



# PARANOIA AS A POSTMODERN CONDITION IN BLAKE NELSON'S *PARANOID PARK*

<sup>1</sup>Mrs. Vanmathi P, <sup>2</sup> Dr S Lavanya

<sup>1</sup>Assistant Professor in English, <sup>2</sup> Assistant Professor in English

<sup>1</sup>Department of English,

<sup>1</sup>PSGR Krishnammal College for Women, Coimbatore, Tamil Nādu, India

*Abstract* : Children's literature is an appreciation of children-related concerns in literature. Children's literature began to theorise various diverse issues like family disorientation, substance abuse, impact of divorce, sexual abuse, identity crisis and psychological trauma. These sensitive issues have become precise platforms of discussion in young adult literature. The novel chosen for study is Nelson Blake's *Paranoid Park*, which addresses lays explicit stress on paranoia. Paranoia is a postmodern condition which is characterized by traits like excessive imaginary fear, unwarranted hallucinations, psychological chaos, and mayhem of uncertainties. The unnamed narrator in the novel becomes representational of the postmodern condition.

*Index Terms* – Postmodernism, Paranoia, Young Adult Psyche, Mental Abuse, Physical Abuse

## INTRODUCTION

Children's books are body of works written for children, making stories as principle sources for instillation of values and virtues in them. To a great extent, it encompasses books that are written for young adults and also adults do enjoy children's books. As Kimberly Reynolds states in her *Children's Literature: A Very Short Introduction*, "the term 'children's literature'...is understood to refer to materials written to be read by children and young people, published by children's publishers" (17). Writers who are engaged in creating children's literature have produced literary works addressing the concerns of children and young adults on the grounds of entertainment and morality. Carrie Hintz and Eric L. Tribunella in their book, *Reading Children's Literature- A Critical Introduction* state this notion as, "Reading children's literature critically can reveal those cultural values and teach us about ourselves" (40).

However, approximately after 1960s, an array of critical investigations started revolving around children's literature when critical theories turned out to become frameworks to analyse the children's books. Ever since children's literature witnessed such inevitable shift, the domain of children's literature was explored and investigated based on varied critical parameters, even involving theoretical concepts like Freud's psychoanalysis and Foucault's postmodern precepts. With the emergence of new age genres like fan fiction, picture books, digital games and so on, children's literatures has surpassed the conventional formats. Thematically, young adult literature never refrained from accommodating concerns of complexities and real-

time issues like gender related issues, drug abuse, racism, psychological uncertainties, lesbian issues, transgender issues and so on by aligning with the changing socio-cultural setup. This transformative phase marks the contemporariness of children's literature.

The evolution of postmodern young adult literature as a sub-discipline is also one such feature. The term 'young adult' was coined precisely during 1960s with the incipience of Young Adult Library Service Association in America to promote and increase the readership of young adult fiction. Young adult fiction foregrounds the sensitivities and sensibilities of the young adults. With writers like Robert Cormier, Christopher Pike, Judy Blume, R L Stine, J K Rowling etc, young adult fiction became privileged with great deal of readership and popularity.

The postmodern phase of young adult fiction discusses issues like family disorientation, substance abuse, impact of divorce, sexual abuse, identity crisis, trauma so on and so forth. In her award winning book, *Radical Children's Literature*, Kimberly Reynolds terms such radical themes discussed in children's literature and young adult literature as "wild zone, within which the new forms of thinking and understanding the world are explored" (Cortez et al. 2).

## 1. Young Adult Fiction

As a subgenre of children's literature, the young adult literature assimilates complex psychological and social concerns. "Children's literature assiduously integrates complex themes and problematic realities" (Cortez 4). By exploring these dark zones, young adult fiction incorporates postmodern themes such as paranoia. Paranoia is a psychological condition of disorientation which causes undue and unwarranted creation of imaginary fears, insecurities, developing self-defensive propensity, turning highly sceptical, mistrust etc. Paranoia, as a postmodern condition expresses the psychological turmoil of the principal characters. Children undergoing stress become vulnerable over a period of time acquiring objectionable attributes during young adulthood as they refrain from being self-assertive.

The objective of this research paper is to study the theme of Paranoia as a postmodern condition in the novel *Paranoid Park* by Blake Nelson. Self- condemnation becomes one of the key features of the character who suffer from paranoia. Some of the other inevitable traits include self-deprivation, illusions, self-doubt, and so on. Virtues hold no significance to them as redemption becomes oblivious. The tormenting past of the characters leads them to troublesome present and hopeless future. The paper tries to address these issues of torments and intrigues of children and young adult within the postmodern domain.

