Poetics of the Teenager in Indian Millennial Fiction: Neel Mukherjee's *A Life Apart*, Anjali Joseph's *Saraswati Park*, and Aravind Adiga's *Selection Day*

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Abstract

One new feature of Indian millennial fiction is the emergence of adolescent protagonists. This may be explained either as a realistic reflection of a new subculture that is rapidly developing in Millennial India or as a metaphor for a society that has moved beyond the legacy of colonialism but is uncertain as to what path it should take next. Adolescents have always been present in Indian fiction, but their predicament was mostly considered as a passing phase. It is only after the turn of the millennium that adolescents have started to constitute a class. None of the adolescents described in these novels is able to foresee their future and they appear unwilling to move on into adulthood. The economic competition of liberal India is represented through stern parents who compel their children to work excessively hard to achieve success. Such is the case with Neel Mukherjee's and Aravind Adiga's novels. Another characteristic of adolescents of New India is that they often resort to "timepass", a kind of unproductive way to while away the time in apathy. These characteristics make the protagonists somewhat different from the teenagers described in earlier Indian novels; unlike their forefathers, their paths in life are not clearly defined, and yet they are heavily pressured to do better than the others. The characteristic open psyche of the adolescent suffers under these conditions of pressure and precarity. Furthermore, almost all the adolescents described in these three novels are gay, often in the process of coming to terms with their homosexuality, which enhances their instability in a homologating society. In the three novels here examined the adolescent subject is unable to grow into adulthood and perishes, either literally or metaphorically, as an over-demanding society annihilates his fragile Self.

Key-words: adolescence, Indian novel, New India, Aravind Adiga, Neel Mukherjee, Anjali Joseph.

Textus 3-2020, pp. 161-181

ISSN 1824-3967

1. Introduction. Teenagers in Indian Fiction

This article examines three novels that were published around the second decade of the present century: Neel Mukherjee's *A Life Apart* (2008, originally published in India as *Past Continuous*), Anjali Joseph's *Saraswati Park* (2010), and Aravind Adiga's *Selection Day* (2018). The former two are literary debuts, while *Selection Day* is Adiga's fourth novel; Adiga, however, published his first work in 2008 like Neel Mukherjee. They are all complex novels that deal with diverse issues and different points of view, but they all share some common features that justify comparison; their protagonists are all teenagers, come from the working- or lower-middle-class, live in metropolises, are all males, and all are gay. However, the three novels can be read from different perspectives, *A Life Apart* is also a novel about migration and dislocation (Beretta 2017), *Saraswati Park* is discussed by Dawson-Varughese (2013: 93-100) together with Raj Rao's *The Boyfriend* under the heading of Gay Literature – but has been hailed in reviews as a Mumbai novel (McDowell 2010; Rahim 2010) – while *Selection Day* could fit perfectly into Varughese's original category of Cricket Literature – "crick-lit" (Dawson-Varughese 2013: 41). Adolescence in these novels is not discussed as a theme; it rather works like a setting, a disadvantaged condition, which the novelists turn into a vantage point to observe contemporary India. Moreover, adolescence is not necessarily restricted to the teens, it may persist as a condition well beyond, as in *A Life Apart* and *Selection Day.*

Teen protagonists, though ever more frequent in millennial fiction, are not exactly new in Indian literature: starting with R.K. Narayan's *Swami and Friends*, there are a number of them, including the protagonists of *Bildungsromane* like Amitav Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines* ([1988] 2005), and to a certain extent even Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* (1982), which lingers at length on Saleem's teens. At the turn of the century, a few novels depicted the life of upper-class Indian teenagers in the eighties, probably drawing on the writers' personal remembrances. I am referring to novels like Ardashir Vakil's *Beach Boy* (1997), which deals with a precocious pre-teen boy from an affluent Parsi family in Bombay in the early seventies, or Chitra Divakaruni's *Sister of My Heart* (1999), which tells the story of two girls growing up in Calcutta in the eighties, and,

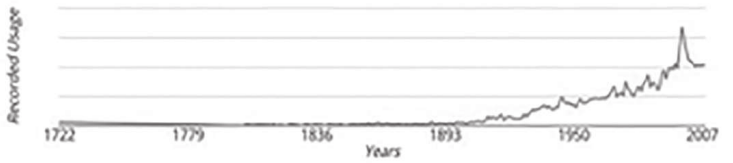
more recently, Abha Dawesar's erotic novel *Babyji* (2005), likewise set in 1990 at the time of the Mandal Commission, whose protagonist is an upper-class lesbian girl from Delhi. To these, we should also add at least one Hindi movie, the much-acclaimed *Rang de Basanti*, directed by Rakeysh Omprakash Mehra in 2007. The protagonists are five Delhi-based students who, unsure about their future, hang around idly until a director from the UK engages them to shoot a documentary on five Indian freedom fighters sentenced to death by the British. The contrast between the lives of the former nationalists and the present teenagers is so striking that the young men decide to change their lives and react against what they consider the present evil of India, namely corruption. Eventually, like their historical counterparts, they all die.

