Shefalee Vasudev

Secrets of the Armoire

Coming of age is a visceral, once-in-a-lifetime moment that gets deeply inked in a private memoir

IN the fourth episode of the ongoing television drama *Buddha* on Zee TV, little Siddhartha, not even 10 years old yet, counters his mother's advice against asking 'adult' questions. "If everything must be asked after growing up, why do I have these questions at all?" asks the boy who would become synonymous with age-old wisdom at a young age. Siddhartha Gautama was destined to wise up before his time. But not the filmi Siddharth Mehra (Ranbir Kapoor in the film *Wake Up Sid*) who plays out one of the most unimaginative coming-of-age scripts—rich boy gets thrown out of his cushy home by an indignant father, learns to make his own money and omelette, thanks to the girl in his life, and well, "wakes up".

If you stay with the idea of Siddhartha as truth, memory, metaphor, fact, farce and fiction for one more moment, there is a Sid (a youthfully mature Akshaye Khanna) in *Dil Chahta Hai* too—one of

SONAL GUPTA
Born **July 30, 1996**

G'bye to sugar 'n spice, 'n everything nice li'l girls are made of. For this south Delhi chiquita is moving from crayons to perfumes, short dresses & high heels...

Photograph by Narendra Bisht

SOHAM BANERJEE
Born July 17, 1996

Of course he should be studying, but the YouTube universe is a constant distraction for this Class 12 student of Calcutta. He wants to pursue an unconventional career.

Photograph by Sandipan Chatterjee

Bollywood's best coming-of-age movies. To me, Aamir Khan as the unfettered Ranchhoddas Shyamaldas Chanchad in *3 Idiots*, the resilient Suraj Sharma as Pi Patel in Ang Lee's *Life of Pi*, the brooding Dev Patel as Jamal Shaikh in Danny Boyle's *Slumdog Millionaire* or the intense and avuncular kid Harry Potter also are modern derivatives of the mythologised Sid. Transported from literature to cinema, they are all young men shoved into the pit of existential dilemmas by volatile circumstances. All end up exhibiting enormous "response-ability". They are either adolescents or just-about adults who carve out a meaningful life outside filial enclosures of emotion and protection. Curiously, they are all male.

If coming of age had a literary prejudice, it is this much-flaunted malehood. Girls have always been presumed to be Little Women.

We could rant that "coming of age" has little to do with adulthood and dig into it as a lofty idea varnished by class, culture and gender. Yet in this age of jumped-up psychobabble, it may be worthwhile to revisit that poetic "loss of innocence" before keeping it aside.

When an adolescent is "officially" fading into an adult, the anxious pulsating inside the head, heart, brain, mind, nerves and bones (and no, it is not the same difference) creates strange conflicts between the mind and the body. The resultant chaos feels like a crazy rush of hormones, of ambition colliding into youthful aggression, of optimism embellished by untainted idealism, of love steamrolling into lust. And still if your life is getting by with a precision that Nature usually has a disdain for, it could be about drifting away wilfully from the parental fold, earning

TRIPTI BHARDWAJ
Born **November 17, 1996**

While the boys were out playing cricket, this Noida girl took to hockey. Tripti has participated in many under-19 tourneys, and hopes to represent India sometime.

Photograph by Sanjay Rawat

HIMANSHU GUPTA
Born **May 23, 1996**

Freedom, licence...wield that wheel well, and you're on your way. The journey is all. This east Delhi youngster is learning to get there.

Photograph by Jitender Gupta

your own money, losing your own sleep, bargaining for your own onions and choosing—not just condoms—but their flavour too.

Analyst and psychotherapist Madhu Sarin says that traditionally in Indian families, girls came of age when they were given in marriage and had to truncate their relationship with their own family all of a sudden and embrace the family of their spouse. "The son evolved more slowly under the care, patronage, envy and competitiveness of his brothers and the father," she adds. In many ethnic communities, growing up, both for girls and boys, was celebrated with a flourish and specific initiation rituals that then opened entry into the community of grown-ups.

Social commentators now argue that many privileged young people in prosperous societies happily float in a phase of extended childhood. They insist stubbornly that their mother's muffins and masala tea are served to them while they change their Facebook statuses. Sarin thinks so too. "What has changed is that childhood has become very protracted—especially for those better-off—so you don't achieve adult identity or move outside your parents' protective ambit till you have at least finished college. Whereas with a large section of the human race still living in grinding poverty, a number of children are forced to give up their childhood and come of age very quickly, like child labourers, child soldiers and so on," she comments.

