

THE TWILIGHT SAGA : IMPACT OVER YOUNG MINDS

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Abstract:

As a child is encountered with stories, melodies and lullabies, he/she starts perceiving the world around him/her by seeing, listening, vocalizing and comprehending. As the child grows into an adolescent; books play a crucial role in development of critical thinking and perspective towards life. They enrich emotions and thus help in developing a psycho-socio perspective of life on the basis of what is read. Adolescence is an extremely crucial period of cognitive development as well as physical and emotional change. Along with the family and friends, a teenage mind is also influenced by external factors such as society, culture, books etc. Specifically books are a great medium for development of a healthy individual. Teenagers identify the characters and events of the books they read with their own acts, beliefs and emotions. The enormous success of the *Twilight* novel series has become a matter of serious debate among the critics about the impact and influence of the dark themed love story on the mind of teenagers. Though one cannot deny the massive reception the books have received but literary experts are more concerned about the underlying pessimism and negativity prevailing in the books.

Keywords:

Vampire, Abstinence, Twilight, Mormon, Feminism, Supernatural

Aims and Objectives:

Literary journals have been in Vogue since the mid 18th century. They have been instrumental to give a glimpse of the society and its culture. This article is a small attempt to draw attention towards the shifting taste and appetite for fiction reading among teenagers.

The 20th century witnessed a steep decline in the interest of adolescents towards reading novels; one certain reason for this is the gradual growth of social media applications and various online platforms. But the publication of Stephenie Meyer's *The Twilight Saga* was a breakthrough and an instant bestseller. Teenagers just drooled over the story of an attractive vampire falling in love with an average human teenage girl. This article focuses on the nature of novels which is as per the taste of today's young generation. They are fatigued with books aiming to teach morals. The success of

Twilight books have been tremendous, but they also raised concerns over affinity of youth towards the dark elements and how they long to have such experiences in real life if by identifying themselves with the characters portrayed.

Review of Literature:

Roshani Choksh, author of 'The Star Touched Queen' and 'The Gilded Wolves' (January 2019) writes about the power of the Twilight books on teen minds. According to her, Twilight is a celebration of emotions as well as the extreme teenage sensations, their first infatuations, adventures and self consciousness. However critics like Jodi McAlister, author of 'Valentine' and 'Iron Heart' heavily criticized the portrayal of the female protagonist for being so passive and being a damsel in distress, even incapable of deciding a correct future for herself and as a victim of patriarchy.

Literature has always been changing and evolving with the shifting literary trends and taste of the times. It is quite arduous to determine what appeals the readers the most, especially the teenagers. With the hectic lifestyles and complicated relationships around, the primary focus of modern literature is to act as a medium of solace and distraction from the surrounding realities. Fictions act as a refuge from the chaotic present world with unending worries and responsibilities. Readers create a world of their own where they can live all their dreams and fulfil all the desires without any inhibition and interference of the people around. The void in their hearts gets filled by what they read.

The modern literature unlike the classical literature doesn't always focus on portrayal of ideal characters depicting high virtues and morals. Lately fantasy drama novels have emerged as the new cult in teenage fiction writings. The humongous success and popularity of the Harry Potter as well as the Twilight series have ascertained this fact. The teens today are utterly fascinated towards the delusionary worlds of these fictions where they can temporarily escape from the present reality and get transported to the fantasy land of the novels. Though many authors have successfully tried their hands on teenage romance fantasy novels but since the release of Meyer's first novel, '*Twilight*' of the Twilight series in 2005, it has completely revolutionised this genre of fiction writing. This series has garnered huge fan base and topped bestselling books chart for consecutive weeks. In November 2011, the series had sold over 120 million copies worldwide with translations into almost 38 different languages all around the globe. The series has also set records as the biggest selling novels of 2008 on the *USA Today* Best-Selling Books list and

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have spent over 235 weeks on the *New York Times* Book Seller list for Children's Series Books.^[1]

The Twilight saga which is authored by Stephenie Meyer, an American writer, carries forward a complicated yet enthralling love story of a young girl and a vampire in four novels namely, *Twilight*, *New Moon*, *Eclipse* and *Breaking Dawn*. The novels were primarily meant for teenagers but even many adults have shown their liking towards the books. The response for the novels was such that the entire book series was adapted and released as five romance fantasy films grossing in billions and multiplied manifold to the fan base of the books. The film stars Kristen Stewart and Robert Pattinson, featured as Bella and Edward turned into worldwide celebrities overnight as the first movie *Twilight* hit the theatres. The series grossed over \$3.3 billion in worldwide receipts.