The novels here considered are different from the previous examples in that they do not seem to treat adolescence as a passing phase between childhood and adulthood, but rather as a kind of essential condition of the protagonists. *Bildungsromane* or biographies may consider some teenage problems, but they rather tend to ascribe them to immaturity (as in *Swami and Friends*), generational conflicts (as in A *Suitable Boy*), societal challenges (as in *The Shadow Lines*), or social realism (as in *Ravan and Eddie*) and to see them within the wider scope of the protagonists' life. The three novels that we are considering here are more like J.D. Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye* (1951), in that the protagonist suffers from the malaise of adolescence, and in that such predicament is understood as a permanent and inescapable condition[1]. I shall contend that these novels engage the issue of teenagers on two different levels – realistic and symbolic. At the realistic level, they register the emergence of a new social group and its malaise; at the symbolic level, they describe the liquid modernity of the subcontinent, a tormented and somewhat chaotic society, as a middle-class adolescent crushed between reality and expectations.

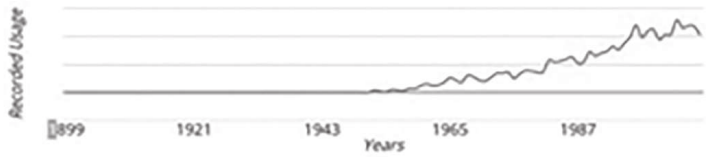
[1] Such interpretation is upheld, among others, by Bruce Brooks in his influential article "Holden at Sixteen", published by the *Horn Book Magazine* in 2004. http://archive.wikiwix.com/cache/index2.php?url=http%3A%2Farchive.hbook.com%2Fmagazine%2Farticles%2F2004%2Fmay04_brooks.asp accessed January 2020.

For millennia all those who did not die before would one day turn thirteen. And yet it is only in the twentieth century that people started becoming teenagers. According to the OED, the word "adolescent" in English was first used in the fifteenth century, but it was extremely rare until the second half of the XIX century. Likewise, the usage of the word "teenager", first recorded in the 1930s, soars after WW2, as we can see in fig. 1 taken from the Collins dictionary.

FIGURE 1
Use of "adolescent" and "teenager" time. From Collins online dictionary



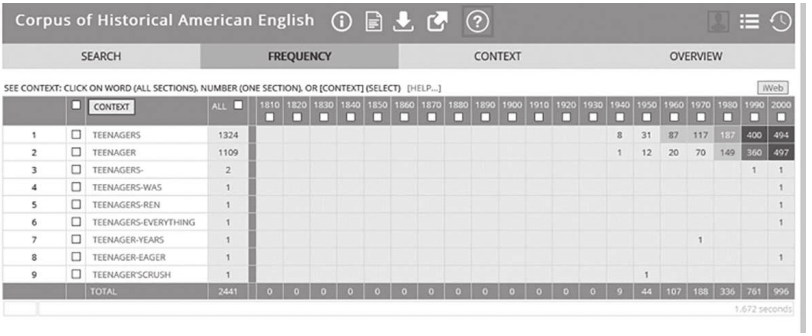
Adolescent



Teenager

The Corpus of Historical American English (unfortunately no such corpus is available for Indian English) shows that the word "teenager" is being used more and more frequently even in these last decades; the charts in Figure 2 reflect the attention that the category receives both in the media and, increasingly, in fiction.

FIGURE 2



	CONTEXT	ALL	1810	1820	1830	1840	1850	1860	1870	1880	1890	1900	1910	1920	1930	1940	1950	1960	1970	1980	1990	2000
1	TEENAGERS	1324														8	31	87	117	187	400	494
2	TEENAGER	1109														1	12	20	70	149	360	497
3	TEENAGERS-	2																			1	1
4	TEENAGERS-WAS	1																				1
5	TEENAGERS-REN	1																				1
6	TEENAGERS-EVERYTHING	1																				1
7	TEENAGER-YEARS	1																	1			
8	TEENAGER-EAGER	1																				1
9	TEENAGER'SCRUSH	1															1					
	TOTAL	2441	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	9	44	107	188	336	761	996

