

The Lies We Tell– A Dynamic Saga Discerning Young Adults’ Psyche

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Abstract

Himanjali Sankar, one of the epoch-making Young Adult novelists of India, created a stir in YA genre through her most recent novel *The Lies We Tell* (2019). Her fascination for comprehending, analysing, and exploring teenage psyche finds vivid expression in the novel. The story revolves around the teenage characters whose love affairs, betrayal, mental illness, and irrational behaviour becomes a cause of concern for their parents and other adults. The constant struggle between parental expectations and their own desires leaves them baffled and nonplussed. The present paper focusses on traversing the minds of young adults who become the victims of mental disorder, frustration, and neurosis due to unsurmountable pressure on them to come to terms with their parents, peers, friends, and other adults. The paper also examines the impact of domestic violence, societal ills, and intemperate use of modern gadgets and technology on the fragile minds of young adults.

Keywords: young adult; mental illness; betrayal; neurosis; WhatsApp

Introduction

Himanjali Sankar, a contemporary Indian YA novelist, hails from the city of Kolkata. After acquiring her Masters and M. Phil in English literature from Jawaharlal Nehru University, Delhi, she taught English at the University of Indianapolis in the US. She wrote several children and Young Adult fiction including *The Magical Adventures of Skinny Scribble* (2001), *The Stupendous Timetelling Dog* (2013), *Missing a Magnificent Superdog* (2013) *Talking of Muskaan* (2014), *Mrs C Remembers* (2017) and *The Lies We Tell* (2019). Her first novel for adults, *Mrs C Remembers* won her FICCI Publishing Award for Upcoming Author of the year 2018. Currently, Himanjali Sankar is rendering services as an Editorial Director at Simon & Schuster India and Associate Publisher at Bloomsbury India.

The paper focusses on Himanjali Sankar's recent YA novel *The Lies We Tell* (2019) in which she has endeavoured to discern the psyche of young adults and their struggle in meeting expectations of their parents, peers, and other adults of the society. The very objective of the paper is to probe into the subconscious minds of the millennial teenagers - their friendships and loves, their hormonal imbalances and excesses, driving them crazy and their fragile mental state leaving them baffled and heartbroken. Talking in an interview about her latest book *The Lies We Tell*, Himanjali says, "...younger people as I see it embody the future and hope so, even while writing about seemingly dark issues, I feel there is always scope for redemption and endless possibilities when dealing with the young."

Young Adult Fiction – Its Relevance in Contemporary Times

Young Adult Fiction (YAF) is for and about young adults aged between 12 to 18 years and the focus is on an adolescent as a protagonist who has surpassed his childhood and yet to turn into an adult. According to Falconer,

“YA fiction, having once been dismissed as an ephemeral and transient genre, has, by its very emphasis on transience, become a kind of cultural lightning rod, attracting to its conductive space questions and debates about what it means to be human in the twenty-first century.” (Falconer 88)

Cole in his book *Young Adult Literature in the 21st Century* writes, “Young Adult Literature describes texts that bridge the gap between children’s literature and adult literature.” (Cole 49) It delves deep into real problems faced by teenagers such as gender bias, sex and alienation, divorce, single parent family, domestic violence, queer identity, and suicide. Falconer is of opinion that “a different sort of edge appears in young adult novels which explore the complex relation of adolescents to modern technology”. (Falconer 96) Contemporary psychologists agree that adolescence is a period of accelerated transition, during which questions of identity formation become paramount: but how to assert oneself as an individual, and how to fit into a socioeconomic context is a challenging task. (Prout 2005)

Young adult novels deal with romantic relationship of the teenagers; their first experiences of love, heartbreak, rejection, and acceptance. The protagonists of YA novels strive to cope up with the vicissitudes of life and attempt to search for the whys and ifs of their experiences. The darker shade of the society is also depicted through the characters of these novels. These novels deal with the problems associated with growing up of the children into teenagers. In the contemporary YA fiction, the story is set in the real world depicting emotional, attitudinal, and adjustment issues of young adults. They project the theme of self-discovery wherein the protagonist learns more about himself and his desires as he faces the world. He poses questions on the beliefs and principles on which he is brought up and endeavours to establish his own identity. YA genre has become so popular in the present times

that its arena has expanded into other genres such as graphic novels, fantasy novels, mystery novels, romance novels and even techno-thrillers, cyberpunk, and contemporary Christian fiction.

