

**STEPPING INTO ADULTHOOD: A CRITICAL READING OF RANJIT LAL'S *FACES IN THE WATER***

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**Abstract:**

Literature not only explores and analyses the knowledge system of the world but also tries to captivate the various dimensions of life and thoughts. Young Adult Fiction serves as an apt medium to educate the youth and engage them with contemporary ideas. It amuses the young audience as it is a blend of adventure, fantasy and romance. Young Adult Fiction is regarded as realistic fiction as it deals with the problems faced during adolescence such as friendship, adult concerns and widening worldview. Young adult literature has established a prominent place in Indian Writing in English. The Indian writers of Young Adult Fiction focus on major themes such as multiculturalism, psychology, nature and family relationships. Ranjit Lal is one of the contemporary Indian writers who is known for his columns on nature; he also has a significant position in Young Adult Literature. The following research article provides a short analysis of the columnist Ranjit Lal as a writer of Young Adult Fiction through an analysis of his work *Faces in the Water*.

**Key Words:** Young Adult Fiction, Ranjit Lal, adolescent, female infanticide

Literature scales the manifold manifestations of the universe through its various genres. Though the writers had been venturing into various styles, themes and techniques right from the beginning, they began to explore innovative styles and approaches in the twentieth century. They began to produce works with a wide outlook and experimental techniques; even the genres were handled effectively and differently. This resulted from the various social changes that took place during the twentieth century when writers started to concentrate on issue-based writing styles. The pleasure of reading was often constrained only to adults until the nineteenth century; later issue-based writing spotlighted children and teenagers and as a result, Young Adult Literature was born.

Young adult literature, with all the nuances exclusive to its form and style, has a protagonist who is either a teenager or one who approaches problems from a teenage perspective. Such novels are generally of moderate length and told as a first-person narrative. Typically, they describe initiation into the adult world or the surmounting of a contemporary problem forced upon the protagonist(s) by the adult world. Though generally written for a teenage reader, such novels - like all fine literature - address the entire spectrum of life (Carlson 48).

*Faces in the Water* is a young adult fiction by Ranjit Lal. The novel was awarded *Laadli National Media Award* in 2012 and *Crossword Best Children's Book Award* in 2010. In *Faces in the Water*, the protagonist Gurmeet undergoes the transition stage and evolves as a fully developed and responsible young man. Gurmeet represents a teenager evolving as an adult; he attains maturity both physically as well as mentally along with the progress of the fiction.

The conceptual framework of Young Adult Fiction includes the fiction's contributions to the current understanding of adolescent identity formation. It includes the power dynamics – adult versus adolescent – shaping views on reality. The hidden implications of gender binary perspectives in contemporary society, facing real-time challenges, the dilemma between the comfort zone and adventurous spirit and the problematic relationships between humans and the environment are a few fundamental issues concerning the genre. The increasing demand for awareness of world issues, illuminating many of the crucial issues of the period is also one of the main aims of Young Adult Fiction. Young Adult Fiction has a wide range of methodologies to show that Young Adult Literature stands up to sustained critical scrutiny (Hill i).

In the fiction *Faces in the Water*, Lal has incorporated all the salient features of young adult fiction. In the fiction, Lal has thrown light on adolescent identity formation through the protagonist Gurmeet.

The main character is a teenager events and problems in the plot are related to teenagers, the main character is the center of the plot, dialogue reflects teenage speech, including slang, the point of view presents an adolescents interpretation of events and people the teenage main character is usually perceptive, sensitive, intelligent, mature, and independent, ... and the actions and decisions of the main characters are major factors in the outcome of the conflict. (Herz and Donald 10)

Lal has brought out the prominent issue of concern both in society and within the family, which is power politics. Being an environmentalist, Lal has not failed to assimilate the human relationship with nature as it is deteriorating slowly with the advent of scientific advancements. He has also brought to daylight the suppression of the female gender which is yet another social evil.

Young adult fiction writers assign young adults prominent roles in their fiction, as they could make their target audience relate with the protagonist. Ranjit Lal is adept in handling the issues related to young adults and the situations are drawn from realistic situations. As a writer of Young Adult fiction, Lal can kindle the passion of reading and interest in his audience; "to increase skill, promote the reading habit, and produce a generation of book-lovers, there is no factor so powerful as interest" (Norvell, 536).

