageing process into a long and lurid adolescence.' (Jed Esty, 2012, p-1) Esty declares that these novels thwart the 'proportion of biographical time' for 'metamorphosis, dilation, consumption, evacuation,

inversion' etc. At best, the period is defined by 'the great novels centred on frozen youth' ranging from Melville's *Billy Budd* in 1891 to Gunter Grass' *Tin Tin Drum* in 1959. Similarly, in Anglophone fictions 'proleptic fits and retroactive starts, epiphanic bursts and impressionistic mental inventories in accidents, in obliquity, in sudden lyric death and in languid semiconscious delay' became rampant. The protagonists of *Lord Jim* (1900), *The Voyage Out* (1915) and *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (1916) swindle through arrested development 'defer in maturation' 'set in colonial contact zones'. (Esty 2) "These are the places where imperialism – in its late and bloated form- unsettles the Bildungsroman and its humanist ideals, producing jagged effects on both the politics and poetics of subject formation."

The fictions, produced during the 1960s, brought in undeclared challenges against the conventional Eurocentric novels of progress. These narratives produced from ex-colonial or semi-colonial peripheries very astutely amalgamated self, nation and empire into single fabric that problematized the genre itself. The magic realism of Gabriel Garcia Marquez defined a virgin trope of storytelling and representation. The 'hypercanonical' narratives of Salman Rushdie's *Midnight Children* (1981) followed by *The Moor's Last Sigh* (1995) initiated his comes of age protagonists in most unusual but convincing way. The allegorization of soul-nation makes his narratives far stranger than its predecessors. The postcolonial fictions of Ben Okri's *The Famished Road* (1991), V. S. Naipaul's *Miguel Street* (1959), Chinua Achebe's *No Longer at Ease* (1960), Upamanyu Chatterjee's *English August* (1988), Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* (1997) Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Namesake* (2003) are some examples how the adolescent protagonists or rather the adolescent literature are anti-canonical in their approach.

The novel of development or Bildungsroman, or anti developmental novels are written, published and read continuously but the art of developing the plot, subject-matter, themes are ever changing. It is unanimously agreed that the adolescence/adolescent literature itself is cultural construction and validates according to temporal moves. But art of studying such texts are also not static. Hence, it is evident that the theoretical contestations are also quite significantly changing its taste and texture side by side.

The recurrent themes in adolescent literature are self, humanist and romantic ideals, sex, power, religion, institutional discourses, identity politics etc. The early canonical writings represented liberal humanism and romanticism but recent adolescent literature is somewhat abundant in anti-humanist ideals. According to Robyn McCallum "the humanist subject has been systematically put into question by structuralist, poststructuralist and Marxist literary and critical discourses. The question in adolescents' and children's fictions is not whether the subject exists, but what kind of subject it is and what are the conditions of its coming into being." (McCallum 2) The humanist ideologies are thwarted by poststructuralists like Althusser, Derrida and Foucault. According to them the concept is logocentric and identically cultural construct rather than a universal. Since the self, the child or the adolescent are by product of social and historical transformations; their explicit representations in literature are also inevitable.

Nevertheless, it is obvious on the part of a critical reader that adolescent literature or adolescent itself is a cultural construct points towards number of connotations. It is certain that adolescent literature contains indeed certain rich codes. The definition of an adolescent literature that centred on growth or process of maturation does not end here; especially, when it has undergone tremendous changes since the early twentieth century. It is imperative to identify the various aspects of the literature that is recognizably adolescent. There is no difference between an adolescent literature and adult literature. Either of the two does not comprise of a specific age group as a mark of distinction. It is evident that in both the strands a fine admixture of adolescents/adults and vice-versa do appear. In linguistic level, both seem to incorporate complex sign-signifier-signified paradigm. Besides, both edify on multivalent issues, techniques, settings and characters. Even children's literatures do not hesitate in incorporating some hidden meanings for which Jaqueline Rose in *The Case of Peter Pan or The Impossibility of Children's Literature* is so critical about the issue. She argues that children's fiction is 'impossible' because it puts on more stress on 'relationship between child and adult'. (Martha Westwater 9) Moreover simple arrangement of signs does not signify meanings nor does it seem to make any sense in literature. Viewed on such perspectives, a major question posits- shouldn't there be some parameters to differentiate the literature categorically? Of course, children's literature is identifiable through its fairy like narratives, use of simple language, superficial codes, dream-like themes and fluffy story line, generally brief in its volume. But what are the aspects of an adolescent literature that separates it from adult literature? When canonical patterns of Bildungsroman or Entwicklungsroman are no more in practice? It is a very significant point to be mentioned that contesting the textual issues in critical theory or discourse are diversified, flooded and irrevocably turned towards discursive points but has never taken its mode of discourse distinctly according to compartmentalization. Any literary text whether children's literature, adolescent's literature or adult literature group (if there does really exist?), are studied through the same parameters, modes and techniques alike. There is a strong ground, hence, to develop specific critical theory, arrangement of discourses for each separate genre of practices. We do identify distinct ideological, linguistic, social, cultural, institutional, spatial and temporal aspects that necessitate branding it as a separate strand.

