

Review

Place of Problem Novels in World Writing in English Today: An Analysis through David Almond's *Clay*

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Writing matters a lot in present scenario. Writing being considered a therapeutic element reflects the writers' personal world. As the title is on World Writing in English Today this paper focuses on the contribution of Problem Novels to the Young Adult World through British Literature. Problem Novel is a sub genre of Young Adult Novel. This is an existing genre, but needs more attention to flourish in various aspects of writing. Young Adult Literature is an emerging area where there is a lot of scope to give a different perspective for today's writing. Days were there, where Young Adult Literature is a depiction of romance. However, Problem Novel arrived when there is a demand for reality or explicit literature. It has a different phase in the development of World English. It is a platform to represent the problems of young adults. The problem is not only in love life, but also in the family and society. They are been alienated from the society because of their age. They live in their own world where no one could enter and their problem can be deciphered. David Almond's *Clay* will be a suitable example for the transition of English in the present world. The novel provides a space to discuss on multi theme. With this the paper would deal with the travel of World Writing in English Today.

Key Words: Literature; English Today; Young Adult Literature; Young Adult Novels; Problem Novels; David Almond; *Clay*

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INTRODUCTION

Writing in English is a powerful mode of communication. The medium decides the impact of writing. On that note literature would be a starboard. The idiosyncrasy of literature travels worldwide like music that binds all emotionally. The aspect of literature writing has periodical changes. It travelled a wide range with lot of themes. Today literature is not for the people from a particular backdrop but for all. It shows the transition in the trend.

Being in the post-modern world, it is the right time to concentrate on literature for young adults. It is a known fact that young adults are targeted everywhere for all kinds of launching. Handling them is a universal problem as their deficiency of trespassing the habitual is a hereditary problem. That is why the writers of this particular literature have taken up a great responsibility while nurturing their art. Historically one could trace the

origin of Young Adult Literature (YAL) to be 1800:

In the 1800s, the attitude of adults towards the young gradually changed. The country expanded, we moved inevitably toward an urban society, medical knowledge rapidly developed, and young people no longer began working so early in their lives. The literature that emerged for young adults remained pious and sober, but it hinted at the possibility of humanity's experiencing a satisfying life here on earth. (Nilsen 41)

The growth and development of young adult literature took different forms like water, to the genre it pings to. It is an area which gives a heuristic exposure to young adults. Problem novel would be an apposite to bring the World Writing in English in highbrow conclave. David Almond's *Clay* could make a mark in justifying the title.

Jumping into Problem Novel is an abrupt discourse and hence conferring on Young Adult Novels (YAN) will provide a distinctive precedence. These novels are different from the classics, which indicate its suigeneris. Eventually, it has associative language and consort with young adult themes. The themes gyrate around present day issues which commonly exist all over the world and stand as an unsolvable avant-grade writing. Apart from its theme, there are other striking features as quoted in De Nilson's *Literature for Today's Young Adults*:

1. The protagonist is a teenager
2. Events revolve around the protagonist and his/her struggle to resolve conflict
3. The story is told from the view point and in the voice of young adult
4. Literature is written by and for young adults
5. Literature is marketed on the young adult audience
6. Story doesn't have a "stay book" or "happily-ever-after" ending –a characteristic of Children's book
7. Parents are noticeably absent or at odds with young adults
8. Themes addressing coming-of-age issues
9. Books contains under 300 pages closer to 200

All these play a vital role in the Young Adult Literature. The first person narrative in YAN aids the readers, for they could sense that the characters are of teenagers with the faulty and simple language they use. The development of YAN has the Problem Novel as its sub-genre.

As it is said, YAN spotlights the common theme in a

weird way; there is a need of novels which will convey the common theme with reality. This vacuum gets fulfilled when problem novels come into existence talking more on explicit reality. They treats the issues like peer pressure, death, suicide in a realistic way. These novels concentrate not only on the personal problems but also dip the personal problems in social context which adds a flavour. It sets an ideal look which differs from the traditional approach of romance for YAN.

