

Terrorism and the Loss of Childhood: A Study of Paro Anand's No Guns at My Son's Funeral

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Abstract

Children of today are growing up in a world in which terrorism in its many aspects has become a salient cultural phenomenon. So, the literature of today is morphing to reflect the truth of the world around us. No guns at My Son's Funeral by Paro Anand is one such book of Children's literature which does not paint a rosy picture of the world for children but picks up the mature and dark topic of terrorism. No guns at My Son's Funeral presents how an impressionable young boy is lured into becoming a terrorist. It brings to centre the issue of terrorism and its impact on the youth. The disoriented youth, being the most vulnerable section of the society is being exploited by the terror forces. The present research depicts how the youth undergo victimization due to terrorism and how the psyche of a young child is subjected to trauma and torture from every side and everyday of his life. Thus, the study reflects the scenario of the victimization of children by the terror groups and the process of making of a terrorist from a young impressionable mind.

KEYWORDS: Children's Literature, Terrorism, Victimization, Loss of Childhood.

Introduction

Media and television exposure of terrorist events throughout the world has increased during the past few years. Today, we are presented daily with news about terrorism—the dreadful acts of violent terrorist attacks around the world and the war of the world against such terrorism. Times today are darker than they were a couple of years ago. Children are growing up in a world in which terrorism in its many aspects has become a salient cultural phenomenon. The truth of the world around us is changing, and so the literature of today is morphing to reflect it. Teens want to read something that isn't a lie. They are open to talks, they understand and learn and most importantly they are adapting and adopting the global culture. The writer's of Young Adult Literature also want the teens to learn and know about how this society is going downhill with the generation of today facing serious threats of terrorism and bloodshed. They present the reality of the world heading in the direction of violence and destruction.

No guns at My Son's Funeral by Paro Anand is one such book where the line between truth and fiction becomes evidently porous. Paro Anand is known to be a fearless story teller who does not paint a rosy picture of the world for children but picks up mature and dark topics that need serious discussion. She takes up themes which are less common in children's literature and gives a glimpse of the stark realities of world today.

The novel is a fictional account born out the experience of Anand when she was in Baramullah, working with children on a project. The project went on to be one of its kind making Anand a proud world record holder for helping over 3000 children make the

World's Longest Newspaper (850 meters long) in 11 Indian states in 13 languages. The thought behind the project was to render voice to those children who do not have a platform to share their opinions and to empower young people to create their own literature and share their own stories. In the backdrop of the Kargil war, while working on this newspaper project in India's terror capital Kashmir, Anand realized from the writings of these young children that all they wanted was peace. None of the children there endorsed violence, either of army or of the terrorists and wanted only peace to prevail. It struck to Anand that their stories needed to be heard and this inspired her to write *No guns at My Son's Funeral* which presents how an impressionable young boy is lured into becoming a terrorist.

No Guns at My Son's Funeral initiates in a town of northern Kashmir known as Baramulla which has a significant population of Sikhs. It used to have many Kashmiri Pandits too. The narrative speaks of the time when terrorism and extremist activities are at the peak in this region. Anand introduces Aftab, a young teenager growing up in the valley, whose age is not clearly mentioned but from his prime interests in cricket, family and friends he seems to be a boy of about twelve or thirteen years of age. He lives with his father who is a school teacher by profession, his mother who is caring but suspicious, an elder sister – Shazia who is mature enough and good at persuading others, and a demanding younger brother. Theirs is a simple and modest middle class, peace loving family, living quite harmoniously with their Hindu and Sikh neighbours by their side.

Without any seeds of hatred or extremism the innocent and sinless young boys of the three families are good friends who enjoy playing cricket together. Aftab too faithfully pretends to be a regular next-door kid, a bubbly teenager but he is seen frequently sneaking off from games to join his secretive group of friends outside the knowledge of his family and regular friends. In fact he lives a dangerous dubious life because when it gets dark outside, Aftab mingles with the vultures of darkness who are the on a mission to exterminate peace from the valley under the pretext of sacrificing their life for a cause and make their living abode a hell.