Nelson conjures a tale of a young adult who gets engulfed by the bizarre changes in him due to witnessing an untoward accident. *Paranoid Park* discusses the dark side of an unnamed sixteen year old skateboarder. The narrator is a high school student. He is a skateboarder and is always fascinated by the park nearby named Paranoid Park where skateboard practice takes place. His friend and school senior, Jared Fitch, takes him to the park. One day, the narrator happens to visit the park in the absence of his friend when he gets acquainted with a set of youngsters. Though initially he could not connect with them, he manages to build acquaintance in due course. One among them is a boy named Scratch. The day ends up disastrous for the narrator as they are chased by the security during their trainhop. The security is run over by the train and the narrator gets psychologically traumatized as he witnesses the gruesome accident.

### 1.1 The Narrator

The post-accident period explores the narrator acquiring paranoiac attributes. Nelson's novel provides a vantage point to view the spectrum of young adult literature from a postmodern point of view. The novel is epistolary in structure. The chapters address an unnamed addressee: though initially unnamed but later is revealed as Macy McLaughlin, his close companion. The book seems to be a kind of confession that the narrator chooses to share with an intimate addressee. The confessions are true to the emotions of the narrator and he contemplates on the terrible days of his life which exemplifies his transformation as a paranoid.

## 2. Paranoia as a Central Theme

Paranoia, as a centralised concern of the text, transcends varied attributes such as manipulated self, disoriented mental patterns, illusions, anxiety, self condemnation etc. The narrator agonises himself with inescapable series of illusive and distressed thoughts. These are accompanied by contradicting behavioural changes and survival crisis. The novel is more about the paranoid quandaries of a young adult narrator. Throughout the novel, the narrator tries to extenuate the impact of the traumatic accident only to end up turning totally paranoid. Within the premise of paranoia, the territory of the novel profusely transcends various issues like survival uncertainty, self- deprivation, contradicting behavioural patterns, disorientation of

thoughts, illusions etc that the narrator undergoes. Nelson solidifies these issues by presenting a series of psychological perturbations of the narrator, who in due course becomes more vulnerable to paranoia.

There are instances in the novel that alludes to counterculture movement which becomes one of the prominent themes of postmodern literature. For example, the name of the skating ground is called Paranoid Park and the reference made to a skinhead, who was a kind of an outcast similar to the hippies. Similar kind of countercultural strain is exhibited by the gang at the paranoid park. The hippies are free-willed people, with no regards to seriousness and rather remain aligned to free-will ideology. Nelson goes on to describe them,

As I walked down, I could see the entire park spread before me. It was crowded on a Saturday night: rad skaters, hot chicks, people partying, goofing around, hanging out. I felt my heart pounding in my chest as I jumped down off the stairs. This wasn't some high-school beer party. This was a serious scene. (Nelson 6)

Such scene displays the countercultural spirit or rather postmodern condition.

The novel begins with an excerpt from the text itself to focus upon the psychological crisis of the narrator which happens to be the crux of the story. The narrator says, "I understood how extreme stress could drive your brain to impossible places... That's how people kill themselves." (3). The statement of the narrator exemplifies the dangers that one could encounter when affected by paranoia. The narrator calls himself a "maniac" (3).

The narrator exhibits contradicting behavioural patterns while completely taken over by the impact of the accident. Fear and insecurity pervade him. He states, "I wanted to run more than anything. But I couldn't. I had to stay cool. I had to act normal"(Nelson 29), but he is unable to do so. After witnessing the accident, his behaviour becomes disoriented. In the process of self- assessment the narrator switches between thoughts. He is in a dilemma whether to reveal the truth, or to confess to someone who could afford to save his life, or to remain silent thought the psychological turmoil is unbearable.

Paranoia, as a postmodern debate in literature, territorially covers a issues like survival crisis, disorientation of thoughts, psychological setbacks, self-degradation etc. These assorted tendencies are collectively attributed to paranoia, when included in children's literature brings about a hegemonic restructuring. It turns out to be a contemporary form or style of narrative in postmodern children's literature on a broader sense and postmodern young adult literature if particularized.

## 2.2 Postmodern Agitations

Nelson analyses in *Paranoid Park* the various levels on gradations of behavior and emotions of the young adult narrator. Right from naming the park to describing the appearances of the boys in the park as "borderline gutter punks" (Nelson 7). Paranoia is manifested to a greater extent when the narrator is psychologically affected due to the impact of the accident which never allows him at peace. He subjects himself to boundless psychological agitations by creating imaginary situations that could doom him.

