

Book Review-2

Title of the Book: Coming of Age (Novel)/
Author: Palash Sharma/ Publisher: Yking Books, Jaipur/2024/Price : Rs.575

Between Silence and Selfhood: A Review of *Coming of Age* – N.Suman Shelly

Coming of Age (2024) by Palash Sharma is an introspective literary effort that seeks to capture the fragile and often unspoken transitions between childhood and adolescence. It may not revolutionize the coming-of-age genre, but it offers sincerity, nostalgia, and emotional resonance. Free from the cynicism that often clouds adult fiction, the novel leans deeply into the emotional palette of a young mind trying to make sense of both internal and external worlds. There is fluidity between perception and reflection in the protagonist's voice, an oscillation between innocent curiosity and a maturing sense of emotional complexity. At its heart, the novel grapples with identity, emotional vulnerability, and the yearning for connection. Rather than rely on external drama, Sharma anchors the story in the protagonist's internal world that is an often turbulent place where affection, insecurity, curiosity, and confusion coexist. The treatment of themes like infatuation and self-discovery is handled with restraint, allowing the reader to relive their own adolescent introspections without being manipulated by sentimentality. The protagonist doesn't arrive at clarity in linear ways; instead, his growth is marked by hesitation, regression, and ambivalence reflecting how most of us actually grow up. Sharma employs a minimalist structure: short chapters, focused reflections, and a prose style that eschews flamboyance in favor of sincerity. This choice aligns with the book's tone but also risks monotony in parts where introspection outweighs narrative momentum. Dialogue, where it appears, feels raw and unfiltered, like excerpts from a personal



journal. This builds an atmosphere of intimacy, though it may leave readers who seek intricate plots or expansive world-building feeling undernourished.

The central character Aarav Sharma (probably a version of the author) is rendered with care. His vulnerability, mistakes, and longing feel authentic. However, secondary characters tend to orbit around him without much independent development. Relationships are explored more like ideas or feelings about people than flesh-and-blood interactions. This could be a deliberate stylistic choice, mirroring the self-centered nature of adolescence, where the world is discovered largely through the self. In its focus on a protagonist more attuned to inner conflict than outward rebellion, *Coming of Age* finds resonance with J.D. Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye* (1951). Like Holden Caulfield, Aarav moves through a world that feels emotionally unauthentic, clinging to fragments of clarity—his badminton court, academic excellence while quietly observing the disarray around him. But unlike Holden, who lashes out, Aarav turns inward, reflecting an introversion that defines much of Generation Alpha's emotional texture.

Aarav Sharma is introduced not through action but reflection. He is a boy adrift in a successful yet emotionally distant household, his introversion a quiet rebellion against the noise of societal expectations. What distinguishes Aarav is not that he is extraordinary, but that he is startlingly ordinary and that ordinariness becomes Sharma's subject. In Aarav's silence and inner monologue, Sharma finds an emotional reality rarely treated with seriousness in fiction aimed at young readers. Aarav's passion for badminton becomes more than a sport; it is the only domain where clarity and discipline anchor him, contrasting sharply with the moral and emotional ambiguity he faces elsewhere. His love for badminton isn't just a character trait, it is a cultural marker. In India, badminton is not just a sport but a growing national passion. Aarav's daily ritual of reaching the court at 8 AM becomes a quiet rebellion against adolescent uncertainty. Sharma uses a relatable and contemporary pop-cultural motif to develop a uniquely personal narrative arc, reflecting both ambition and avoidance.

As the title suggests, the central preoccupation is with growth that is not only biological or psychological, but existential, echoing the internal confusion of someone “unaware of everything” as the text itself admits. Sharma’s occasionally stream-of-consciousness narration recalls James Joyce’s *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (1916), where Stephen Dedalus’ journey toward intellectual and spiritual independence unfolds in elliptical prose. Readers are less concerned with what happens and more invested in how it feels. Aarav’s inner life marked by anomie, self-awareness, and reluctance to conform echoes this classic literary interiority.