Without wasting any time and pages in describing the various characters of the novel, Anand goes on to tell about the connection of Aftab with terrorists. The nights reveal the secrets of Aftab as he sneaks away successfully from his house to the hideout of his terrorist group. The group comprises of Akram who is a firangi probably an Afghani. He is the leader of the group, whom Aftab worships as his mentor. The personality of Akram is enchanting with his handsome appearance and exciting appeal. But deep down inside he is crafty, shrewd and deceitful who has a passion to kill. He says, “I kill because I love it!” (*No Guns at My Son's Funeral* 73). The other members of the group include Feroze who too is a Firangi, Javed and Imran who are Kashmiri. The group members consider themselves to be fighting for a cause, they think of themselves as freedom fighters but from the perspective of the civilized society they are terrorists. Away from the general public, in the midst of dark woods, the group involves into rigorous physical training and plans and plots for the future disruptive activities to shake the foundations of the stable order.

Terrorism and the Loss of Childhood

If there is any lesson that we can draw from the experience of the past decade, it is that the use of child soldiers is far more than a humanitarian concern; that its impact lasts far beyond the time of actual fighting; and that the scope of the problem vastly exceeds the numbers of children directly involved.

- Kofi Annan - former UN Secretary General (Singer 94)

As per the reports of the Israel Ministry of Foreign Affairs about The Exploitation of Children for Terrorist Purposes, “Terrorist organizations exploit the innocent appearance of children who do not arouse suspicion and can easily blend in among the crowds. Furthermore, the terrorist organizations view children and youths as the most convenient recruits for suicide bombing missions, since they are easily influenced” (The Exploitation of Children for Terrorist Purposes 2003). In *No Guns at My Son’s Funeral*, Anand here raises the same issue of luring young children to become terrorists.

Mia Bloom and John Horgan in their article *The Rise of the Child Terrorist: The Young Faces at the Frontlines* point out to the fact that, “Children are easier to indoctrinate and less likely to resist, since they do not yet fully understand their own mortality” (Bloom and Horgan 2015). In the narrative too we find that children like Aftab can be brainwashed easily because they are too innocent to differentiate between right and wrong. Aftab struggles a bit emotionally with his mother and father who hate violence, only hoping for peace in Kashmir. He also retorts his mother’s warnings who cautions him to stay away from these terrorist groups.

‘You just don’t understand.’ He faced her. ‘They’re not firangis, they are our own. They are our real brothers. They are helping us....’ (No Guns at My Son’s Funeral 17)¹

The report prepared for U.S. Department of Homeland Security, Science and Technology Directorate on *The Internet as a Terrorist Tool for Recruitment & Radicalization of Youth* states that “Terrorist groups are systematically preying upon the vulnerabilities of young persons in various contexts offering a range of incentives – from financial assistance, to familial-like bonds, to the promise of something exciting to do – that are intended to make membership in the group attractive” (The Internet as... 1). In the narrative too, Akram gains trust, establishes rapport and fulfills the emotional needs of Aftab, thereby gradually isolating him from his family and friends. Akram manipulates Aftab in such a way that he starts despising his father and cannot stand to listen a single word against Akram from his mother’s mouth. When Aftab receives a thrashing from his father he goes to the extent of saying, “‘My father,’ it came out in a seething, strangled whisper, ‘ I hate him.’” (NGSF 22).

