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Research Article



Distressed Adolescent in Subima Misra's Select Stories: An Anthropological Study of Indian Childhood

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Abstract

Critically speaking, Indian societies tend to ignore unusual behavior or psychosexual crisis in a child or teenager. This paper attempts to tap some of those uncomfortable nerves of Indian childhood and debate some of their challenges through the lens of Indian family structure. Contextualizing some of the crucial stories of Subimal Misra, a prominent and powerful voice of Modern Bangla literature, this paper, again, sympathetically but scientifically negotiates different relations of Indian household and their effect on the psychosexual growth of a child or teenager. It attempts to ask, though not limited to, these following sets of questions: How does the presence of a mother and her behavior affect the child? What are the psychological dilemmas that push a teenager to unidentified rage and revengeful attitude? How does society

influence the formulation of a veneer into a teenager? It is curious to note that the stories under consideration here, like *Will You Preserve Your Chastity*, Aparna (1987), or *Here's How We Wring a Quarter of Lime* (1989), are 'about' children but not 'for' children. With the help of an anthropological point of view, this paper problematizes family relations, imposition of social choices, and their gaps.

Keywords: Adolescent, Psychosexual, Mother, Family, Culture, Lovelessness, Vengeance, Vulnerability, Narcissism

Modern Bangla literature has produced some of the most iconic and unforgettable children and teenage characters for readers of all ages. Whereas Bibhutibhusan Bandopadhyay's Apu and Durga (from *Pather Panchali*) and Sarat Chandra's Ram (from *Ramer Sumoti*) justifies the unembellished living of rural Bengal, Sasthipada Chattopadhyay's fictional detective stories of *Pandob Goenda* add the spice of adventure to Bengali imagination and comic characters like Handa Vonda or Nonte Phonte (both by Narayan Debnath) and Tenida (by Narayan Gangopadhyay) introduce basic humor to its readers. These characters tend to attract not only children but they are equally popular among adult readers. Simplistic behavior and common inclusive settings are the driving force behind their omnipresence and universal acceptance. In other words, most of the commercially successful children characters of Bangla literature have drawn well within domestic and cultural limitations and are not exposed to unconventionality or experimental liberty.

However, the plotlines and characterization of some of Subimal Misra's stories make the reader uneasy and uncomfortable, if not in disbelief. A powerful voice in the Bangla little magazine sphere, Subimal Misra earns a reputation for his experimental narratives and technical interventions. Centralizing the marginalized and oppressed community, his fictional writing capitalizes on adult content for a mature audience mostly. In fact, he claims his readers to be well-versed in all forms of art including music, painting, cinema, and literature in order to decode his writing. Still, the portrayal of some of the female characters in their adolescence not only exhibits the creative faculty of the author but problematizes the question of sanity and vulnerability in children within family boundaries. For instance, through the psychosexual anxiety in the unnamed teenager from *Will You Preserve Your Chastity*, Aparna (1987), or the clueless but unbridled vengeance of the teenage narrator in *Here's How We Wring a Quarter of Lime* (1989), Misra's narratives dive into the dark terrains of adolescent psychology and vulnerability. It is curious to note that all these stories demonstrate modern timeframe, upper-class urban settings and influential families with licentious behavior. However, as a matter of fact, leveling such characters and their attitude as 'modern' and reckless is a crude way of ignoring suppressed human desires and sociological research.

As mentioned earlier, neither Indian society nor literature accept or recognize unusual behavior and psychosexual crisis among children and teenagers. Instead, we have various parameters to generalize them as wantonness or mischievous habits of a growing child and expect such behaviors to wane away with the passing of time. For instance, traditional Indian texts have a peculiar tendency to conceal any form of waywardness of a child as *bal kryira*