1.672 seconds

2. Adolescents in Contemporary India

In the novels examined here, adolescence is not to be considered literally as the teen age, but rather as a state of mind. Julia Kristeva defines adolescence as an "open psychic structure", a period of "dramatic restructuring of the self", connected with a "tremendous loosening of the superego" (Kristeva 1990: 8). The simple rules established by parents in one's infancy cease to be a valid and stable beacon, and the adolescent subjects must set out to establish their own. This age is characterised by a search for new love objects, which often triggers depression and compels one to seek solutions to it. Such solutions may sometimes verge on the pathological, like drugs or alcohol, or push one to extremities, like a political cause or a religious commitment. If one looks at the adolescents' anxious psychic structure from the viewpoint of stable adulthood, one will see it as a critical phase and therefore a temporary structure, but it does not necessarily seem so from the inside. Adolescents trapped inside this crisis will hardly foresee its ending and will rather consider it as their existential condition. This is another way of describing the difference between a biographical novel and a novel focussed on adolescence. The former will present the adolescent's open structure as a moment of crisis that is bound to be soon resolved, whereas the second will present the same structure as a predicament. As such, adolescence is also subject to be read metaphorically. This has often been the case, for instance, with Salinger's *Catcher*.

Like the US in the fifties, India is now on the verge of a major change. The country's economic boom has been underway for over twenty years now, but Indians themselves cannot anticipate where this is leading. Older societal structures, like castes, patriarchism, and religion, that have offered stability to the Indian society for centuries, appear to many increasingly obsolete, but it is not clear what, if anything, is going to replace them. The Western models of equality, wealth, and welfare may appear alluring to some, but undesirable to others, as they come with consumerism, materialism, and irreligion (to borrow a term often used by pundits). The liberal economic deregulation pursued in India since the nineties and the expansion of the urban middle-class have brought some strata of society unwittingly closer to Western models. Thus the recent upheaval of Sangh Parivar, and its political branch, the BJP – sanctioned by the election of Prime Minister Modi in 2014, who was confirmed for another term in 2019 – may be read as a failure of Indian progressives to show a viable alternative to the patriarchal order. Nor can Indian liberals really be blamed for it, as the societal change was not driven by any cultural transformation born within society, but rather by the external forces of a market economy and globalisation.

The comparatively high number of novels featuring adolescent protagonists in India, and not belonging to the young adult niche, may mirror a sense of rebellion or uneasiness, a phase in the history of Indian society that we may well term a collective "open psychological structure". In a different context, Hanna Arendt has discussed a similar condition in the essays collected under the title *Between Past and Future* (1968). In the preface, "The Gap between Past and Future", Arendt examines the plight of post-war French intellectuals and concludes that, paradoxically, from a psychological viewpoint they were better off during the occupation; they enjoyed a unique moment during those otherwise dark years when they were able to actually work for freedom. Intellectuals who "had never participated in the business of the Third Republic were sucked into politics as though with the force of a vacuum" (Arendt 1968: 8-9). The common enemy and the necessity to defend freedom had created a bond between culture and action that was previously unknown to that generation. Such moments, Arendt contends, come only seldom in history, as for example during the American or French

revolutions, or the Hungarian uprisings in 1956, when culture and politics felicitously come together. Arendt calls this contingency a "treasure". The Liberation put an end to that particular situation, and intellectuals were no longer required to work together to produce "the public space where freedom could appear" (Arendt 1968: 4). Indian intellectuals who wrote during the decades around decolonisation were arguably in the same position described by Arendt. The fight against the colonial legacy and English cultural denigration (Tiffin 1987) absorbed their energies and prompted them to imagine a free, just, equal, secular India. Writers such as Rabindranath Tagore, Raja Rao, Mulk Raj Anand, R.K. Narayan, Nayantara Sahgal, Satyajit Ray, Anita Desai, and Amitav Ghosh, in all their diversity, may all have criticised one or two features of modern India, but their narratives have cooperated in creating a sense of Indianness. The Indian modernity portrayed or envisaged through their protagonists may or may not be traditional, but it is almost always independent of Western influences. Twenty years after the turn of the millennium, Indian society has been independent for three generations and has undergone transformations that would have been inconceivable even twenty years ago. As long as the colonial mindset was still prevalent, or at least relevant, Indian intellectuals knew what their common target should be and were called to wed their speculations to a decolonising action; since the turn of the century, things have become blurred, as English colonialism has been replaced by neocolonial globalisation.