The novel subtly raises questions about identity, purpose, and how we construct our sense of self amid a rapidly shifting social world. Particularly notable is the author’s focus on the “Alpha generation”, an emerging demographic rarely depicted with depth in fiction. Sharma doesn’t lecture; he listens through his characters, presenting their fragmented awareness as both limitation and authenticity. The exploration of first love, friendship, self-doubt, and familial expectation comes across with tenderness and truth. In some moments, the narrative edges toward the sentimental, but this is forgivable in a debut that dares to be vulnerable. What may appear to some as structural looseness is a strength: the book resists plot-driven formulas in favor of character depth. Aarav’s relationships with his parents, ambition, and aspirations are touched upon gently, with an observational eye rather than a moralizing voice. Even Jamaica Kincaid’s *Annie John* (1985), though written from a distinct cultural standpoint, parallels Sharma’s treatment of adolescence as a psychological crisis. Both Aarav and Annie grow increasingly detached from their parents, experiencing a quiet, aching drift away from the familiar without necessarily knowing where they’re headed.

What distinguishes *Coming of Age* is not just its thematic alignment with literary forebears, but its cultural anchoring in contemporary urban India. Sharma situates Aarav’s emotional turmoil in the affluent yet emotionally distant environment of a successful family in Ahmedabad, a milieu rarely explored with such psychological honesty. Aarav’s relationship with his parents is marked by absence more than abuse, by

distance more than dysfunction. This emotional shading is one of the book's quiet strengths. The prose, particularly in the opening chapter, leans lyrical and abstract, with a philosophical tone. The idea of a "meaningless pause" becoming the gateway to existential self-examination signals Sharma's literary ambition. It marks a shift from event-driven stories in Indian fiction toward something more introspective. Set against a flourishing upper-middle-class Gujarati household, the novel captures both material abundance and emotional austerity. Ahmedabad is not merely a setting in *Coming of Age*, it is rather a character. The state, known for its entrepreneurial spirit and conservatism, provides the perfect contradiction for Aarav's internal world that is externally prosperous, inwardly adrift. His father is a successful businessman; the lifestyle exudes affluence. But within this surface lies a deep existential pause, a theme Sharma establishes from the first paragraph. The "pause" where time suspends itself evokes the spiritual dissonance of a youth lost between ambition and identity. In a society that prioritizes visible success, Aarav's introspective nature stands in quiet rebellion. Sharma's narrative joins a tradition of novels exploring disaffection and identity. Aarav, like Holden Caulfield, is detached and skeptical. Yet, unlike Holden's rebellious voice, Aarav internalizes more than he vocalizes. This silent sensitivity also evokes Haruki Murakami's *Norwegian Wood* (1987), where characters drift with a sense of longing. Aarav is at once ordinary and profound: a rank-holder, a sports enthusiast, a boy grappling with the intangible weight of meaninglessness. The philosophical tone where emptiness becomes self-inquiry is ambitious and echoes existential literature. Sharma dares to ask difficult questions and lets them remain unanswered.

The academic rigor Aarav endures—rank-holding, coaching decisions and planned futures is saturated with Indian middle-class realism. These pressures are presented not as dramatic conflicts but as quietly consuming forces. This grounding in reality aligns with narratives familiar to young Indian readers, like *Kota Factory* (2019) or *Chhichhore* (2019), while retaining literary depth. Aarav is surrounded by comfort but emotionally isolated. His silence mirrors the internalized loneliness many teenagers

experience. While the novel doesn't explicitly mention social media, it evokes the emotional numbness often associated with a hyper-networked world. Like *The Perks of Being a Wallflower* (1999), Sharma embraces the emotional texture of adolescence rather than sensationalizing it. What makes it striking is that Sharma filters these themes through a distinctly Indian and particularly Gujarati lens. It is neither performatively "modern" nor nostalgically "literary." Instead, it offers a hybrid form which is quiet, questioning, and human. It blends pop culture and personal storytelling, using contemporary influences as integral threads. Unlike Western examples where transformation comes through rebellion or romance, Aarav's journey is marked by inward questioning and subtle dissonance within privilege. The novel innovates by slowing adolescence down, holding it under a microscope, and allowing existential pause reminiscent of Camus' *The Stranger* (1942) to speak louder than events. Its setting in Ahmedabad is significant. Indian coming-of-age narratives are often rooted in the rural or hyper-urban, but Sharma offers contained domesticity. Alienation is not just a byproduct of dysfunction, but also of success.