(children's play). Proverbs like *badi baap ki bigdi aulad* (spoilt brat of rich father), *alaler ghorer dulal* (darling of a millionaire), *adore adore bandor* (Spoilt by excessive love), among others, are some of the methods of adults' refusal to address the crisis of a child's life. On the other hand, Subimal Misra's stories tap into the psychological challenges his child-teenage characters experience during adolescence, foregrounding their relationship with family members and social acceptance. This paper attempts to reevaluate our understanding of childhood and its problems through the lens of Indian society and family structure. How does the presence of a mother and her behavior affect the child? What are the psychological dilemmas that push a teenager to unidentified rage and revengeful attitude? How does society influence the formulation of a veneer into a teenager? With the help of a detailed anthropological study of Indian societies, we aim to investigate various family relations and how they synthesize with the psychology of a growing child. More so, as Indian societies are predominantly patriarchal and they have a marked preference for a male child, this paper humbly examines the gaps in female space and their interaction with male psychology.

The role of a mother in the Indian family structure

Woman plays a central part in middle-class Indian household. Living between the crossfire of a male-dominated traditional society and balancing her own sexual desires and psychological orientations, an Indian woman raises her children and maintains household affairs with equal efficiency. It is true that her performance and contribution hardly meet the positive appreciation of society and other family members. However, a critical analysis would reveal the fact that her entering into motherhood, especially by giving birth to a male offspring, elevates her role and status in society's eyes. Still, one should not forget that such elevation in the family hierarchy strictly remains limited to the other women of the family and distant relatives and comparisons are being made among her sisters and sisters-in-law only.

Theorizing motherhood, Sudhir Kakar introduced the term 'Good Mother' in his research-length book *The Inner World* (1978) to indicate the role of a woman as a mother and society's expectations of her in the Indian context. Commenting on the nuances of the bonding between a mother and her newborn, Kakar rightly explains:

the first development stage of childhood, characterized by a decisive, deep attachment to the nurturing mother, by dependence upon her for the necessities and the pleasures of succor and comfort, and by the 'crisis' of trust in the benign intensions of others towards oneself... (91)

In other words, the 'attachment' that Kakar is referring to in the passage above, is physical closeness. The prolonged period of infancy that lasts for three to five years is characterized by exclusive intimacy between the mother and the child. As a result, the child remains dependent on the mother both physically and emotionally. Emotional gratification is manifested in terms of fulfilling the child's demands from feeding to keeping his/her company. More so, keeping in touch leads to physical dependency too. Kakar couldn't be more realistic while narrating the mother-child intimacy:

During the day she carries the youngest, or the one most needing attention, astride her hip, the others within arm's reach, as she goes about on visits to neighbours, to the market, to the fields, and on other errands. At home, if not suckling or nestling in his

mother's lap, the infant is playing on the floor or resting in a cot nearby. Constantly held, cuddled, crooned, and talked too. (91-92)

Taking a cue from the above discussion regarding the presence of a woman in an Indian household and the parameters of the mother-child relationship, we shall attempt to locate these finer elements inside the plotline of Subimal Misra's stories and investigate whether they exist among the characters and to what extent. First, let us debate the role of mothers in our texts and whether they influence the course of events and the basic family power structure. For instance, the story *Here's How We Wring a Quarter of Lime* (1989) holds no direct involvement of any mother figure. Having set at the backdrop of an influential rural family, it introduces the father of the narrator as a socially superior and politically active person. He marries for the second time while the mother of the narrator is still alive. The presence and involvement of the mother are so insignificant that the narrator doesn't bother to introduce her other than making a single passing reference- 'After a few days I heard that our new mother was going to arrive. My own mother stayed at home all day, grieving, covered in jewellery, praying before a picture of Anukul Thakur' (210). One can guess the reason behind taking the second wife is the failure in producing a male offspring by the first one. It is a social stigma in Indian society. In this context, the failure makes the mother detached from household responsibilities and taking care of the girls both. Her absence from the narration of the girl indicates her non-involvement in her life too.