In the same essay, Arendt describes the contemporary Western intellectual as someone torn between the past and the future, unable to step back and contemplate the struggle between these two forces with detachment. If he only could step back to observe the interplay of the different forces, Arendt contends, he would create a "space for thought", from which he would be able to govern the struggle productively. In other words, intellectuals are pushed forward by history but fear losing their connection to the past, being rather wary of what the future has in store. This seems to be the position of several Indian intellectuals today[2]. If we metaphorically reduce

[2] Amartya Sen's *The Argumentative Indian*, Dipesh Chakrabarty's *Provincializing Europe*, Ashish Nandy's famous *Antisecularist Manifesto*, Amitav Ghosh's *Ibis Trilogy* may all be read as signs of this tug of war between past and present.

this historical position to the scale of individual life, we must equate the crisis with the typical predicament of the adolescent, caught in the melee of transformations and unable to view them critically. This condition may explain the interest of Indian novelists in the newly emerged class of teenagers. Indeed teenage or adolescence as we know it in the West is the product of an affluent society, where children may grow into adulthood without the need to work or start a family before their mid- or even late-twenties. Originally it was mostly an urban phenomenon, connected with school-going, that has later been extended to the countryside.

In India adolescent culture has been late in developing compared to the West. Four factors are likely to have slowed down the formation of a youth culture in the subcontinent: namely poverty, the caste system, a different attitude towards family obligations, which often lead to arranged marriages at an early age, and a general distrust in Western models. Poverty obliges people to leave school and take on adult responsibilities at an early age; the caste system lays down a clear pattern for one's life so that there is hardly an open period when one does not know what one will do when s/he comes of age. Extended families in India are organised as clans, whereby the wishes or aspirations of the individual are much less important than in the West. Even getting married for many boys does not entail leaving the family. Besides, arranged marriages, like the caste system, foreclose many life opportunities and aspirations and impact on the openness of the adolescent psyche. The wealthier Indian urban classes could have developed a teenager culture at an earlier stage, but for the mistrust of Western models. Upper classes in India have long educated their children in convent schools that brought Victorian pedagogy well into the twentieth century. The liberty that teenagers enjoyed in Western societies was often considered a symptom of decadence and a threat to the values of the patriarchal society (Breckenridge 1995) so that any autonomous youth culture was positively discouraged. Young men who did not need to work were sent to public schools, where they would "make men of them", while young women would stay at home. In particular, boarding schools, such as the famous Doon School, tend to create watertight groups and to organise every minute of the students' lives so that they can hardly develop a subculture of their own.

Ever since the inception of India's new economic model, when Manmohan Singh became Finance Minister in 1991, things have been changing and an increasingly large urbanised middle class has come to enjoy the affluence needed to aspire to a wealthier life, regardless of one's caste. Education is therefore considered the means to a better lifestyle. The ensuing number of students has fostered the development of a new adolescent culture and, with it, a sort of class consciousness – if that of teenagers can be called a class (Juluri 2002).

In 2010, the same year *Saraswati Park* came out, an English researcher, Craig Jeffrey, published a book that has been very popular with Indian sociologists ever since, the title is *Timepass: Youth, Class and the Politics of Waiting in India*. Jeffrey, a former PhD student in Meerut (UP), concentrates on students from two colleges who feel that education has failed to open up the new perspectives that it had promised. Thus, they live in the hope that eventually they will be able to get some government job or some other white-collar occupation. They believe that they have a right to get a government job because they passed their examinations, and they feel betrayed by the promises made by Indian educational institutions. As they wait, they are engaged in "timepass", an Indian word that the OED defines as "an activity or interest that serves to pass the time agreeably but unproductively; an idle distraction". As instances of timepass Jeffrey mentions political activism, social work, eve-teasing, tea-stall chatting (in Bengal it would be called adda)[3].

3. A Life Apart

Taken together, the three novels that we are considering here present the emergence of a teenage urban culture in India that had hardly existed or had been largely ignored in the past. Roughly speaking, there are two adolescent types in these novels, which correspond

[3] Indian literature has an illustrious predecessor of this kind of timepassing student in the character of Tridib from Amitav Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines* (1988), but his role as a mentor in that novel does not allow his adolescent qualities to stand out. In fact, Tridib was not considered by other characters as an adolescent, but rather as a young man. Indeed, the only real adolescent in *The Shadow Lines* is Ila, who has long lived in the West, where she has probably developed her teenage character, which is misconstrued if not overtly criticised even by the narrator.

to as many real-world counterparts. Firstly, those who are heavily pressured by their families to do well at school and get good jobs; they often have good family connections and eventually build successful careers. Secondly, those who are somehow less motivated, disappointed, and depressed by their inability to keep up with their own or their families' expectations. This is the increasingly large group of timepassers. Both situations contain some kind of malaise, which may even become extreme, as the case of the high rate of drug abuse and suicides below the age of thirty in India testifies (Vijayakumar 2010; Aggarwal 2015). Aravind Adiga, for instance, presenting his book in Edinburgh recently admitted:

> This story took five years to write and I don't write things like these unless they are viscerally connected with me. I wasn't particularly good at cricket when I was young, but I grew up in the old India, the one that existed before 1991, when we had a very limited socialist economy […]. Life was hard and ever since I was a child my mother told my brother and me that we had to do tremendously well in school, because we did not have enough money to pay for a medical college. She wanted us to be doctors. And it was not just good enough to do well in school, we had to be number one. Literally from the time I was three I was made to study every single evening of my life. […] I felt tremendously guilty if I missed any single evening of my study. (Aravind Adiga 2017: 33:00)

Less dramatically, Neel Mukherjee implicitly admitted a similar pressure as he confessed that after a while he had lost interest in his PhD on Spenser and would rather devote his energies to creative writing, but he first completed his PhD, "being a good Indian boy" (Vescovi 2019: 221). We have no information whatsoever about Anjali Joseph's teen years, except that she grew up in the UK.