An Analysis of *Clay*

David Almond's *Clay* is one which can be a perfect blend as a Problem Novel. The best part of the novel is its setting with urban background in 1960s. Davie a thirteen year old lad is the protagonist and he narrates the novel. The narration gives the reader an impact that this problem novel deals with the issues of small gang and street gang; Davie is always found in gang which includes Geordie Craggs, an altar boy Skinner, and Poke. They find difficulty when a new boy Stephen Rose enters Felling, their home town. Davie, Geordie and his friends are influenced by the idea that Stephen Rose has no one, for his father died in stroke and his mother became mad. Reading the novel shows that Stephen Rose was sent to Bennett College to be trained as priest. However, he comes back without completing it because of his parents' death. He is in Felling under the care of his aunt Crazy Mary, a woman not in a normal state. These makes Davie and Geordie mock at Stephen. At times Father O' Mahoney comes as a rescuer when he is been mocked at. The vital feature of a problem novel is that the problem controls the plot. The problem in the novel is unwillingness to accept the new one Stephen. This nature gets connectivity towards other features of problem novels like true and direct exposure of social injustice, the miseries and sufferings of the lower classes.

One valid point to be discovered is the miseries and sufferings of the lower classes. Though Stephen is not the protagonist of the novel, one could understand he is a boy from lower class with his economical condition. The social status of Stephen brings a lot of difficulties for him to get along with other young adults in the novel. Davie the protagonist appears to be a good one through his confession to Father O' Mahoney:

"Bless me, Father, for I have sinned. It is two weeks since my last confession".

"I drank some altar wine, Father"

"And will you do it again?"

"No, Father. And I stole some cigarettes from Dad".

"Not only is that theft, but they will do you dreadful harm".

"Yes, Father. I know that, Father. And I have

coveted other people's goods, their money, Father. And I have called people cruel names. And..."

"Have you now?" what kind of name?"

"Fish face, Father"

"I have had impure thoughts, Father"

"And did you act on these thoughts?"

"What, Father? Oh, no, Father" (27-29)

The confession of Davie shows that he is good and he wants to know more about Stephen with whom he becomes friend later. There is another occasion which portrays Davie has a peer pressure to behave in a strange way to Stephen. He has a chat with Geordie that gives a reader that Geordie tries to make Davie fill with an offensive thought on Stephen.

"You're too innocent, Davie", he said. "That's your problem. You think everything's nice and everybody's nice. You've naïve, man". He pointed at me. "One of these days, somebody 'll start taking advantage of you". (33)

Peer pressure makes young adult to react in a way different way leading only to the destructive path but not to the constructive path. Almond brings out this feature in a comprehensible way. Peer pressure brings the vital difference of building a wall between their economical statuses. Geordie extends this attitude with Stephen's Aunt Crazy Mary. Thus he often disrespects the elders. This can be compared to the state of subalterns. The weaker ones are intensively alienated and beaten up in the society. It shows that young adults should be channelized to build up their moral and emotional values.

There are the other issues and features in problem novels to get a better understanding. Problem Novels have an artistic notion; it can be revealed through any of the characters in the novel. In Almond's *Clay* Stephen Rose is built up with this skill. Stephen could make clay to move and to live like a human. This could be strange and odd to the readers. On the other hand, this extraordinary skill, where other young adults' do not possess, makes him survive. The initial conversation of Davie and Stephen begins with the making of clay into life. Davie shows an attitude of disinterestedness in talking with Stephen, before getting to note this skill within him. He is surprised when Stephen shows him the clay alive. Davie is not able to believe and not impressed when the clay appears still, motionless and eventually is impressed when the clay is alive:

He drew one of the bowls towards himself. He took the wet cloth off. He ripped a little lump of clay away. He started shaping a human body with it. He paused.

The figure was tiny, delicate, half formed not like

the other formless soulless lumps, but like a baby, half made. He lifted it to his lips. "Move", he whispered to it. "Move, my little one".

"Look, Davie", he said. "Look deep. Look with the eyes of the spirit, Davie. When I say you'll see it move, you will see it move".

"And I did see, and I nearly cried out with fright, but he stopped it dead. He dropped the child onto the bench, clapped his hand across my mouth. (68-70)

Almond shows the confused state of Davie whether to believe it or not. This incident gives the positive side of Stephen that he is respected as a skillful artist. And the fate is that a skilled artist will not be known to the world. This artistic skill gives a confidence to Stephen that he is different from others. The skill develops friendship between Davie and Stephen.