On the other hand, the story revolves around the actions and afterthoughts of the unnamed narrator- a fourteen-year-old girl. Due to her father's influence at the local school as president of the school committee, the problems of class promotions or challenges of passing the tests never arise. At a very early age, she has understood her father's powerful dominance in their village. However, instead of being conscious of her family's reputation or her own prosperity, privileges make her irresponsible- 'I know my father. He would rescue me, come what may. After all, he had the strength of money. Anything was possible if one had money. He would led nothing destroy his family's honour' (Wild 215). A deep psychological study would reveal that the carelessness that the narrator is displaying generates not from her spoilt nature but from being in a state of lovelessness. Adolescence is a crucial period for any teenager. They need the perfect amount of guidance and care. It is the time when most hormonal and biological changes happen inside the body. Their psychology goes through turmoil. At this stage, they need emotional support and guidance. And what could be more fruitful than parents' love? In Indian society and family culture, it is believed that parents are the first teachers of a child. However, in the case of the narrator, she never finds the opportunity of getting close to them or other members of the family. Family showing absolutely no concern towards their adolescent child indicates a fragile bonding among themselves. This is uncommon for a rural Indian household. Continuing the uncommonness of the depicted family, her father remains occupied with his outdoor social activities too which leaves him barely any time to interact with the girl. It is evident from her affidavit-

I had a group of friends, and we would slip out of school during the lunch break and go to the newly opened video parlour a short distance away. If my father ever heard about it, he would scold me mildly. Instead of studying you're going around doing all this!

That's all. But after he took a second wife, he never bothered to do even that. Where he did he have the time to bother? (207)

Whether it is a sense of relief and freedom or the silent despair of a child coming out of her subconscious mind is a matter of debate. While narrating her misadventures and dismal social relations with others, she keeps on agreeing to the fact that her father leaves no stone unturned to fill her life with lavishness- 'Because I loved to eat cake, every month cakes were bought for me from Kathleen in Calcutta. The latest styles of slawar-kameez came from New Market' (209). Still, certain melancholic anguish is visible in her voice each time she mentions her father's 'love'- 'Father had no time for us. But to be honest, he did not leave any wish of his daughter unfulfilled' (210). At this juncture, we shouldn't mix this 'love' with parents' affection towards children. In any Indian social structure and cultural context, no amount of economic security or earthly gifts can replace a mother's love or father's care for the child. In other words, the narrator never receives genuine love from both parents which makes her delusional about its value. In the next section, we shall investigate the psychology of the teenager and how it gets synthesized with other elements of the family and society.

Synthesizing with the Other: Child's perspective

Gardner Murphy, an American psychologist, rightly argues that the emotional attachment that the child enjoys with other family members too, if not of the same intense level as with his/her mother, leads him/her to believe in lovable cousins and trustworthy benefactors (56). In other words, unlike the western family structure, emotional attachments result in strong family bonding. Whereas the west believes in isolated and independent living, Indian families and their relations with each other are more inclusive. It generates trust and warmth even among distant relatives. Visits to each other's houses are more frequent and informal in nature. Bonding among cousins and other children of the same age group reflects equal friendliness. This leaves little opportunities for dislike, contempt, or vengeance. Besides the strong relation among cousins, the attitude of children towards parents is mostly positive. Adrian C. Mayer agrees with the fact that Indian children found their mothers highly supportive and extremely caring. Such emotional support helps to mold the character of a child and nourishes their psychology at the most tender and volatile stage of life- adolescence. However, there is a difference in the level of intimacy between a male and a female child. For instance, whereas an Indian male child connects with his mother more naturally and idealizes her as perfect, women do not sentimentalize their mothers. Besides this, the phase of intimacy for boys with their mothers lasts for three to five years. On the other hand, girls remain in the company of their mothers and other women till marriage, learning household activities and taking on new responsibilities. Several psychosexual anxieties like penis envy or the realization that the father holds a superior position in the power structure, among others, are culminated in their minds, leading to jealousy for their mothers. Sudhir Kakar justifies this point eloquently- 'For daughters, mother is not an adoring figure on a pedestal: she is a more earthly presence, not always benign but always *there*'.