According to Bloom and Horgan “Recruiting child soldiers also typically involves the use of force, kidnapping, or narcotics, whereas terrorist organizations employ a more gradual process of indoctrination, so that the children appear as willing participants.” (Bloom and Horgan 2015) Akram too employs a gradual process of indoctrination, so that Aftab willingly participates in his mission. At one point of time when Feroze takes

¹ **Note:** Hereafter in this paper, *No Guns at My Son’s Funeral* will be referred to as NGSF

side of Aftab and other boys telling that they are still too young to carry out the terrorist activities and that they were just kids playing at being heroes, Akram dismisses his views saying,

‘Nahin, Feroze, you’re wrong. One should never wait till these new recruits are old enough to start thinking for themselves. Then they lose courage, once they know what the dangers ahead of them are. You have to use them while their dreams are bigger than their knowledge. While they’re still hypnotized by its romance, by the likes of you and me.’ (NGSF 8-9)

Thus these terrorists are indeed cunning and very well know how to beat and mould the iron while it’s still hot. Thomas Koruth Samuel in his research about *The Lure Of Youth Into Terrorism* notes that,

The reality is that while terrorist groups have extensive hard power, they also have considerable soft power, which they have proved to be adept in using. In turbulent times, these groups attract youths by exploiting their vulnerabilities and providing them with a sense of identity, belonging and cohesiveness. Over a period of time, in a troubled environment, these youth begins to define their identity with that of the group and its struggle. (Samuel 2016).

When disturbed Aftab complains to Akram about the behavior of his parents’, Akram reveals his soft side and exchanges an emotional dialogue with Aftab to gain his confidence. He also shares the history of Feroze with Aftab just to make Aftab feel special. He urges Aftab to be his close ally, someone whom he can depend on when the time comes. Thus Akram uses the situation to his advantage and succeeds in gaining complete control over Aftab. “Akram looked into the boy’s eyes, seriously assessing him. He liked what he saw – an honesty, an integrity. An unquestioning innocence. An innocence he could use. Now and later. An innocence that was like clay in his hands. He would mould it now....”(NGSF 23-24).

Israel Ministry of Foreign Affairs in their findings on *The Exploitation of Children for Terrorist Purpose* observes that, “Children are indoctrinated with extreme Islamic ideas, calling for support and encouragement of the Jihad. At the camps, the children are taught about the history of Islam, and pictures of martyrs are hung in every place” (*The Exploitation of Children for Terrorist Purposes* 2003). In the narrative too, Akram eventually succeeds in shifting the moral viewpoint of Aftab. Also Aftab is so much influenced by Akram that he uses the teachings and preaching’s of Akram even to fool his own mother. At one point of time when Aftab’s mother is angry with him and chides him for his long disappearances, he uses the tactics taught by Akram to gain the trust of his mother.

But for now, he knew he had to win his mother’s trust back. He knew how to do it, he knew her soft spots. Always look for your enemy’s soft spots, vulnerabilities, Akram taught them, time and time again. He’d also impressed upon him that anyone who was not with ‘the cause’ was an enemy. Even if it was Ammi you were thinking about. If only Akram could see him now. He’d be proud, his Akram Bhai.(NSGF 12-13)

Also when Aftab receives a good trashing from his angry father for going out of the house at nights, he uses the situation to his advantage. The severe blows of the father leave Aftab's body slap-sored and painful, and the mother feels sorry for chiding Aftab which led to such a scene. Aftab definitely finds comfort in the warmth of her mother's arm after the thrashing episode of his father, but still he exploits this opportunity to gain all the sympathy of his mother and leaves her feeling guilty as taught by Akram. " 'I'm sorry,' she whispered into his hair, cradling him now. He bit back on the, 'I'm sorry too,' that arose in his throat. Akram had taught him how to use just such a moment well. 'Turn your opponent's weakness to your advantage, your weapon,' he had said. He turned his mother's guilt to his own advantage now" (NGSF15-16).

Terrorists know that employing children for their mission is more fruitful as children are less suspicious and can go to any extent to prove their loyalties. Terrorists draw young children into terrorism with the messages of power and determination. Teenagers are especially susceptible because of the life style changes they are going through. They look for coherence and clarity and a clear-cut ideology is of great appeal to them. In the narrative Aftab is highly intoxicated under Akram's spell and does exactly as ordered, despite of warnings from his family and friends who merely suspect him of falling into bad company of friends who might be terrorists.