The novel is structured in part through diary entries. This blends the personal with the socio-cultural since the diary doesn't just chart Aarav's feelings. It reflects the idioms he consumes such as movies, a heroic transformation arc, school culture, and academic pressure. In doing so, the epistolary mode becomes both subjective and subtly sociological. Aarav's entries are not the meditative recordings of classics like *The Sorrows of Young Werther* (1774). His introspections are mediated by cinematic and pop-cultural tropes. He writes, "I mean up my expectations. You know, in movies it happens like that. The hero after a tragic incident becomes the topper." (195) his shows how he scripts his anxieties through media. The ironic misalignment between expectation and reality is what T.S. Eliot envisioned: the artist mediating emotion and form. The epistolary form also reflects his desire to assert identity and be heard by adults (in this case, his parents), "I want to talk with you both more directly compared to this, just for once." (198) There is vulnerability here, a desire to be seen beyond school and expectations. Eliot's lines

from “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock” (1915) offer a parallel: “Do I dare / Disturb the universe?” Like Eliot’s protagonist, Aarav wrestles with voice and inarticulacy. One dream sequence describes his family at home, and then suddenly he is standing alone. It evokes separation. Freud posits that dreams reveal unresolved desires or anxieties. Aarav’s dream of being stuck and unable to engage as reflects a latent fear of abandonment. Freud exercises on it in his discussion of the *unconscious*. It symbolizes emotional dislocation. Bhaba’s concept of the “unhomely” where the familiar becomes uncanny, home becomes a site of estrangement. The repetition “that home, his home, their home, maybe” (138) mirrors Eliot’s style of fragmented selfhood. There is a sensory disturbance if Aarav’s dream is closely observed, “A strange smell was coming out from it (the bedsheet). He didn’t like the smell....” (138) which Julia Kristeva’s calls as a moment of abjection, where Aarav encounters something inassimilable, alien yet intimate i.e. his own unconscious.

Further, if we look at the interiority and the exteriority of the text, Kristeva suggests that every text operates at the threshold between the interior (subjectivity, unconscious drives, personal memory) and the exterior (language, ideology, history). In *Coming of Age*, Aarav’s deeply personal, introspective narrative embodies this liminality. His moments of existential stillness particularly the described “pause” where everything stops—represent a rupture in the symbolic order: a moment where the internal (his unvoiced trauma, confusion, identity formation) breaches the surface of normative, socially structured language. The text becomes a semiotic space in Kristeva’s terms, where the interior speaks through the cracks of the structured, exterior world of exams, badminton matches, and familial expectations. Sharma’s use of an urban, upper-middle-class Gujarati setting exemplifies textual exteriority—the socio-historical codes that the protagonist is always negotiating. Aarav’s father, the rigid expectations, and the unyielding structure of academic performance are expressions of the symbolic order, in psychoanalytic terms that tries to stabilize Aarav’s subjectivity. What is quietly radical in Sharma’s novel is that the interior never fully merges with the exterior. Aarav’s

identity is not “resolved” or “formed” by the end rather, the novel preserves the tension between inner becoming and outer containment, embodying Kristeva’s idea that the subject-in-process is always fragmented, fluid, and in dialogue with structures larger than itself.

The closing moments offer a resonant meditation on adolescent identity and authenticity, not through resolution but rupture. As Aarav and Kavya shout, “I AM CRAZYYYYY!!!” and “READY!!!!” the novel reaches a cathartic culmination. This is less about narrative closure than affective release. Their emotional eruptions dismantle pressures of coherence, embracing identity’s performative dimension. Kavya’s raised arms are symbolic gestures against conformity. Aarav’s final shout signals not a conclusion, but an opening. Coming of age is not a moment of realization, but an ongoing dialogue between chaos and clarity. The novel mirrors life’s own recursive structure: unfinished and constantly rewritten. Thus, *Coming of Age* becomes a space where the interiority of emotion collides with the exteriority of culture, refusing closure in favor of emotional honesty and open-ended becoming.

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