Foregrounding the nuances of Indian family structure and the modus operandi of different relations in socio-cultural and religious contexts, at this juncture, let us pinpoint the crises and unconventionality in the lives of Subimal Misra's characters. We have already

discussed the coldness in the parents-daughter relationship in the story *Here's how We Wring a Quarter of Lime* (1989). Speaking critically, such relationships might damage a woman's capability of loving someone or reciprocating someone's love. In the text, she gets involved in a physical relationship with her maternal uncle willfully in order to destroy his good-boy image in the class. My assumption here is that as she doesn't have any seeming experience of an inclusive family, her actions hold no respect for the family's reputation or love for other family members.

The story *Will You Preserve Your Chastity, Aparna?* (1987) is presented from the perspectives of several characters. One of the narrators is a seventeen-year-old girl. Her emotions are more overt than the previous girl. Envy and resentment play a central role in reflecting her relationship with her mother. She bluntly utters-

I hate my mother, the girl said exasperatedly, shaking her bobbed hair, responding to the remote assault. I don't call her Ma, I say Mrs Sanyal, Mrs Aparna Sanyal. I find it disgusting to call her ma. She returns drunk every night- she flirts with every one of Dad's friends. I smoke, I drink, I push drugs, heroine, smack- everything. Who cares? Why does Mrs Sanyal poke her nose into my private life? A woman like that has no right to admonish or order me. I'll do whatever I want, I can share my bed with whoever I wish. (Wild 190-191)

Again, with the portrayal of an upper-class urban family, one shouldn't misinterpret the voice of despair of the narrator with a 'modern lifestyle' and what we consider as something 'cool'. Although the western cultural nuances might associate themselves with such licentious actions, Indian societies are fundamentally moralistic and value-driven. Therefore, the narrator's hopelessness comes out of her mother's promiscuous living. Being part of that upper-class social circle, she neither lacks money nor luxurious items in life. However, due to numerous extra-marital affairs and engagement in other foppish activities like partying or shopping, Mrs. Sanyal, too, deprives her child of motherly intimacies and emotional support during the adolescent period. We have already subscribed to the fact that such intimacies and emotions are the driving force of the Indian family structure and they cannot be replaced by liquid money or lavish lifestyles. In other words, the above careless expressions of the narrator about her life, here, expose the angst and suppressed anger against her mother for keeping her away from motherly affections. Such relations are unusual and rare in the Indian socio-cultural context and are bound to torture the psyche of a teenager. Therefore, it is painful to see her punishing herself with unhealthy substances like drugs or wine at a very tender age due to her unhappy family life.

Considering the exchange of mutual thoughts between children and other family members in the Indian context, we shall move on to the complexities of a child's psychology when taken out of his/her mother's protection.

Shock: A drift in child's psychology

At the end of the intimate phase, the child is forced to leave the 'cocoon of maternal protection' and enters an unfamiliar masculine territory driven by discipline and harshness. It occurs at the age of four to five years. In an anthropological account, S. C. Dube explains it in detail-

The liberty that he was allowed during his early childhood is increasingly curtailed. Now the scent is on good behavior and regular habits. The child is more frequently spanked for being troublesome... As he grows older the discipline becomes more and more difficult. At first he was punished for being 'troublesome' or for 'crying without reason' but now he has to distinguish clearly between things to be done and things not to be done. (149)

Therefore, a mind which is not fully developed to perceive the demands and tensions of an adult world goes through a shock. Although there are plenty of sources of comfort and guidance for the child in an Indian household in terms of grandparents, uncles, or cousins, Sudhir Kakar believes that the loss of maternal intimacy exposes the child to vulnerability, ultimately leading to narcissistic injury. By vulnerability, what he means is an identity crisis and a search for his/her own distinctiveness. Again, Kakar explains the nuances of this narcissistic injury as- an unconscious tendency to submit to an idealized omnipotent figure, both in the inner world of fantasy and in the outside world of making a living; the lifelong search for someone, a charismatic leader or a guru, who will provide mentorship and a guiding worldview, thereby restoring intimacy and authority to individual life. (Inner World 153)