The four novels revolve around the life of 17 year old Bella Swan who decides to move from Phoenix, Arizona to live with her divorced father in the small town of Forks, Washington to give her mother a life of her own as she plans to get remarried and travel with her sportsman husband. Bella hates the small town and it's almost always damp climate and somehow tries to adjust in her new school. Her life takes a drastic turn when she meets the mysterious yet breathtakingly handsome Edward Cullen at school. She gets irresistibly attracted towards him and eventually they both fall in love with each other and then Bella discovers that Edward and his family are vampires though they live on animal blood rather than human blood against their nature. Though Bella could not keep herself away from Edward and endangers her life quite a few times to stay with him. Finally they both got married and Bella gives birth to a half human- half vampire baby. She almost loses her life in this process but somehow was saved by Edward, who bit her to inject his venom in her heart thus converting her too in a vampire.

Though the plot is quite simple and since its release has been constantly criticised by literary experts for its anti feministic point of view and poor writing style but the huge readership defies all the classical parameters set by the traditional novelists. The author has quite skilfully moulded the gothic characters from classic horror novels in a beautifully woven romantic plot with teenage worries, insecurities, dilemmas, abstinence and the battle between good and evil.

Since the release of Twilight books, the vampire craze in teen literature has multiplied manifold and this has resulted in several debates and arguments among literary critics.

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What causes a potentially serious situation is how the books impact the dynamics of teenage mind and thought process as they are its target audience. The teens today live in a complicated world where from a very tender age they are confronted with emotional and mental turmoil. In a conference held in Cambridge University, England on “How young-adult books and movies affect teenagers’ minds”, Professor Maria Nikolajeva says “We don’t know exactly how literature affects the brain, but we know that it does. Some new findings have identified spots in the brain that respond to literature and art. For young people, everything is so strange, and you cannot really say why you react to things- it’s a difficult period to be a human being.”^[2] Researchers and scientists believe that while teenagers are turning the pages of the books for romance and plot but there are certain other major takeaways also from the books which may cause long-lasting impact on the minds of the youth.

It is also said that the values propagated by the series are too conservative and by no means fit the modern world. The novels advocate the value of abstinence before marriage just in the traditional way. There is not a single description of explicit physical intimacy between Edward and Bella. However there is a hidden undercurrent of eroticism in the novels. Though Bella has quite often shown the desire of love-making but Edward clearly states that it is something he would agree to only after their marriage. Meyer, being a Mormon has strictly adhered to not include any vivid sexual description. But for the readers, the physical inclination both the protagonists feel for each other is contagious. The teenagers feel a hormone rush and are gripped into the pages. The anticipation of the first physical encounter between Bella and Edward rather than the actual description of the scene have successfully hooked the interest. Psychologists find this strong hold of the novel quite worrisome. Teenagers’ minds are more susceptible than adult minds to influence from peers and experiences as well as from books, movies and music. It processes information differently than a more mature brain. Brain imaging shows that teens are more likely to respond to situations emotionally and are less likely to consider consequences through rational forethought. What also compels us to think deeply about the impact of the novels is the position of women shown. Feminism is a prevalent concept in the modern world. Women today want to be treated at par with men with equal liberty and there have been movements and protests for uplifting the condition of women in the society. The series shows Bella being dependent on Edward for everything. This not only raises a question mark on a woman’s right to make her own choice but also disregard her position in society as an independent creature.

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Researchers have found that stories with dark themes affect the young minds, and this is the reason why teenagers are especially drawn to stories with vampires, zombies and other supernatural characters. In her speech Professor Nikolajeva further adds, "We all remember that teenage is a difficult period, full of contradictions- dark feelings one day, joyful feelings the next. The *Twilight* books are very much about this, about budding sexuality and not really knowing what you are. If young people read books where there is no hope at all, it's really damaging. We need to be aware of young people being influenced by what they read or watch and the games they play. It all plays a very important role." Youth literature must direct the young minds towards positivity and mould them in a constructive manner. There is a huge responsibility on the shoulders of teen writers to understand the psyche of the readers they are dealing with. Teenage mind is vulnerable to what they come in contact with. They get easily fascinated by the books they read and get influenced by them.