The story of Ritwik Ghosh in Neel Mukherjee's *A Life Apart* brings together both pressure and timepass. The brief life of the protagonist spans over three phases: as a child in Calcutta (which is told in brief flashbacks), as a student in Oxford, and as an illegal migrant in London. When they were children, Ritwik and his brother were physically abused by their mother whenever their school records or their respective behaviours were anything but excellent. Ritwik recalls his mother with these words: "She ruled with an iron hand, like some furious goddess from the Hindu pantheon, quick to take offence and send down punishment. There was no woolliness

about her, no indulgence; it was tough love, love like the grip of a vice" (Mukherjee 2007: 114).

As a youngster, Ritwik took his mother's behaviour as fairly normal, partly because it is not particularly conspicuous in India, partly because neither Ritwik nor his brother were allowed to "waste" their time with their peers, and so they had no occasion to compare their family with others. In Calcutta, Bidisha-di was considered a model mother; everyone complimented her on her two well-disciplined children.

> Bidisha Ghosh was the proudest mother in Jadavpur. Not only were her two boys fair, which drew appreciative comments from neighbours – *Look at your boys, like two little sahibs* – but they also went to an English-medium school, cementing further the comparison with sahib. But above all, they were known to be the two most perfectly disciplined boys around (p. 114).

It is only when Ritwik is in England that he understands how his mother had crushed his childhood. An English friend at the college tells him about her experience in a charity for the prevention of child abuse, thus triggering the epiphanic moment when he, almost incredulous, reassesses all his previous life.

> Sarah continues, "We're now campaigning for the total ban of smacking in schools. Corporal punishment has long gone, we hope, but even the residue, such as smacking pupils, or children at home, is unacceptable."
> […] "Do parents not smack their children here occasionally?"
> […] "You mean disciplining children counts as child abuse? Isn't that a bit excessive?"
> "No, not at all. A child is a person with rights. Hitting her or him is an act of physical violence. It's unacceptable. Besides, there are extreme cases of child abuse that is not sexual. You'll be horrified to hear what some parents do to their children".
> *No I won't what do they do tell me tell me in graphic details tell me what they do*. (p. 113-114 original emphasis)

Ritwik's plea to know more is not morbid; he has come to a point when he wants to understand his own position. Later he will reflect on the word "abuse", considering the difference between cultures:

> "Abuse" for Ritwik has always meant the hurling of loud, angry, possibly filthy words at someone else – you can call someone a motherfucking

bastard and that would be abuse. But to have it upgraded like this, in the casual snap of two fingers, to his entire childhood, to his relationship with a mother who is not there anymore to answer questions or even to listen to him – no, that can't be right. And surely this has happened, more or less, to every child in India? (p. 254)

Left alone to confront his past, Ritwik develops his own (homo) sexuality in deviant ways, seeking casual sex with strangers in Oxford's public toilets. There is a passage in the novel where Ritwik positively owns that he does it in order to punish his mother.

At other times he just sits away the hours in his cubicle thinking, "What would you think if you saw me now? *This*, this stench of urine and disinfectant and cock, this is what I am, not what you wanted me to be". And he punishes her more by staying on another extra hour when he knows there won't be anyone else visiting the public toilets that night (p. 142).

Cottaging, besides its dangerous and deviant connotations, is a way to waste one's own precious time. The whole business is described at length in the novel as consisting of endless night hours in squalid cubicles waiting for someone to show up. It is this waste of time that constitutes an act of revenge on his mother rather than the actual casual sex with strangers, which Ritwik considers with a certain detachment. Cottaging is therefore a belated form of timepassing, whose main objective is to quash his mother's efforts at shaping him.