At this juncture, let us understand the above crisis and how a child deals with it through a textual example. The narrator of *Here's How We Wring a Quarter of Lime* is obsessed with Hindi cinema. She is such a cinema enthusiast that sometimes she skips school or bunk classes to attend matinee shows at a nearby video parlor. This is not uncommon in the Indian subcontinent. Another anthropologist Patricia Uberoi makes detailed scrutiny of Bollywood cinema as popular culture and its effect on common people including children in her book *Freedom and Destiny* (2006). The concept of hero worship is reflected in the narrator's obsession for Mithun Chakraborty, a Bollywood hero of the 1980s and 1990s. At the beginning of the story, the narrator mentions zealously- 'I went through the pages of film magazines. My friends called me a Hindi cinema addict. Mithun was my hot favourite. I kept track of all his latest films. There was always a color picture postcard of Mithun hidden inside my book. From time to time I kissed him on his lips' (Wild 207). Her last action reminds us of the superficial acts of Raina from the romantic comedy *Arms and the Man* (1894). However, the narrator's actions are prompted by what Kakar explains as a child's desire for an ideal figure at the level of fanciful imagination. Again, this desire gets intensified over time as she notes- 'With a lot of difficulty I had obtained Mithun Chakraborty's address in Bombay and written him a letter, asking him to help me get into films. For this I was even willing to be his maidservant' (212-213). On a sad note, her father could have become that guru or mentor for the girl, had he given her that space and won her confidence and trust.

Elaborating on our previous discussion on narcissistic injury, in this last section, we shall theorize the problems of narcissism with needful textual justifications. Austrian psychologist Heinz Kohut argues that a child goes through two different levels of narcissistic configurations while searching for his own identity. The first level is the *grandiose self*. In this level, the child believes that he/she is 'perfect' and is still living in the previous narcissistic equilibrium. This conviction towards perfection is explained by Kohut as 'broad spectrum of

phenomena, ranging from the child's solipsistic world-view and his undisguised pleasure in being admired, and from the gross delusion of the paranoiac and the crudely sexual acts of the adult perverts' (25). In other words, such psychological drift brings exhibitionism (i.e. showing off one's physical beauty, knowledge, possessions, etc.), desire for attention (tendency to get highlighted and become centre of attraction for others), hypochondria (extreme consciousness regarding one's health, mostly delusional), psychosis (a kind of mental disorder which makes a person away from reality) or paranoia (when a person suffers from overstated self-importance and unreasonable jealousy for others). A close analysis of the character traits of the narrator from the story *Here's How We Wring a Quarter of Lime* will reveal the fact that she displays quite an amount of symptoms mentioned above. What strikes us most in her occasional narrations regarding her family background, misadventures, or passion for cinema is her sense of pride. The way she internalizes and introduces her father as an influential figure and powerful political leader before the reader is menacing- 'Despite the abolition of zamindari, he had a huge amount of property in his own name, and benami property as well. With his farm and livestock and so on, he had a large establishment... but my father had tremendous clout in the area, hence people feared saying anything to his face' (Wild 209). More so, she has understood one fact that she is the darling of her father. Therefore, being precocious, she also knows how to immune herself against all sorts of odds using her father's influence. Secondly, such privileges lead her to vanity and delusion regarding her physical beauty. From the family perspective and relationships, she is a lonely child. As a result, she creates a world of imagination around her which is chiefly dominated by her beauty and grandeur. She is the queen of that world, therefore, centre of all attraction. This self-obsession sometimes pops out in her narration- 'My friends often told me that. They said I look like Mandakini. The village boys certainly, and even the young history teacher in school gaped at me covertly. I had seen *Ram Teri Ganga Maili* thirty-one times' (212). The point I want to establish here is when such self-obsessed persons are rejected by someone, they cannot digest it easily. The crisis in the plotline comes when her maternal uncle, who is in the same class, first rebukes her and later ignores her advances. Through first-person narration, Subimal Misra lets us peep into the inner turmoil of that fanciful girl on being scolded by the maternal uncle-

Why don't you go and tell my father, I don't give a damn! I was possessed by something. I decided that one day, if I ever got the chance, I would expose just how 'virtuous' he really was. Come what may, I would destroy his pride. After all, how long could boys restrain themselves? I laughed inwardly. I had become quite precocious by then, influenced by all the movies that I had watched. (207)