However, teenagers connect to *Twilight* in a level which surpasses all theories. They can actually connect to the characters especially that of Bella Swan, who is depicted as an average teenage girl with low self-esteem and a feeble personality. She is clumsy and accident prone. In the first novel, *Twilight*, Bella describes herself as, "*I'm absolutely ordinary- well, except for bad things like all the near-death experiences and being clumsy that I'm almost disabled.*"^[3] A young girl can easily imagine herself as Bella and empathize with her choices. Stephenie Meyer says in an interview, "*I left out a detailed description of Bella in the book so that the reader could more easily step into her shoes.*"^[4] So it becomes more thrilling when something incredible and magical happens with Bella. When the extraordinarily handsome Edward Cullen enters her life and finds her unique and completely irresistible as the smell of her blood appeals to him the most in centuries, the readers get enthralled. Bella's simplicity overcomes his bloodlust for her and she becomes the most exquisite thing in the entire world for him. He is willing to sacrifice anything in the world for her. Through the average Bella, a young reader can imagine that it's possible for something magical to happen to them also. Through this average everyday girl character, Meyer has succeeded in capturing the imagination of the readers. But what is of prime importance is- Is Bella an ideal character to look up to? Bella's love for Edward is eternal; she was always ready to even give up her life to be with him. She knew he is more than thousand times powerful than her but still craved for him physically. Bella quotes in *Breaking Dawn*, "*You could run from someone you feared, you could try to fight someone you hated. All my reactions were geared toward those kinds of killers- the monsters, the*

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enemies. When you loved the one who was killing you, it left you no options. How could you run, how could you fight, when doing so would hurt that beloved one? If your life was all you had to give your beloved, how could you not give it? If it was someone you truly loved?^[5] This self destructive love is not healthy. Also her character is quite passive; she doesn't have a judgement of her own. More than a lover, Edward protects her like a parent and decides what is good for her. When he leaves her in *Eclipse*, thinking it was the best way to protect her from him and his people, he imposed his decision in Bella without asking for her consent. This separation almost killed Bella. Literary critics find it anti-feminist. A modern woman today doesn't appreciate being controlled by anyone. They want to be treated as equals in love and not as submissive and loyal submissive beings.

Edward Cullen on the other hand is the lover every young girl desires and fears. The reader wants to be devoured by him. He is utterly beautiful yet intimidating. He is almost perfect in everything but what needed to be paid attention to is the reason why Edward in the first place got attracted towards Bella. It was the scent of her blood which caused him to notice her in the first place. As Edward tells Bella the first time he proclaims his love for her in *Twilight*, "To me, it was like you were some kind of demon, summoned straight from my personal hell to ruin me. The fragrance coming off your skin... I thought it would make me deranged that first day. In that one hour, I thought of a hundred different ways to lure you from the room with me, to get you alone. And I fought them each back, thinking of my family, what I could do to them. I had to run out, to get away before I could speak the words that would make you follow..."^[6] Bella appealed to Edward not because of her qualities or her personality in the first place. He wouldn't have even noticed her ever has it not been her mouth-watering smell which drove him insane with thirst. It took all his mental strength yielded from centuries of self control that he could resist himself. Since then he started to notice the otherwise insignificant Bella and gradually fell in love with Bella's goodness.

It is quite scary to imagine that the person you love has the highest probability to kill you in no time. Although Edward loves Bella to the core of his existence but he even tried to control her. In order to keep Bella safe he decides whom Bella should meet and takes most of the decisions if her life. This can be seen as a case of mental abuse. He finds Bella unable to decide the right and wrong for her and even keeps her at dark regarding many important matters of her life. Since the day Bella starts to hang out with Edward, she completely stops socializing and ignores all her friends, even her best friend Jacob. Several

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times Bella's father even advises her to have people in her life else than Edward. Edward's presence in Bella's life is kind of toxic. She doesn't have any privacy, even when she didn't know, Edward used to come through the window at night to gaze at her while she sleeps. Her entire life just revolves around him just like a planet orbiting the sun. It is selflessness to its extreme which is not at all healthy. Edward's over-protectiveness kept him from respecting Bella's personal boundaries and Bella's dependency on Edward prevented her in having a life of her own.

In a real life scenario, this kind of a relationship is not the epitome of eternal love instead it gives goose bumps to imagine a love story blossoming under constant threat that too from supernatural elements. Parents of teenagers and critics fear about the influence this novel series put on the individual personalities of young boys and girls. Their relationship is destructive because neither of them could live without the other one. The young girls found everything they secretly desire in the dark character of Edward and they fantasize him in real life. This is a very dangerous situation as real life cannot be correlated with fictions. Young adults do not just read fictions for entertainment instead their thoughts and behaviour get highly influenced by them. Therefore, the need of the hour is to direct their minds towards constructivism and positivity keeping in mind their delicate mental state and thereby, erasing the twilight of aberrations from the youth.

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