Lal makes use of appropriate narrative pattern in line with the development of the theme of the fiction. He employs first-person narrative assigning Gurmeet the role of the narrator of the story. "Voice is all-important here and is the quality that most clearly distinguishes young adult from adult fiction" (Campbell 75). The readers are made to follow the perspective of Gurmeet closely. The protagonist Gurmeet is a fifteen-year-old teenage boy from the great Diwanchand family, a prestigious family known for its pride and lineage. The family's proud facts are revealed to the readers in the initial pages of the fiction by Gurmeet. "... they say no one can really remember when a girl was born the last time ... no one can remember when anyone in the family fell sick" (Lal 1). The prime proud fact is that only boy babies have been born in the great Diwanchand family for generations. The secret behind the proud fact is that the family has a tradition of dropping newborn girl babies in the well which is near their ancestral house. The newborn babies survive only if it is a boy baby otherwise it is silently dropped into their ancestral well. The belief is that these girl babies who were dropped into the well offer the family good health and so the whole family drinks water only from their ancestral well. The members of the family make sure that this tradition is followed without any obstruction: "... the tradition must and will carry on no matter what" (Lal 178). Gurmeet, realising the injustice in his family line, attempts to save a newborn girl baby thus exhibiting the development of deep moral sense and responsibility.

Young adult fiction is also known as 'Coming of Age Fiction' or 'Bildungsroman' since the protagonist or the major character undergoes growth along with the development of the plot. Young Adult writers focus on the issue of coming of age and its related events. Lal was very particular in writing to the Young as he was displeased with the advent of modern advancements into their hands. To enrich the younger generation with the joy of reading, Lal has chosen his target audience to be young. He believed that capturing the young minds could create a generation where humans learn to live along with nature as he has a great affinity towards nature.

In the novel, Lal uses a few supernatural elements to give his readers a thrilling experience commingled with emotional appeal. The supernatural elements in the story bring out the social evil of female infanticide. The supernatural elements help Gurmeet grow as a holistic human being. These supernatural elements make Gurmeet a courageous human as a result of which Gurmeet rises to stand against the social evil practised in the Diwanchand family.

The supernatural elements in the fiction appear from their ancestral well from which the great Diwanchand family drinks water. These supernatural elements are none other than the girl babies which were born to the family and are dropped alive into the well. The real truth is revealed to the readers along with Gurmeet's encounter with supernatural elements. Since the family has not experienced the love of the girl babies, the presence of supernatural elements makes the characters in the fiction enjoy the affection and joy received from girl babies. Gurmeet wants to free his family from the shackles of imaginary ideals and vanity: "Well, it was a whole new kind of life, now that I had the

ghosts – or whatever they were – of three sisters and four sisters to live with (one of whom had crush on me, which could be both nice and tiresome)” (Lal 167).

In the novel, Lal brings in various themes, including the relationship between man and nature, awareness of the current social evils, family bonds and also the problems faced by teenagers. Gurmeet learns the value of family, which can offer real care that would make the young adult a responsible citizen of the society. Gurmeet is initially forced to stay in his ancestral home which is situated at the foothills of Aravalli hills for his vacation; his stay in their ancestral home has enlightened him in many ways and chiselled him into a responsible citizen. “Young Adult Literature has come of age through their treatment of themes that matter not just to teens struggling with adolescence, but to all of us” (Hill 2).

One of the most important aspects of young adult fiction is that it deals with both the traditional and the contemporary. There is always a mental conflict in adolescents between the traditional and modern ways. Lal tries to strike a balance between the traditional and the modern through the behavioural patterns of the young characters in the novel. Gurmeet who evolves as an adult tries to withstand the power dynamics in his own family. He makes sure that he saves the life of his newborn sister which the family tries to kill as usual in the name of tradition, towards the end of the fiction. He tries to make his parents understand the fact that there is no partiality in nature and so in humans as well. “Even if they had tried voicing objections to the breaking of the great tradition, they probably would not have been heard” (Lal 197).

“Contemporary Children’s Literature is generally developing from plot-oriented towards character-oriented texts” (Hill 2). Interpersonal and intrapersonal awareness are practised in Young adult fiction. In the fiction, Gurmeet’s interpersonal as well as intrapersonal skills are well developed at the culminating point of the fiction. While his adventurous spirit of saving the child, risking his life, talks about his intrapersonal abilities, his convincing appeal towards moral action proclaims his interpersonal skills. Undoubtedly, by portraying Gurmeet Lal aspires to create a model for the young adults who are at the portals of adulthood to evolve as a responsible citizen of the country. This is considered a pivotal aspect of young adult fiction.

Ranjit Lal through the fiction *Faces in the Water* proves that he is a successful writer of Young Adult Fiction. He has also established that Young Adult Fiction, ... are freer than ever to experiment, to flex their creative muscles, to employ themes, tools and techniques that were previously considered taboo in literature that had once been defined by constraints and too often fashioned according to formula. (Cart 113)

Lal instils in the young minds the importance of being a responsible citizen and also to maintain a healthy relationship with the family members. Lal makes his readers understand that every action is done with the values and assumptions that come from the wide communities like families, and friendships. As Lal is an environmentalist, he also brings in the primary duty of every human in this world to conserve Mother Earth and also to appreciate the hidden beauty of the environment. Lal has poignantly and meticulously unveiled the social evil of female infanticide which has been intertwined with Indian society for years.

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