These chains of thoughts, like a stream of consciousness, expose her psychosexual desires and biological maturities. Nevertheless, her provocative actions which begin in the state of vengeance against the maternal uncle dissolve into the fire of physical desire at the first touch of a male body-

Chhoto Mama's muscular body. He was a bit startled at being hugged so suddenly. Even after I knew that the fleeing animal was a jackal, I continued to clasp Chhoto Mama. To tell you the truth, it wasn't as if I had never experienced the male touch before, but that day it was as though a secret desire had wiped away all ties of blood. I deliberately

held mama's well-built masculine body firmly for a long time. I was in a state of intoxication... After that, as each day went by, the intoxication of the feel of that firm, capable, powerful, masculine body seized me even more. (212)

Such incidents make no change in the mind of Chhoto Mama, a simple village boy, as he is preoccupied with his works and such forbidden thoughts never occur to his mind anyway. Therefore, he ignores her advances unknowingly. As a result, it has a drastic effect on the imaginary world of the narrator. Besides, it directly challenges her self-proclaimed importance and image of superiority too. Subimal uses interrogative and exclamatory sentences in order to display her disbelief- 'Chhoto Mama may have been a very good boy, with his face buried in books all day long, but to disregard a beautiful, modern girl like me? I, who was supposed to drive people crazy!... So, to disregard me!' (212-213). However, her vengeance turned sexual-jealousy ends in disaster as her father tortures Chhoto Mama mercilessly at the news of her being pregnant.

The second level of narcissistic injury is called *idealized parental imago*. Here the child is convinced as 'you are perfect, but I am a part of you'. In other words, due to emotional attachment, the child idealizes his/her parents and imagines them as perfect. So, perfection and omnipotence are attributed to parental figures. More so, being their biological offspring, now the child is perfect too technically. Now, at this juncture, what traumatizes the child is the faltering of his/her parents from an idealized position. Coming out of the cocooned state of the mother's protection, when the children step out into the adult world and face harshnesses like rejections or punishments, their idea about their parents' perfectness gets shattered. Therefore, observing the character of the narrator from *Will You Preserve Your Chastity, Aparna?*, it is not difficult to locate the crisis in her life. Like any other girl of her age, she might use to idealize her mother. However, her mother's licentious actions among other men aggravate her distress. As a result, this trauma leads to paranoia. She becomes jealous of her mother's existence and actions. Her mother testifies to this jealousy- 'She would get very happy if she saw me ill at ease. As if my discredit was to her credit. And she got annoyed if she discerned the slightest intimacy between her father and me' (191). Speaking critically, her mental condition seems alarming from her mother's statement. Moreover, when contrasted, such jealousy leads to unhealthy comparisons with parents. In order to keep self-identity and superiority intact, the child brings comparison in each step with his/her now mundane parents. In our text, too, the narrator becomes conscious of her physical beauty-

I got angry when I heard anyone praise Ma, then again, I couldn't tolerate any denigration, either. I suffer from a narcissus complex. I would stand for hours in front of the mirror, and think I was far more beautiful than my mother. So why did Uncle Robi praise my mother and not me? I would find a reason to pick a quarrel and create an uproar. (192)

However, with time, such mental traumas dissolve temporarily or permanently, especially when the child becomes a parent.

To conclude, moralistic sensibilities are the founding stones of Indian family structure and cultural consciousness. Any unusualness or unconventionality in an individual might bring a crisis to social and religious relationships around him/her. However, all cultural societies

have their own corrective measures like social impositions, human conscience, maturity through age, or mutual understanding which eliminates subtle irregularities. Further, in this modern age where people are becoming conscious of mental health, crises of the adolescent period cannot be avoided through generalizations. In other words, we cannot nullify the possibilities of a child suffering from mental traumas like psychosis, paranoia, or psychosexual anxiety anymore. They could be fatal to the individual and the family both. On the other hand, we cannot appreciate Subimal Misra more for exploring these terrains of child psychology, debating the issues regarding the adolescent period, and tapping psychosexual tensions in teenage, which are still considered taboo in Bengali literature.

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