The incidents of terrorism, as pointed out by Thomas Koruth Samuel confirm the fact that the employment of child terrorists in carrying out attacks is on an increase. He reports,

In the Mumbai attacks which took place in 2008 leaving 165 civilians and security personnel dead, it was observed that these attacks were a series of ten coordinated attacks orchestrated by ten individuals. But what was most chilling about these attacks was the common thread that bound them together – they were all young. Besides the eldest terrorist, Nazir/Abu Umer who was 28 years old, the average age of the other nine terrorists was only 23 years. The leader, Ismail Khan was just 25 years old. (Samuel 2016).

Here in the novel Aftab is even younger and is not more than fifteen years old.

It is seen that deliberate and structured strategies are planned by terrorists to radicalize and recruit young people to resort to acts of violence. In today's fast growing technological world, the use of Internet and social Media has played a significant role in aiding terrorist groups to contact and mobilize youth. As discussed by Samuel "When there are few opportunities to break out of the cycle of poverty, perceived or real, injustice and despair, there is a greater tolerance for violence. Terrorists groups have used these circumstances to their advantage by identifying and offering youths what they are lacking or by even offering them a 'way out' of their situation through martyrdom"(Samuel 2016).

The situations of insurgency and instability in an area are also responsible for terrorist's acts. The children inhabiting such areas of are more prone to getting involved in acts of violence. Thomas Koruth Samuel reflects,

This coupled with the fact that the opportunistic strategy of the terrorists of preying on vulnerable and susceptible youths has borne tremendous fruit in communities where there is a real or perceived injustice. Hence, these groups are not looked upon as perpetrators of

violence but rather as fighters struggling against a tyrannical enemy. Against this backdrop, it is perhaps understandable why youths that do join such groups are perceived to be heroic and courageous – a narrative that is actively constructed, propagated and disseminated by terrorist groups. (Samuel 2016)

Here, Akram teaches the young Kashmiri boys like Aftab, Imran and Javed the differences between the inhabitants of their city, differences which Aftab had missed so far, as he was very close to Angad and his other friends who belonged to different religions. But Akram taught Aftab that there was a need to defend the Valley from the enemies, the army, who are oppressing the people and bleeding the nation. After this kind of brainwashing from Akram, Aftab scoffs at his parents' ideas of peace and security in the valley. He clearly is so much stirred by Akram's influence that he becomes firm in his conviction that peace and freedom in the valley can be only achieved through violence and one has to fight the tyranny of the armies to bring change.

Fanatics use the innocent children as robots to carry out their extremist plans. According to Thomas Koruth Samuel "preaching a skewed and misconstrued interpretation of a religion have the potential to capture the hearts, minds and imaginations of the young people. In most cases, recruiters would identify and target the more promising youth and pull them into a smaller setting where a more comprehensive indoctrination programme would be undertaken"(Samuel 2016). Thus terrorists with a charismatic personality and a hardcore narrow mindset manipulate children to believe that they are actually struggling for a noble and worthy cause. Here too Akram is portrayed as a rebel who pines to destroy everything and everyone who does not worship Islam. Akram is a perfect villain who is shrewd, cunning, fierce, cruel, deceptive and enigmatic at the same time. He is the epitome of a perfect terrorist leader who has mastery over manipulating the mindset and emotions of young children to his advantage. "Akram, whom Aftab admired like the older brother he didn't have, but longed for. Akram, so handsome, so tall, so sure of himself. So brave. Akram, who wore his battle scars like medals" (NGSF 3).

The hearts of the children are filled not only with hatred, but they are also tempted with the aspirations to win reputation, name and individuality. Samuel maintains,

Against this backdrop, it is perhaps understandable why youths that do join such groups are perceived to be heroic and courageous – a narrative that is actively constructed, propagated and disseminated by terrorist groups. It is also significant to note, that poverty and despair are not the only factors that draw youths into extremist groups. Membership into such groups also provide youths with a sense of identity, prestige or pride, acceptance, responsibility, outlets for frustration and excitement which appeal to all youths, regardless of economic or social status. (Samuel 2016)

Even Aftab is enticed to join the group because he pictures Akram as his hero and role model and aspires to be like Akram. "The meeting continued. The plotting, the planning. Aftab loved it all. He felt like a big hero in films. Like Hrithik Roshan in Fiza. He could easily picture Akram in that role. Cloaked in black, green eyes blazing out at those who hurt him. AK-47 in his powerful arms"(NGSF 5).