In the third stage of his life when he becomes an illegal migrant in the UK, Ritwik in a paroxysm of *cupio dissolvi* will prostitute himself in dangerous quarters of the metropolis, even when he does not want money. This is, however, also the time when he resorts to another, more sophisticated, way of timepassing, i.e. writing a novel. Ritwik, and his author with him, does something quite surprising for a postcolonial writer. He devotes himself to rewriting a canonical text by Tagore, *The Home and the World* (1916), focussing on the minor character of Miss Gilby, who is the only European in the whole novel. Chapters of Ritwik's book, which he never mentions to anyone, are interspersed in the main narrative, creating an interesting counterpoint[4]. Rewriting Tagore for a man of Bengali origin is almost

[4] About Ritwik's re-writing and its significance see Mukherjee's interview in Vescovi 2019.

an act of blasphemy; it means to go against his heritage, to challenge a cultural icon; the idea is even more provocative as he chooses a marginalised European character as his protagonist, while Tagore's novel is famously set at the time of the Swadeshi movement when all major Bengali intellectuals protested against the Partition of Bengal attempted by Lord Curzon in 1905.

It is clear that, despite his outstanding academic results, education as such, both in India and in the UK, fails to provide an emotionally satisfying life for Ritwik, who eventually resorts to different kinds of timepassing, living without any expectations, precisely like Miss Gilby in his nameless novel. By deliberately overstaying his student visa, he prolongs the position of psychical openness that is typical of adolescence and engages in dangerous activities to while away the time.

4. Sarswati Park

Saraswati Park shows another adolescent type, Ashish, who spends one year in Mumbai with his maternal uncle, Mohan mama; he has to resit the third year as an undergraduate due to poor attendance. The text describes college dynamics that must have been familiar to the author. Ashish and his friend Sunder (later his lover for a brief time) hang around tea stalls, read comics, play computer games, and "lay apathetically on the bed" (Joseph 2010: 96). Like Ritwik, Ashish also comes from a lower-middle-class family, which makes his relationship with the wealthier Sunder rather fraught. However, Ashish is not over-pressurised by his family so that he resorts to timepassing with natural simplicity and without quarrels with his parents, although his aunt once describes him as "feckless" (p. 14). He is conscious that his BA in English literature will not give him a lucrative job, besides he is rather uninterested in the classes and his mind keeps drifting away, thinking of what he will be doing next. In fact, it should be said that the few bits of classes that sneak into Ashish's head, and therefore into the book, appear rather dull as the teachers concentrate on the history of literature rather than on texts. "For next week read chapter three and four and look over the *Waste Land*" (p. 88) is the conclusion of one of the classes. This chimes with a remark in Craig Jeffrey's book *Modern India*, where he laments the poor level of many Indian undergraduate courses,

where students are not required to actually read the texts, but simply to learn by rote the answers to standard tests (Jeffrey 2017: 105). Thus, even though Ashish appears sensitive and intelligent on the whole, he cannot find either in himself or in the college the necessary motivations. As the narrator puts it "[h]e could run fast enough but lacked the will to win" (p. 84). On the whole, he is more interested in discovering his sexuality with Sunder than in reading the English canon. However, the liaison with Sunder is shortlived. When a servant enters their room without knocking and surprises the lovers half-naked, the two boys end up quarrelling: Sunder accuses Ashish of being interested in his money, to which Ashish responds by accusing Sunder of taking advantage of him because he is poorer. Apparently, their liaison had been a kind of timepassing too.

Later Ashish develops another relationship with his private tutor, who again is not his peer in terms of age and academic hierarchy. Professor Narayan's approach to literature is new to Ashish and far more fascinating than that of his teachers. Narayan engages his pupil in textual analysis and critical discussions. Once, showing a Shakespeare concordance, he expands on the polysemy of the word "nothing": "If you look up 'nothing', you'll find many of the other uses of the word in Shakespeare carry a similar double sense. As well as meaning nothing, the word seems to connote that very quality of metatheatricality, dramatic illusion. I've often thought,' he said, a little wistfully, a little proudly, 'of writing a book about Shakespeare's Nothing'" (p. 191)[5]. As we shall see, the choice of the word is hardly casual, since nihilism is one of the features of the novel. With professor Narayan Ashish learns a more sophisticated way of timepassing: they discuss Elizabethan theatre, philosophy, watch *nouvelle vague* films (*400 Blows* and *L'argent de poche*, explicitly mentioned, are possibly a reference to model adolescent stories), indulge in cooking, explore sex, in short address anything but the forthcoming exams. This romance also ends abruptly and, to Ashish, inexplicably as Narayan decides to cut short the relationship. At the end of the novel the protagonist, bound to leave for the US, is still

[5] In fact, in Elizabethan English the word nothing was used also as a slang for the female genitalia, but the author seems to ignore this less philosophical denotation. I thank my editor Rossella Ciocca for pointing this out to me.

looking back, crying over his lost love, and his eyes only dry after the plane takes off. The novel is thus entirely focussed on the one year that Ashish spends at his uncle's; but for the length, it could be called a short story. Ashish's last phone call to Narayan from the airport and his tears as the plane rolls along the runway show that his psyche has not developed yet, and he is not projected into the future. Throughout the novel, the protagonist never thinks of his future life in America, unlike his more mature friend Madhavi, who convinces him to leave.