The Lies We Tell– A Tale of Strained Relationship

The Lies We Tell begins with a newspaper report regarding terrorist attack on Mumbai on November 26, 2008, in which twelve shooting and bombing attacks across Mumbai were carried out by ten Pakistani members of an Islamic organization Laskar-e-Taiba. Out of 12 shooting attacks, one attack was at Chhatrapati Shivaji Terminus (CST) in which Ajmal Kasab and his confederate shot fifty-eight innocent people.

The story is told by the protagonist Irfan Ahmed, a seventeen-year-old boy who loves playing football and is deeply attached to his girlfriend Uma and his elder sister Sanya, six years older than him, whom he calls 'Appi'. Appi was like "a protective, anxious mom" to Irfan (Sankar p. 4). She used to take a lot of care of him and always supported and guided him. Irfan was awfully close to her sister and shared all his feelings with her.

When Irfan was 12, his parents discovered that Sanya was dating Rohit who was studying in Class XII at that time. His mother caught Sanya red handed with her boyfriend Rohit in her room; "it was pretty melodramatic and awful." (p. 7) Irfan was still a kid and traumatized by all the shouting in the family that went on for days together. Everything changed after this incident and Appi became extremely anxious about leaving home and studying abroad. When she was gone, Irfan was left alone; he felt devastated as Appi was the only person who could understand his moods and emotions and provide him comfort during troubled times.

Unlike his outspoken Appi, Irfan defers to his parents in almost everything, His Abba commands, "No more football, cricket and tennis... Once you start doing better in Chemistry and Biology, you can start playing again." (pp.16-17) Even his Ammi restricts him from pursuing his passion of music, "And you really have to stop all that music and band nonsense."

(p.17) Irfan never raises his voice with his parents, though music was “greatest source of comfort” (p. 18) for him. No one in fact communicates in the family, except talking about his studies. His parents are always concerned about his academic progress at school. Though he is not bad in his studies but nothing short of the best pleases his parents. At dinner table also, his Abba would discuss his studies and Irfan would say, “Ok. I am not a genius. Kill me.” (p. 10) He feels desolate, disheartened and dismal at the mechanical approach of his parents who considers studies above everything else.

Himanjali conveys a strong sense of disapproval in the fractured family that tries to get through each day, rather than living it. Excessive expectations from a child frustrates him and splits him apart. Teenagers live in an exhilarating state of mind during their transition from childhood to adulthood –between the age of 13 and 19. They think, feel, and behave differently than they do as children or as adults. This is the time when they pursue their life goals, seek independence to enhance their skills and strive to overcome the growing pressure of peers and family members. This is a period of fast paced development in five key areas: moral, social, physical, cognitive, and emotional. It is necessary that parents understand the psyche of their children and put efforts to make them feel more comfortable in their process of growing up.

Uma and Rishi – Irfan’s Best Friends

Uma and Rishi are Irfan’s best friends since childhood, and they form an inevitable part of his life. Uma is beautiful, carefree and has no hesitation in talking back to her parents. She is fond of learning Hindustani classical music and “her voice was rich, deep, trained.” (p. 18) Uma is Irfan’s girlfriend, but he keeps his affair with Uma a secret from his hawk-eyed parents for whom “...romance and love meant time away from academics, which meant time wasted.” (p. 19) As Irfan and Uma get closer, Rishi slowly grows resentful. Rishi comes from a troubled family, with an abusive father and scared mother. His mother is a victim of domestic violence; his father beats his mom frequently; “Rishi would draw broken lines with markers, black and

blue and red, on [Irfan's] arms and back, to show what his mother's body looked like after a beating." (5) When his father is into this mood, Rishi would go and stay at Irfan's house.