When such crisis arises, the narrator wrestles with the unseen foes which are nothing but collection of imaginary fears or rather illusions. He cogitates his presence in the crime scene when he states, "with one wrong move, I have destroyed any chance I had for a normal existence (19)". The ineluctable error represents the paranoid condition of the narrator, caught within an inescapable chaotic web of memory. He also considers himself as a "dirty kid" (Nelson 20) sinking into endless illusive thoughts and fear. Off and on, he tries to get back to his senses while stabilising himself amidst disoriented and bewildering thoughts by telling "It was an accident, I reminded myself" (23). But at the same time he says, "I had to think clearly... My brain could have debates all night long. My body didn't care. My body wanted only one thing: to get the hell out of there" (21).

He turns susceptible more and more to such unwarranted paranoid thoughts. Frequent shift in thoughts occur. One moment, he decides to share this with someone close to him whereas the next minute he changes such idea. Subsequently, he resorts to admit his crime to police but then realising his life would be ruined, he withdraws. Likewise he is administered by his own paranoid fears where at one point of time, he lets himself confessing to 'God maybe', and later he says,

Then I started to cry. It happened suddenly, and once I started couldn't stop... After I'd cried for a long time, I started to talk. I don't know who I was talking to. God maybe. I kept telling sorry... I asked why this had happened. What had I done to deserve this? (23)

The narrator feels a vacuum within as he lacks faith in God. In the process of figuring out all possible alternatives to save him, he ostensibly ends up claiming himself guilty. He decides that nothing could save him and he becomes a person of diminished mental capacities. As the plot goes on, the narrator tries to connect the past events with the present as he becomes inexplicably pervaded by paranoia. The narrator's

psyche becomes a collection of uncertainties exercising intense control over him and diffuses his sense of reality and he becomes disoriented. This distortion of totality leading to paranoia marks the narrator as the representative of postmodern condition.

In a brief scene with his father, the narrator tosses between two conversations: one with his father and the other within himself. While his father talks to him, a series of unwarranted thoughts runs parallel in his subconscious mind that tends to bewilder him throughout. This is again associated with a sub-condition of paranoia which is called TCO (Threat Control Override). TCO is a condition when an individual feel excessively threatened by external stimulus. The narrator is affected by TCO so he considers every person as his potential threat. He also believes that these people are capable of endangering his life, for example, the young men who saw him at the park, people who glimpsed at him after he absconded from the crime scene, the lady who accidentally hits against him on the way back home and so on. He tells, “No matter what I did, I had killed someone, There is no escaping that. Someone would tell me, someone would remember me, something would go wrong. And then the police would come” (Nelson 57). Consequently, he begins to deem every person as a sinner. By and large, he generalises the tendency of committing sin as a human condition itself.

He problematizes every moment, deeming himself helpless and hopeless by telling, “When you had real problem, there is nothing you could do” (33). This negotiation goes endless when he turns abnormal and disconnects from reality. He checks on television quite frequently to find if any murder news is reported. He feels psychologically incarcerated and reality becomes an unattainable entity for him. He becomes conscious of preserving the secret but in doing so, nevertheless, he also admits to himself at any given instance that the his psychological condition has becomes irresolvable. He says, “I don’t know how to be human. Everything I do is wrong, and everything else I do just makes it worse” (50). He deems himself as a socially unfit individual, neither able to admit the truth nor able to confront the consequences.

It becomes so obvious that he is psychologically degrading with no clue of redemption. He feels completely incapacitated. The notion of normal life becomes forbidden for him. Despite hoping off and on that the things would turn better, he only plunges into distortion simultaneously. He seems to be surrounded by a periphery all the time. He feels that he is under surveillance all the time. Mood swings and emotional shifts happen so rapidly that he is unable to resort to normalcy. Distrust disallows the revelation of truth. Obsession becomes a natural aftermath. He is unable to realise that he is on a self-destructive mode. He wishes to escape reality by recounting on his happy past.

### 3. Conclusion

A close reading of such texts reinforces how far children’s literature has changed over time. Children’s literature has traversed beyond the established premise as *Paranoid Park* deals with the complex psychological problem faced by the young adult protagonist. The young adult fiction has relatively increased in employing postmodern themes with the emergence of books like *Paranoid Park*.

Engagement with the paranoid narrative in young adult fiction facilitates profound scrutiny of contemporary issues that are closely associated with the younger generation. Not every young adult would get entrapped in such untoward incidents. But the way the young adults respond to such serious incidents represent the postmodern tendency. However, this novel reflects the increasing cases of psychological imbalance among young adults. As Kidd quotes from Courtney Weikle-Mills, “Children’s literature in this way is a literature of and for potential “majors” as well as a literature of and for minors, helping to transform young people from imaginary to actual citizens” (110). Books like this bring to limelight the untold miseries of the young adults so that they are understood in better perspective.

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