5. Selection Day

Selection Day, Aravind Adiga's fourth novel, is set in Mumbai's cricket world. Cricket novels have become a relatively popular subgenre, according to Dawson-Varughese (2013), and an icon of the New India, especially after traditional Test cricket with its long matches and English connotation was supplanted by the more rapid Twenty20, whose matches last about three hours. These changes have made cricket more commercial and closer to the consumeristic needs of the new Indian middle-class; this in turn has made cricket a billionaire sport that attracts many young people. The Twenty20 cricket League is mostly followed on TV throughout the country, resembling baseball rather than old fashioned Test cricket, both in the spirit of the game and in its consumption by the public. In the novel, new cricket is a symbol of the shift from the English colonial cultural influence to the American/globalised neo-colonial one. The story revolves around two brothers from a Mumbai slum who are trained by their stern father to become cricket champions. The man, named Mohan Kumar, is relentless to the point of psychosis. He is convinced that he can make his children the next Sachin Tendulkar – the famous Mumbai cricketer who has become incredibly wealthy and famous despite his allegedly lowly family. Thus, the setting of the novel is not a school but a cricket club in Mumbai. The world of cricket mirrors the city: it is rich, competitive, and corrupt. Some boys use their proficiency at cricket as a steppingstone to college, but school reports are not important to Mohan Kumar, a petty chutney seller, who leaves nothing untried to foster his children's career; he offers special devotions to their family deity Kokke Subrahmanian – whom he promotes as the god of cricket – invents special diets,

isolates his children from their peers, especially girls, and forbids them to shave and to drive, which are, in his view, equally dangerous activities to a cricketer's body and focus. His educational success makes him a local celebrity.

> […] Mohan Kumar offered a few words of valedictory wisdom to the inhabitants of the Shastrinagar slum.
> 'Age sixteen to eighteen is the danger zone. Kambli and Sachin, *both* were talented. But only one became a legend. Why? Everything is falling to pieces in this country. Everything. Boys are taking drugs. Boys are driving cars. Boys are *shaving*.'
> Some of the neighbours had brought along their sons and their cricket bats for Mohan Kumar to bless: perhaps God's grace was contagious. (Adiga 2016: 69)

The comic absurdity of Mohan Kumar's views is only a slight amplification of opinions and methods actually used by abusive, forceful parents. Like Ritwik's mother in *A Life Apart*, also Mohan's self-esteem soars as he boasts of his educational methods; needless to say, he often beats his sons too. This may only happen because the whole society is permeated by the idea that children must be urged to succeed, no matter the cost. The two boys react to their parent's ambitions and expectations in different ways. Both brothers seem to comply with their father's wishes. However, for a sick joke of fate, Radha growing up develops a "balance shift problem", which becomes a blight on his future career, while his brother Manju might actually be selected to play for Mumbai, but he deliberately blows his chance as he prefers to study physics – which eventually he fails to do. Mohan Kumar at times seems to recognise this tragic irony of fate but refutes its implications. Once, for instance, he says to his elder son, "Did Lord Subramanya mix things up? Give one boy the talent and the other the desire? But no, these things do not happen to those who have trusted God, Radha. You will be selected today" (p. 239). Radha, however, is not selected.

Radha is a rather ordinary boy; he enjoys playing cricket and enjoys his success while it lasts, contravening his father's precepts in two points only, as he consumes junk food and dates Sofia, a rich and attractive girl from his school. His brother Manju is sensitive and "complex"; he is more attracted to physics than to cricket, and develops a confrontational stance especially thanks to Javed,

a wealthy school mate and a promising cricketer himself. Javed often comes up with slogans like "My life is not limited by your imagination" (p. 189) and seeks to persuade Manju to rebel against his father, quit cricket, and to go to college. Mostly, however, Javed is inscrutable, he writes love poems to Manju and claims that he does not really care for sport; still a certain competition between the two boys remains. Eventually, after a few twists in the plot, Manju will accept Javed's invitation to go and live at his place, abandoning the paternal home. The two boys spend some days together, but eventually Manju decides to leave his friend and go back to the only thing he can do, cricket.

Like Ritwik, also Radha, Manju, and Javed appear to seek a kind of annihilation. Radha, after being bowled out on selection day, decides to beat up any Muslim boy and randomly attacks a player for no reason other than give vent to his resentment towards his brother, and possibly his father. As a consequence, he is disqualified for life from cricket and wanted by the police, as he flees to his ancestral village. Manju, who could have been selected, refuses to go and play in front of the talent scout and remains with Javed instead, only to leave him a few days later. Javed decides to leave cricket altogether, symbolically emulating his elder brother who had taken his life a few years earlier. The selection day constitutes for these boys a sort of rite of passage, in which they all fail almost deliberately. In different and symmetric ways, the two brothers and Javed rebel against their fathers and their coach, i.e. the adult world, at the time when they should have come of age, thus prolonging their adolescence.