As Rishi and his elder brother Ritesh grow, they become big and strong. One day, "Ritesh pushed his dad against the wall and said that the next time he raised his hand on his wife, he would personally strangle him." (p. 7) After this incident, Rishi's father never beat his wife. Ritesh becomes a hero in the eyes of Rishi. This instance makes Rishi indifferent to his parents and he "didn't let his parents affect him, after a point." (7) Himanjali Sankar puts forth the psychology of teenagers whose thinking is sculpted by the behaviour of their parents. The domestic violence has a pervasive effect on the minds of teenage boys who subconsciously starts believing in the superiority of the male folk over female gender. It is imperative that the teenagers are brought up in an amiable, caring, and harmonious atmosphere where they find a space to voice their ideas; where they are heard and not merely ruled by their parents. It is only when the teenagers are imparted due respect, love, and affection that they grow into responsible adults.

Irfan's Break-up with his Girlfriend Uma

As the story moves on, Uma starts distancing herself with Irfan; finally breaking up with him and begins dating Irfan's best friend Rishi. Irfan is deeply shocked, and his psychological state begins to worsen up when his childhood sweetheart sours a bond of many years with him. Being sensitive by nature, Irfan is already combating with the departure of his sister whom he adores above anyone else; now with break-up with this girlfriend, he receives another blow that shatters him immeasurably.

He finds solace by writing emails to his sister Sanya but severs his relations with the rest of the world. He begins to withdraw into himself, deletes WhatsApp from his phone and shares with his sister how heartbroken he was, by continually emailing her. His sister whom he calls "Appi" is the only one whom he can rely upon during this laborious and troubled times.

He writes to her that after his break-up with Uma, he was feeling “cliched and awful.” His heart was like “beautiful glass shattering into a meaningless mess with jaded edges.” (p. 36) He tells his friend Ana, “And if she [Uma] left me because I wasn’t exciting enough, then she didn’t know a thing about commitment, about relationships, and how they are supposed to work. For excitement one goes to rock concerts; for love and comfort we were supposed to have each other.” (p. 94) He resentfully says, “I want to grow a nice new thick skin and not hurt all the time. But I do. I hurt.” (p. 46) Irfan loves Uma deeply but she parts ways from him and befriends Rishi. This shakes Irfan from within; he loses interest in life and becomes indifferent and detached.

On the other hand, even after dumping Irfan, Uma has a soft corner for him; she cares for him, which is evident from the WhatsApp messages between Rishi and Uma. Rishi often asks Uma, “Come on Uma! Will you give up on protecting Irfan’s feelings?... Are my feelings of any consequence to you?” (pp. 40-41) He says, “I love you, Uma but I am tired of Irfan being a part of every second conversation we have.” (p. 42) Rishi continually feels jealous of Irfan as he suspects that despite Uma being his girlfriend, she is still inclined towards Irfan.

Himanjali Sankar points out the psychology of teen aged boys who strive to impress the girls; win their love and then impose their ideologies upon them. They develop a sense of possession and remain in fear of losing their partners. They fail to understand that true love needs no boundaries, no restrictions, no constraints.

Circulation of Uma’s Photo Among Classmates

One day, a photo of Uma gets circulated on WhatsApp among the classmates and Uma is convinced that it was Irfan’s way of taking revenge since she parted ways with him. Because only Irfan and Uma had access to the photo, Uma’s suspicion was valid. Irfan denies having circulated the photo. He, on the contrary, believes that it was Uma’s way of drawing attention to herself – “...some form of perverted vanity? Showing off her own flawless body.” (p. 67) He

feels that Uma must have done it to create trouble for him and to place herself in controversy in school as she wanted everyone to know that she possessed a gorgeous body. He thinks,

“Every last feeling, connection, that I had with Uma is now sullied, dirty, meaningless. I feel a blankness that is worse than sorrow or hurt – I need to fill this blankness, it’s driving me mad.” (pp. 67-68)

Uma’s photograph was circulated with the caption ‘goddess of the night’. Every boy in the class XII was sharing the photo with others.