Ask Rampal, now 24, with wrinkled

SHUBHAM TRIPATHI
Born August 23, 1996

Woo betide those arrived at this threshold. All the world's a stage and this Class 12 student a mere enacter of an age-old drama

Photograph by Tribhuvan Tiwari

and blackened hands, whose dhobi father died of brain cancer when he was just 12. For him coming of age was a dark fatherlessness, a grief-stricken mother, a scorching and heavy iron that challenged his boyish arms with cruel intent, five younger siblings, all wailing at different hours, all pushing Rampal to become the father figure, bread-winner, minder, mentor and scolder, responsible and adult-like. Rampal, a coming-of-age resume—Height: 5 feet, one inch. Age: 12. Address: an urban slum in Delhi. Primary job: fathering his own mother.

Growing up and coming of age are two viscerally different experiences. The former has a social marker, when at the age of 18, the State considers you bodily and mentally reliable enough to drive, marry, vote (not drink if you live in Delhi). Quite like getting out of one car and getting into another—this one with you in the driving seat. "I felt independent when I left my parents' house at the age of 17 to study in Pune; however, it was when I started earning at the age of 19 that being grown up made true sense to me," says the 22-year-old Rohit Varghese, an RJ with Radio Mirchi in Delhi. The feeling got accentuated when Varghese's father booked a property in his name asking him to cough up ₹80 lakh by 2016. "That's when I realised that the good old days of having mum-cooked breakfast at any time of the day are over," says Varghese.

Outside familial rites of passage, coming of age is a shocking reminder of life's ironies. It hurts in the guts. The untimely death of a loved one, the social or personal fallouts of a war, an accident, a failure.... If falling in love is a growing-up symptom; falling out of

S. ROHITH DAS
Born July 1, 1996

Never mind the maiden and her unconcern, this Chennai boy is into gymming

Photograph by R.A. Chandroo

love or being jilted is the coming-of-age dis-ease. It is a saturating reality and often comes wearing pain on its sleeve. It forces people into internal dialogue, which become as important as the thoughtful action that sometimes follows. Most confess that their coming-of-age moments changed them forever.

In 1971, classical dancer and activist Mallika Sarabhai lost her father. She was not even 17 years old. "My brother was in the US, I felt the all-too-sudden and enormous responsibility of looking after my mother," says Sarabhai recalling that episode of painful maturation. "As I cremated my father, I knew that my childhood had to end, that I shouldn't even make my grief visible so as not to burden my mother," she says, adding that the older one gets, the more one realises how random the official markers of adulthood are. "It's like trying to compartmentalise life, which is not possible," she says.

A crisis revolving around parents bobs up rather recurrently in the Indian narrative. Ask Chandan Chawla, a practising musculoskeletal physiotherapist in Delhi and an avid reader of philosophic books. "For me, it was my father's critical brain surgery when I was 26 years old. In a span of 24 hours, the huge responsibility of decision-making was thrust upon me and it was hard, very hard. My father survived but I believe that coming of age has more to do with realising your responsibilities and accepting the outcome of your actions and decisions," says Chawla.

Parental distance is an unsteady pendulum; it also oscillates to the other side. "When I went to America in the late '80s, the physical and psychological distance from my parents was a gift

A group of 18-year-olds

The age of consent, marriage, and adulthood—but hey, there's time yet. A trio of youngsters gauge an adult film poster outside a cinema hall in Mumbai.

Photograph by Amit Haralkar

because it forced me to figure things out on my own and fight my battles," says the Bangalore-based Shoba Narayan, journalist and author of *Monsoon Diary: a Memoir with Recipes*. "I lost a master's degree in art because I stood up for what I believed in," says Narayan, explaining that she refused to rearrange her master's thesis—a sculptural installation—according to the professor's advice. The university mandated that students should defend the work with a speech and the words should match the work. But Narayan wanted the work to speak for itself, if at all. "This would never have happened had I been with parents who would have advised me to 'compromise' and get the degree," she says. "But this event was a key coming-of-age moment for me. It made me who I am," adds Narayan.

No wonder then that the flag-bearing age of adulthood—eighteen years—that appears too tall at 10 and too stunted at 40 only finds a fuzzy resonance in people's memoirs. But the coming-of-age juncture is remembered in autobiographies as a vividly orgasmic, maddening or heart-breaking moment. As a momentous upheaval that updates your age on the emotional passport.

Only now this sentence from the first page of J.D. Salinger's *Catcher in the Rye*—called the ultimate coming-of-age novel—makes sense to me. "I am not going to tell you my whole goddamn autobiography or anything. I'll just tell you about this madman stuff that happened to me around last Christmas just before I got pretty rundown and had to come out here and take it easy."

Coming of age is madman stuff, folks. What's the number 18 got to do with it?

Truth be told, *Outlook* invited me to write this piece only because I got married at the age of 18 and grew up suddenly in an OhmyGod way.

Madman stuff, no? ◘