Sulton (1982) says that "the essential quality of problem novels is "sensibility, evoking in the reader strong emotion for its own sake". David Almond's *Clay* shows the sensibility to evoke the readers in two aspects: one is the difference in the attitude of young adults who have proper guidance from parents and with parents left out. The second is the love life in young adults. With the first aspect the reader could filter it from Davie, Geordie, Mouldy and Stephen. The state of Stephen and his parents is discussed earlier. Davie has a conducive and supportive family background. This makes a young adult to discuss, share and come out with good decision:

"We were sitting at the table eating eggy bread and drinking tea"

"The brunette or the blonde?" said Dad.

"Frances or Maria?" said Mam.

Dad laughed.

"And which one's got the eye for Geordie?"

They walked by again. Dad kept on nudging and asking.

"Lost your chance", said dad.

"I'm not interested", I said.

"Oh, aye?" he said.

"Well, they're both nice girls by all accounts", said Mam.

Dad laughed. (120)

Almond portrays the other character namely Mouldy as a tough guy. Other adults including Davie found him a troublesome person in Felling. One could get an idea from reading that those who are rustic and trespassers will be away from parents. Everyone in the group wants Mouldy to die because of his dominant nature and beating others to show his strength. This is one of the reasons why others hate him. When Davie starts to get along with Stephen, Stephen is there to help him in all means. That makes Stephen murder Mouldy. The murder

of Mouldy remains suspense until Stephen opens his mouth:

“A dreadful thing. A boy has been found dead”.
I close my eyes, don’t breathe, and don’t speak.
“His name,” she says “is Martin Mould”.

...

And we get in under a tree and I’m looking out,
and there is Mouldy.

“He couldn’t. Not that it mattered. By now
Mouldy’s a whimpering wreck. I put my hand in
the middle of his chest. I tell him. “This is for
Davie and his mates”. (160, 186-89)

Marie is an important character in the novel. Though the novel fills with first person narrative, the conversation between Davie and Marie has an objective view. She leads Davie whenever he gets confusion with Stephen. Readers could get the presence of young adult and problem novel in the portion of Marie. Almond presents Marie with a refined quality. It is one of the reasons that boys fall for her. She always guides Davie and makes him stand away from the wrong company. Davie is always surrounded by a gang of friends where there is a possibility of misleading. Almond gives a bird’s eye view through Marie. She has been designed as a person filled with humanity:

“There’s talk they’re going to fill it in”. She said.
“They’re going to bulldoze the gardens and
knock the last of the old house down and fill the
quarry in and build a new estate”.

“I know”, I said.

“They’re cretins”, she said. “They’ll call the new
streets Pretty Place and Lovely Lane but they’ll
not see how they’ve smashed a bit of Paradise.”
(92)

Almond could present the nature of young adult when he is with a girl. He brings a new world where Davie makes clay live and goes for a walk with it around Felling. The author uses a technique of repeating words to get the impact of readers, which gives a setting that the readers can enter the world of Davie. He uses words like MOVE, LIVE.

The best part of the novel is its language. Almond has taken a colloquial style of language. This is again an important feature in problem novel. This gives a sense of nativity to the readers from a young adult point of view. It shows the reliability of readers towards problem novel. In some places Almond uses words with different spelling like Bliddy Hell, Mam, and Mebbe. While adding a new perspective it does not confuse the readers.

The disappearance of Stephen after the fight with Davie, when he goes out with clay, makes a remarkable

feature of problem novel. Stephen survives due to his artistic skill limiting his friendship with one person. He is neither an antagonist nor a protagonist; it is a role of individuality that Stephen has played through his artistic skill. Almond gives a rationalistic thought that God created man and Stephen created clay to live and so he can be an indomitable creator. He also spends more pages to bring out the importance of art by introducing Prat, Art Teacher: “I think an artist is simply human, a human with an astounding skill, a skill that may indeed be God-given, but nevertheless... human” (80). Thus the status of Stephen is elevated. Everyone wonders at the disappearance of Stephen and the death of Mouldy towards the end of the novel. Davie could regain the clay and show it to Marie its wonders. The readers could associate that art lives for a longer time.

CONCLUSION

It can be concluded that Almond depicts the features of problem novel: plot revolves around the low class people; set is a hash setting; language is colloquial; there is vividness in description. His writing has created a literary platform for Problem Novel through his rich characterization. Any work of art would have the reflection of author’s life and Almond too acknowledged it in an interview. Problem Novel could be an apt conductor to transmit the state of Young Adults, for it not only reflects the personal life of young adults but also binds social life. Definitely it would be an innovative perspective in English Writing.

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