Uma does not go to school the next day, for, she was feeling hysterical and suicidal. Rishi tries to convince her that it was Irfan’s mischief as he wanted to disgrace her by making her photo public. He wants Uma to report the incident to Police and name Irfan for the doing. He asks her, “You’re still not mad at Irfan. Somehow, Amazing.” (p. 72) “Come on! You wouldn’t tell the police that he did this.” Uma annoyingly says that she does not want Irfan to land in jail and so she would not name anyone. Rishi is envious of Irfan because despite Uma’s break up with Irfan, her concern for him is unceasing. This makes him jittery and revengeful.

The principal of the school calls Irfan and asks him if he has done the mischief, to which he refuses. He is shocked at the behaviour of his former girlfriend Uma who is blaming him for the deed that he never committed. He is shattered and heartbroken; he emails Appi, “I don’t desire Uma’s endorsement as far as my life goes – never again. Yes, I’m falling apart, but it’s my problem and I know how to deal with it.” (96)

No one in the class talks to Irfan. He writes, “It would make no difference to anyone if I killed myself – if I hung myself from the ceiling fan in school, no one would look in that direction.” (98) He feels a cold demented silence around him, making him mad. Going to school becomes unbearable for him – “It’s like wading through mud the whole day, my whole body leaden and heavy. I just need to get out. Of this house, this city, everything.” (105) Irfan

feels helpless, desolate, and heartbroken. Julia Kristeva, talking about the shades of adolescence remarks,

“Being on the ‘edge’ of adulthood in the twenty-first century is a more daunting experience than previously because ageing can flow in both directions: the ‘edge’ is double-sided. And this process can unfold not only in either direction but also at varying speed. Not only are there children zooming to adulthood at an accelerated rate (‘tweenagers’) but there are also adults tumbling back into childhood (kiddults).” (Quoted by Falconer 92)

Himanjali Sankar reveals the mental agony of the protagonist Irfan who is unable to cope up with the mental stress; he finds his life devoid of purpose and wishes to escape into another world where he can stay untroubled. Teenage is the period in which the young adults often take wrong decisions; they get traumatized at minor happenings of life and cause harm to their own selves. They need to be comforted, counselled, and protected by family members so that they look at life in optimistic and pragmatic way.

Break-up of Rishi and Uma

Rishi is extremely upset with Uma as she starts withdrawing herself from him. He angrily says, “You are bringing out the worst in me. You’re making me paranoid, jealous and insecure.” She wretchedly speaks,

“Rishi, I am just too tired to listen this. I don’t have the patience. I don’t have the mindspace...I can’t deny that I’m worried about Irfan. And it’s ok for everyone else to move on but I need more time.” (pp. 85-86)

She determinately says that they should not carry on like this anymore. “I don’t want to be in a meaningless relationship...You know we’re done. And we’ve been done for a while.” (pp. 110-111)

Rishi feels crushed and spiteful as Uma rejects him outrightly. He gets more perturbed because his own mother expresses more fondness for Irfan than him. Dejected, he says, “Everyone loves Irfan shit.” (p. 101) Rishi’s mother does not want Rishi to date Uma. The

probable reason is the strained relationship between Rishi's father and mother; both have stopped talking to each other, with the result that she has grown thin and worried. She does not have many friends to talk, and she feels isolated and neglected.

Himanjali points out the fact that family environment has a profound effect on the psyche of teenagers. They consider their parents ideals; their personality is moulded by what they see and experience during their childhood. Domestic violence has a detrimental effect on the fragile minds of teenagers; they feel helpless and desolate to see the discordant atmosphere of the family and wish to escape from the uncongenial entourage of the familial quarrels. As they grow up, they imitate the behaviour of their parents; they become attention-seeking & demanding individuals who do not hesitate to cause harm even to their close friends. Falconer remarks,

“The adolescent body, subject to rapid, metamorphic change, is often represented in terms of the grotesque, rather than the idealized classic body...[Teenagers] may well find it a struggle to come to terms with new thresholds of being in the twenty-first century, where the concept of individual identity is increasingly called into question.” (Falconer 94-98)

Irfan's Mental Ailment

Irfan's parents are worried about him because his academic performance has become awful in the past six months, and it is going down more and more. Though he was one of the best students in the class in XI standard, it is surprising “How the mighty have fallen!” (p, 103) His Ammi and Abba frequently visit the school, meet the teachers, and discuss his performance. They meet the principal and the counsellor to talk about his mental health. They meet the football coach who is also upset because Irfan refuses to play football anymore.