It is contextual to mention that adolescent literature extremely suffers from the dearth of critical theory and discourses. Dorothy Van Riper, Lilian R. Furst and Taima Ranta are just a few names who are deeply concerned for the inadequacy of critical sources to study the adolescent literature. Of late, however, a group of teaching community especially those assigned to teach adolescent fictions in various Universities and colleges across the world pioneered the critical thoughts. The prominent among them Roberta Seelinger Trites, Robyn McCallum, Peter Hunt, Jed Esty, Rod McGillis, Peter Hollindale, Maria Nikolajeva etc. have come up with their valuable publications in the forms of books, papers, lectures, articles, fictions that foregrounded the urgency of reconsidering adolescent literature in critical discourse.

Interestingly, these writers provoked the literary practitioners but could not evolve out a distinct horizon through which adolescent literature could be studied, theorized or interpreted with. Rather they have offered for revisiting the adolescent literature from those perspectives applicable in all the texts irrespective of generic distinction based on particular developmental stage. Anyways, the most important part of these writers prescription is diagnosis of few critical modes of study that may help one find out the suitable for his/her purpose.

Today, the most important and convenient modes of studying the adolescent literature are based on Mikhail Bakhtin's carnivalesque, polyphony or heteroglossia, Michel Foucault's power and sexuality, Jaques Derrida's deconstruction, Julia Kristeva's intertextuality, Sigmund Freud and Lacan's psychoanalysis, and Marxist theories. One of the most popular theoretical approaches to adolescent or children's literature is Bakhtin's concept of subjectivity. It was Maria Nikolajeva who used Bakhtin's concept of 'chronotope' to study her children's literature. Recently Robyn McCallum discusses a number of issues of adolescent literature that finds suitable interpretation through Bakhtin's concept of subjectivity, language and narrative. He, however, undertakes that adolescent literature is more than depicting subjectivity because it elaborates on "personal, social or intellectual growth, maturation, and understanding; entail more or less implicit concepts of selfhood, identity and agency". According to him, the strand of adolescent literature is a 'discursive practice' and 'culturally situated' and percolates among the implied reader. His observation under Bakhtin's relegation underlines that subjectivity is constructed through dialogues in a narrative. Bakhtin is thus basically responsible for dialogic construction of subjectivity because the influence of language, society and culture is predominant on the adolescent's cognition and maturation. A number of key concepts of Bakhtin such as polyphony or heteroglossia, dialogism, monologism, addressivity, chronotope, carnivalesque are co-relational with children's or adolescent literature.

Similarly, Roberta Seelinger Trites finds 'power dynamics' as pertinent to study the adolescent literature. Her postulations are based on some texts like Cormier's *The Chocolate War* and J. D. Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye* that he finds better convenient under the study of power and sexuality after Michel Foucault, Althusser and Max Weber. Foucault's concept that 'power is everywhere; not because it embraces everything, but because it comes from everywhere' leads Trites to find adolescent literature under its spectrum. In fact, adolescent literatures frequently jostle within power dynamics. Both political and economic or institutional powers define the subject position in an adolescent literature. The subject position is perpetuated under Ideological State Apparatus (Althusser's concept). Trites identifies 'power-repression' enigma in adolescent literature modeling on Foucault's 'war-repression schema. She also elaborates on adolescent sexuality in such literature and says- "teenage characters in YA novels agonize about almost every aspect of human sexuality: decisions about whether to have sex, issues of sexual orientation, issues of birth control and responsibility, unwanted pregnancies, masturbation, orgasms, nocturnal emissions, sexually transmitted diseases, pornography, and prostitution" (Trite 84). Hence, Foucault's concept of sex and sexuality is equally contextual to understand the power/repression dynamics in adolescent literature. It would be very significant to quote Trite again- "adolescent novels that deal with sex, whether they are obviously ideological, usually contain within them some sort of power dynamics wherein the character's sexuality provides him or her with a locus of power. That power needs to be controlled before the narrative can achieve resolution." Contemporary adolescent literature also abounds in non-heterosexual gays and lesbians. Thus the reader may find sufficient space for Queer discourse as well.