The impulse for thrill and excitement in life are triggered into the hearts of young children and they are exposed to the world of weapons. Israel Ministry of Foreign Affairs points out that “At the camps, the children are subject to incitement, and are trained to use weapons”(The Exploitation of Children for Terrorist Purposes 2003). Here through the history of Aftab’s meeting with Akram we realize that these innocent children are trapped into the clutches of these terrorists as they lure them by painting a glorious picture of thrilling and exciting life away from the monotony and boredom of day to day activities. “Akram who showed him the most amazing weapons, gave him money whenever he needed it and most of all, brought excitement into the life that had been dull till now”(NGSF157).

The allurements of attaining paradise through sacrifice is another reason crafted by the terrorist to entice young children. Israel Ministry of Foreign Affairs notes that, “The terrorist organizations uproot the children from their homes and families. Resorting to brainwashing and religious indoctrination, they incite the children to carry out terrorist attacks. The children are persuaded that if they do so, they will be granted paradise in the hereafter” (The Exploitation of Children for Terrorist Purposes 2003). Akram too with his charming personality convinced Aftab and emotionally lured him that he would be blessed with Jannat (heaven) as a reward for his loyalty and martyrdom. Aftab is attracted to getting a chance to fight as he is encouraged to think that he is fighting for greater good. His name will be remembered as a freedom fighter who sacrificed his life fighting for a cause and that he would receive the blessings of Allah for defending his cause.

Conclusion:

Thus, the narrative has the issue of terrorism at its centre which is less common in children’s literature. The young boy Aftab, a young teenager bubbling with energy and adventure undergoes victimization due to terrorism. He is lured to become a terrorist. He is indoctrinated with the ideas of martyrdom and sacrifice by the terrorist Akram and thus falls prey to suicide bombing. We find terrorists exploiting the child protagonist by manipulating and isolating him from their family and friends. The terrorist Akram gains trust, establishes rapport and fulfills the emotional needs of Aftab, in such a way that he cannot stand to listen a single word against Akram from his mother’s mouth. When disturbed Aftab, complains to Akram about the behavior of his parents’, Akram reveals his soft side and exchanges an emotional dialogue with Aftab to gain his confidence. He eventually succeeds in shifting Aftab’s moral viewpoint to gain a complete control over him. Aftab is so much influenced by Akram that he uses the tactics taught by Akram to gain the trust of his mother and fool her. Thus, the brainwashing by the terrorist leads the child to scoff at his parents ideas of peace and security in the valley and consider anyone against the ‘cause’ as his enemy.

The devastating effects of terrorism is seen in the narrative as the psyche of the child is affected which result in many behavioral changes. A psychological complexity and emotional tumult is experienced by Aftab. Due to his connections with the terrorists, Aftab loses the innocence of childhood and remains in a world surrounded by worries and violence. He experiences an emotional breakdown and the inner turmoil within him reaches its peak in the final scene. He is so much traumatized on seeing the dead body of his heroic mentor Akram, that without any second thoughts, in a fit of rage and emotions,

he presses the button to explode the bomb in his bag killing hundreds of people in the market place including himself.

The disoriented youth, being the most vulnerable section of the society is being exploited by the terror forces. The psyche of a young child is subjected to trauma and torture from every side and everyday of his life. The study thus not only addresses the problem of victimization of children by the terror groups and the process of making of a terrorist from a young impressionable mind but also poses complex questions that compel us to think about the ongoing violence and conditions that prevent society from resolving its own problems.

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