Irfan is taken to Dr Kohli, “a fat, detestable psychiatrist” every week for counselling. He goes to the psychiatrist just to satisfy his Ammi. He is given medication by the psychiatrist

which he often pushes them below his tongue and spit them out afterwards. "Nothing seems important anymore. I'm willing to go with the flow. I don't have much fight left in me." (p. 124) Irfan suffers from mental ailment and does not find interest in anything. He finds his life a heavy burden which he is unable to bear. He misses his sister Appi extensively who is not there to support him. At a young age, Irfan finds his life colourless and meaningless. He needs someone who could understand him; console him and lead him to a right path.

Irfan's Meeting with Uma

Irfan decides to meet Uma at school to talk over the matter. He tells her that his parents are called to school every week because she had made his complaint to the principal. Though Uma is sure that it was Irfan who had circulated her photo on WhatsApp, yet she makes efforts to maintain an affable relationship with him. She tries to convince him,

"Everyone wants to help you... I'm sorry if you are taking some bizarre revenge or whatever on Rishi and me for abandoning you, but it didn't have to be this way. We could have been friends. Forever, as we always imagined." (pp. 106-107)

Irfan is deeply hurt and once again slips into Appi's world of comfort. Uma is surprised to see that Irfan is talking to his sister who is not there. She says, "Talk to me. You don't have to ...address your sister who is not here." (p. 109) She starts sobbing and leaves the place.

Himanjali Sankar poses a question of mental health of the teenagers which has become a matter of great concern in the contemporary times. These teenagers are anguished at inconsequential happenings and slip into depression making their lives cumbersome and ponderous.

Terrorist Attack on Army School in Peshawar

It was 16th December 2014 and was Uma's birthday. The T.V. reporter broke news about Peshawar school massacre, terrorist attack in which seven armed Taliban fighters stormed an army run primary and secondary school in Peshawar, Pakistan. The terrorists had attacked the army school and killed 145 people including 132 children of the age group of eight and eighteen

years of age. There were photographs of dead bodies of the children on T.V, “And then older photos of smiling children in school uniforms. In better times. Good-looking children, rosy cheeked, tall...so much pain.” (p. 131) This incident reminds Ammi of horrendous 26/11/2008 terrorist attack in Mumbai when Sanya had gone to Mumbai to participate in inter school debate competition. Sanya lost her life during a terrorist attack at the Chhatrapati Shivaji Terminus in Mumbai in 2008 when Ajmal Kasab opened fire and killed many people ruthlessly. Remembering his sister, Irfan painfully asserts, “Yes, she was dead. Appi is dead...Appi will always be dead but Uma is alive. And I am alive... No one else has to die.” (p. 135) Even after a period of five years, Irfan is not able to accept the fact that his sister is no more; he misses her immeasurably.

Irfan receives the news of MitaAunty’s (Rishi’s mother) suicide on 16December 2014. She took her own life. He remembers how he hated Rishi’s dad for the way he treated her- beat her black & blue and insulted her. Irfan was always close to Mita Aunty; he wanted to tell her that he missed her, missed cooking with her and missed listening to music with her. He wanted to tell her that Rishi turned out to be such a bastard like his dad. “Nothing like Mita Aunty.” (p. 129) Rishi grew up seeing his father ill-treating his mother, so he too adopted the similar kind of violent behaviour as he surpassed his childhood and turned a teenager.

Rishi’s Revelation about Uma’s Photo

Rishi reveals the secret to Uma about her photo that was circulated in WhatsApp group among school mates. He admits that it was he who did it. He knew Irfan’s passwords. So, he got a fake SIM card and did it. Uma is deeply hurt and asks Rishi why he did that. He tells her that he “was jealous because you still loved Irfan and I wanted you to get over him...And my mom loved Irfan too! I really started hating him and wanted to see him suffer.” (p. 137) Rishi tries all possible ways to push Uma away from Irfan but fails miserably in his attempt to do so. Uma does not hate Irfan even though she finds him getting weirder day by day.