One of the most popular and recurrently used theoretical approaches in fiction is psychoanalysis. M. Egan in his discussion of Peter Pan acknowledges- "the serious study of children's literature may be said to have begun with Freud" (cited in Hunt 102). Since adolescence itself is a developmental stage where distinction between childhood and adolescence is gloomy, psychoanalysis is another important criticism that is plausible in adolescent literature as well. The concept of Freud, Jung and Lacan are applied to break the author-reader-character myths. They are instrumental in foregrounding, at least to some extent, the unconscious. Although Freud paved the way for later psychoanalysts, he remained silent for adolescent stage, a most crucial turning point of human development. However, Freud's triad of "unconscious, preconscious and conscious defines unconscious as a non-verbal, instinctual and infantile given and as dominated by the pleasure principle." (Bosmajian 102). Freud's observation of id, ego and super ego, Jung's archetypal images and Lacan's association of unconscious with language, break down the sewage into the hidden part of human psyche. Most psychoanalysts agree on the point that adolescence is the period of 'storm and stress' that connotes the inner turmoil of the characters. It is perhaps the psychoanalysis that reaches faster to study the adolescent literature.

Among many others, intertextuality also occupies a space when there is the question of contesting adolescent literature. Though Julia Kristeva coined the term 'intertextuality', it has stemmed with Bakhtin, and most prominently with Jonathan Culler and Roland Barthes. In the simplest form, intertextuality refers to 'literary allusions and direct quotations from any literary or non-literary texts' (Christine Wilkie; cited in Hunt 131). In broader sense, readers understand the text through already embedded text after his/her reading of previous texts in abundance. Wilkie identifies three main categories of intertextuality in a literary texts- (i) texts of quotations- drawn from literary and non-literary works; (ii) texts of imitation: supplant of literary works of great past writers; (iii) genre texts: identifiable to a literary conventions. The intertextuality underlines the meaning in the 'space between the focused text and its intertexts' (McCallum 276). It is implicitly polyphonic in nature because it focuses the trajectory of 'cultural and literary discourses, genres, pretexts and generic precursors'. When there is a discussion of adolescence/adolescents, then its references to cultural or literary orientation are always discernible in recognizing its intersubjectivity. Intertextuality is a discursive mode where meaning is culled from 'infinite intertextuality' (Barthes' concept). It is a new text reproduced through previous encounter of literary and non-literary forms of experience and knowledge. The title of Paton Walsh's *Goldengrove* is just an example that is derived from the beginning lines of G. M. Hopkins' poem *Spring and Fall*- "Margaret are you grieving / Over Goldengrove unleaving?" (Cited in McCallum 37). Walsh's novel and Hopkins poem both run parallel to its thematic

concerns; i.e. transition from childhood to adulthood. Similarly, Robert Cormier's 'After the First Death' (1979) is taken from Dylan Thomas' poem 'A Refusal to mourn the death, by fire, of a child in London'. However, this type of allusions moves effortlessly and comfortably in both children's and adolescent literature. The usual beginning of 'Once upon a time there was ...' in children's literature or any explicit knowledge of intertexts in adolescent literature necessitates a 'conscious recall' to their past reading experiences. Roland Barthes terms this experience as 'circular memory of reading' (Barthes 36). The advantage of studying an adolescent literature is that – it enables the readers to establish the rich codes of dominant socio-cultural aspects, linguistic parallels/contradictions, and also the author's intention in creating the implied reader. Besides, it helps in identifying the power relations between the intertexts and focused text, between the author and the readers and also between representations in the text and social institutions as defined under particular political and economic conditions.

The theoretical praxis in adolescent literature may be anyone befittingly applicable to a specific text. It is not confusing for any reader that adolescent literature is market potential but somewhere it is a marginalized genre of writing because neither it is a wholesome children's literature nor a fully grown adult literature. Though irresistibly, one has to concede that market is captured through adolescent literature or sometime adult literature with fascinating adolescent characters but due recognition is denied, avenues for critical discourses are scanty and adult literature domination continues.

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