In the epilogue, "Eleven Years after Selection Day", we learn that Radha has been expelled for life from professional cricket because of his misbehaviour, while Manju has played in a minor role and is going to become a coach. Their now overtly detested father is almost completely paralysed, but he still tries to control their lives. After an accident eight years earlier, Radha now has a limp. It becomes apparent that Manju provides for him and that he is probably given to drinking. And yet the relationship between the brothers has not changed. Significantly, Manju is still a virgin, which suggests how he has not moved from his adolescent condition:

> Manju winced: he knew what was coming next. Radha would tease him for still being a virgin.

"Little brother, have you ever tried … *group* sex? Just wondering".
"Yes, big brother", Manju replied. "I once used *both* hands".
Radha Krishna Kumar resisted; but then gave up, and howled with laughter.
"Everything was wasted, Manju. Your balls *and* your brains".
They walked and limped as one body, Manju with his arm around Radha, beige holding on to blue. (p. 321)

Apart from Manju's wit, the exchange is significant in that it condemns the way their father brought them up and the unbearable expectations heaped on their shoulders as teenagers, even with the benefit of hindsight. The two men limping away together are a symbol of their inability to grow into complete adults. Manju has never grown up; in a sort of epiphany toward the end of the novel he realises that, after all, the only thing in which he has always excelled is a version of timepassing:

His excellence, his uniqueness, was not in cricket, not in batting, he had discovered – but in withdrawing. He could pull back from human beings like the ocean. *That* was his contract with God: Manjunath Kumar would never have to compromise with another person – man *or* woman – would never again have to do for him *or* her the things he had done for his father. […] Hadn't [Sofia] said, more than once – "You are the Einstein of being alone?" So let me retain my one excellence: let me *be* alone! (p. 323).

Such is the paradoxical plight of highly pressurised teenagers whose parents become their persecutors in order to fulfil a goal that only belongs to the previous generation. Adiga claims that there are dozens of such young men in cricket fields throughout India and very few of them will eventually make it into the cricket league. Most will fail, remaining without a Plan B to fall back on. When compared with the political stance assumed by a writer of the previous generation like Raj Rao in his acclaimed *The Boyfriend* (2004), even homosexuality in these novels appears more a metaphor for the difference between the protagonists' predicaments and their parents' expectations than a political act. Sex is more often than not indulged in as a way of timepassing, and homosexuality serves as a kind of objective correlative (possibly best understood by a western readership) for the struggle to find a place in a society that does not want you; being an adolescent is after all a queer position. The infamously difficult predicament of Indian homosexuals is used

here to highlight the plight of Indian teenagers, who struggle to be recognised as such; none of the love relationships formed in these novels appears to bring any joy to the people involved, as they are always laden with intrinsic tension, and none lasts to the end of the narrative.

6. Conclusion

The novels examined here stand out in that they picture adolescent protagonists that respond or fail to respond to the challenges of New India. The protagonists do not appear to change over time, although one is tempted to read the novels as *Bildungsromane*. Indeed, as Bakhtin suggests, the highest point of the *Bildungsroman* is the emergence of the hero, especially when this emergence is connected with the emergence of the "real historical time" (Bakhtin 1986: 24 ff). These three novels do make the present time emerge but, paradoxically, thwart the development of their respective "heroes". Or we can say that the emergence of the present hinders the development of the protagonists. Rather than speaking of an emerging hero then, one should speak of a self-annihilating hero. Annihilation is actually the only "development" in these novels. Ritwik seeks out dangerous situations in the poorer quarters of Oxford and London using lust to conceal his longing for death – hiding Thanatos with Eros; Ashish is often caught thinking of suicide, not necessarily when he is most dejected; Radha, Manju and Javed destroy their future as cricket professionals, each in a different way.

As Moretti (1987) maintains, the *Bildungsroman* often entails a kind of negotiation between the hero and society, the hero aims at "self-development and integration" (Moretti 1987: 19), whereby part of the *Bildung* consists in reaching maturity through a synthesis of these two opposite forces. In the novels that we have examined, there is no particular desire to belong to a society which is mostly considered as hostile – the protagonists claim that they enjoy being alone – nor is there a striving towards self-affirmation, since the protagonists cannot see clearly what their own self is or should be. On the contrary, they passively resist whatever society would make of them, and it is this resistance, whether played out as timepassing or self-annihilation, which keeps their psychic structures open and hinders their development.

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