Through the portrayal of Rishi's character, Himanjali Sankar brings forth the idea that marital violence and discrepant relations between parents adversely affect the inner self of children. As these children grow into adults, they become callous, insensitive, and tempestuous; they prove detrimental not only to others, but also become self-destructive. They get completely disillusioned, disgruntled and disremember the very goal of their lives. These teenagers need assistance, compassion and love from their peers, elders, and parents in order that they take life in the right perspective and brighten up their future by their inventive genius and contribute to society by their exemplary deeds.

Uma's Final Meeting with Irfan

Uma meets Irfan after he is back from hospital. He opens his heart before Uma and admits that it all happened because his sister Appi had died in gruesome attack on Mumbai by the terrorists on 26/11/2008. After this incident, he had become dependent on Uma and he transferred his love for Appi to her. Since Uma broke-up with him, he lost Appi again. He became psychotic because he was unable to cope up with all. He used to write letters to Appi even though she was dead because it used to give him comfort.

Uma and Rishi knew about the death of Appi. They were a great support to Irfan till Uma broke up with him. After losing Uma, Irfan lost touch with reality, and remained in a fantasy world with his sister. He missed Uma immeasurably. Today, he wanted to tell Uma that he did not leak her photo, but it seemed unimportant, and she probably knew the fact. Talking about her break-up with Rishi, Uma says,

“Rishi hit me. Wham across the face. Just after we broke up...I thought of Rishi's dad hitting his mom and Rishi, all helpless and angry. I thought of Mita Aunty who is dead now. Rishi had problems, Irfan, big, serious problems.” (p. 140)

Parents play a pivotal role in the physical and mental development of children. Their cognitions, beliefs, thoughts, attitudes, conduct, and feelings influence the child's psyche, which he imitates in the process of growing up. Children who are exposed to violence learn

to resolve their disputes and dissensions in a violent manner. They become desensitized to the pain and distress of others. Such children face behavioural, psychological, and physical problems as they reach the stage of adulthood.

The Lies We Tell

All the three young adults – Irfan, Uma and Rishi are entwined by the blemish of speaking lies to one another. Irfan derives satisfaction of sharing his feelings with his dead sister Sanya whom he calls Appi by writing emails to her, which always remains on his laptop. After his break-up with Uma, he tries to create his own world devoid of Uma, but he longs for her companionship incessantly. Uma, after her break-up with Irfan, is always concerned about his wellbeing, though she is in relationship with his new boyfriend Rishi. Rishi considers Irfan as his competitor and makes all efforts to demean him by circulating photo of Uma on WhatsApp allegedly in Irfan's name. He speaks this lie to win Uma and drive her away from Irfan which he fails to do in the long run. In this way, "Despite all that has happened, despite all the malice, all the lying, it was just lies that we told each other and might continue to tell, all wrapped up in hurt and love. It was just that. It's what we do. It's the lies we tell." (p. 140)

According to Falconer,

"...in contemporary YA, violence, death, and the apocalypse have become the norm rather than exception...Young adult fiction has sought to articulate questions about rapid transitions, identity crises and epiphanies, it is proving to be a ready medium in which to capture the felt, everyday experience of a world on the cusp of fundamental change." (Falconer 89)

Conclusions

The Lies We Tell is a splendidly crafted and poignant novel for young adults that combines wide array of facets of life including romance, suspense, intrigue, love triangle, and anxiety. It

provides a compelling understanding of many pressures that young adults face in their day to day lives which their parents, teachers, and other adults are unable to decipher. The novel presents a tale of changing dynamics in relationships and its effects not only on teenagers involved but also on the adults associated with them. These teenagers with fragile mindset influenced by what they see, hear and experience; they make efforts to adjust with the complicated lives within nuclear families where everyone leads a separate life.

Himanjali Sankar has presented a tale of broken homes, broken hearts, and broken relationships of young adults in the novel. She has created a stimulating and invigorating plot with sneaky climax. She has effectively used the technique of screenshots of WhatsApp chats and emails to show communication between young adults. Written in lucid language, the novel grips the reader till the end on account of unpredictable twists and turns that are replete with intense human emotions.

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BIO-NOTE

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