

Representation of Child in *a Strange and Sublime Address* and *the Immortals* by Amit Chaudhuri

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Abstract

Amit Chaudhuri is an essayist, novelist and critic. He has written seven novels so far, a non-fictional book, a critical book, an anthology and two story books. His novels present a picture of middle class society of Bengal or Calcutta. His characters are simple people who celebrate different phases of life. The characters Sandeep of *A Strange and Sublime Address* and Nirmalya of *The Immortals* present the shades of childhood and teenage self of the novelist himself. This research paper is an attempt to study the psychology and mindset of these two characters in connection with theory on child psychology and development of these child or adolescent protagonists.

Key Words: Child Protagonist, Adolescent Behavior, Formal Operational Stage.

Child has always been represented in adult fiction in different manner. The child and adolescent are part of social and family novels. There are few milestones that need to be covered by the novelist before the portrayal of child in fiction. First the novelist must have an understanding of child psychology. Second the surroundings must be observed in relation to and on the basis of point of view of child which is not an easy task. The child psychology has never been a matter of study among the writers which poses a threat to the realistic interpretation and presentation. A child's conception of the world is totally different from elders. If the child and adolescent characters are used in fiction then they have an important say in the literary work. Their opinions and observation matters most. The narrative voice given to them or for them needs to be strong, assertive and independent. The child characters change adult opinions and also get changed by the opinion of elders. Their journey from child to adolescent or to an adult is influenced by their experiences and conclusions. The seeing or stating of a child can change adult discourse and vice versa. There are few examples of this inclusion in William Golding's *Lord of the Flies*, R.K.Narayan's book *Swami and Friends*, Arundhati Roy's *God of Small Things*, Amitav Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines*, Bapsi Sidhwa's *Ice Candy Man* and Salman Rushdie's *Midnight Children*. However these novels were focused upon the child only but there are few books like Mrinal Pandey's *Daughter's Daughter*, Neelam Saran Gour's *Speaking Of 62* and Rushdie's *Harun and Sea* with inclusion of both child and adult. Children respond to the circumstances of the adult world. They are not the creator of circumstances but suffer due to the negative impact of situations. The techniques used to represent child in fiction depends upon the factors like plot, story, circumstances, narrative, theme and background. A child is nurtured in imagination and it is the talent of novelist to convert this imagination into literary imagination. Through children's literature, the writers also voice their opinions and choices.

This research paper is based on the nature, growth and development of children in the novels *A Strange and Sublime Address* and *The Immortals* by Amit Chaudhuri. In these novels the novelist has deployed different ways to highlight the point of view of child in the social, political, psychological and moral concerns of middle class family and society. The middle class of society especially of Bengali society is a web where children live closely connected to family. The child characters Sandeep and Nirmalya of above mentioned novels who are also the protagonists, live with their family and come in contact with relatives and society. They observe the adults and bring out their own conclusions. They are perturbed by the situations but lack the command to control or change it. The child characters of these novels are the good children who turn into morally strong and polite grownups. The novel *A Strange and Sublime Address* is the first novel of Chaudhuri which presents the middle class or Bhadraklok of Calcutta. The novel presents Sandeep, a ten year old boy who feels proud to be a part of a family and social structure. Sandeep loves to live in a joint family but is forced to stay at a apartment in Bombay due to his father's job. On coming to Calcutta at his maternal uncle's house, he feels blissful. Sandeep is the representative of the new generation of changing city of Calcutta affected by industrialization, colonization and globalization. Sandeep's world view is also presented through the novel. Thus Sandeep becomes the observer of adult's world and a minor partner to the story. Nirmalya is another youngster with a lot of privileges. He is philosophical and yearns for a simple life. He is intelligent with a keen vision. He is a devotee of old ways of life with love for classical music and tradition. He despises his life of upper class. He loves his teacher Shyamji but is unable to accept his new notion of art as a source of earning. He wants Shyamji to teach Classical music instead of modern songs on the choice of his disciples. He does not want his guru to compromise with his knowledge. He is critical and immature. He can put up his opinion but cannot change his situations.

Being a child, Sandeep was addressed by his nick name at his maternal uncle's house. He loved the old patterned house which was pious for him like a shrine. The ancient house attracted him with its antique furniture and rooms. He observes the house with curiosity. He notes every detail with his mind's eye. His curiosity knew no bounds. The boys or children of this age are curious. While taking bath the boys Sandeep, Abhi and Babla observe each other's bodies. Sandeep has an eye for details. He notices everything regarding food, clothes and household routine. He sees the rooms and tastelessly arranged things. He captures mental images of pooja routine of his maternal aunt. "Sandeep himself did not believe in God, much less in gods. Like most children, he was the opposite of innocent: he was sceptical but tolerant of other creeds"(44). Sandeep's eye does not miss anything. When he hears the mutual talks of all relatives gathered together on Sunday, he comes to "the conclusion that the grown-ups were mad, each other after his or her own fashion. Simple situations were turned into complex dramatic ones; not until then did everyone feel important and happy(78). These bold ponderings coming from a youngster are a proof of modernity in literature. These are also not perfect. They belong to country but cannot speak their mother tongue correctly. The novelist names him as "one of the innumerable language-orphans of modern India(95). He is also a good listener. He listens to every word of conversation. He notices the tone and gestures of people. He likes the conversation of his uncle regarding business. The narrative is in third person and the story reveals the children's mind. "It seemed there was no democracy among children- always an aristocracy based on strength, intellect and seniority"(18). Sandeep loves his freedom. He wants to explore the spaces as a free bird. The age of adolescent comes with a lot of physical and mental changes. Boys develop infatuation towards opposite sex. Sandeep also feels the changes in him. He dislikes his school. The surroundings at school felt strange and unfamiliar to him. He feels full of life at Chottamama's house only. At other places like school he does not want to be noticed and

recognized. "He hated being in the foreground; he wanted a housefly's anonymity." (35). The children are good imitators. The novelist reveals this quality too as the children imitate politics by making them enact a play based on freedom fighters. Sandeep feels a sense of loss when his affinity towards the place and maternal uncle's home is distorted by the decision of his departure due to the completion of holiday time. He feels sad on observing that the time is slipping. He wants the time to stop so that he can live in the moment. He comes back to his liveliness on re- returning to Mama's house. Being a youngster Sandeep got a say in everything. He started voicing himself confidentially but he was more comfortable in being gloomy and silent. However he asked innumerable questions to the aged Chordimoni as well as Mamima. The questions were related to their marriage, husband, children and personal life. Sandeep is naughty and loves to play mischief upon people along with his brother cum friend Anhijit. The children of the novel present the young adulthood that has come with the modernity. They show signs of involvement and adjustment to the social life. They discover new dimensions of relation with community, society and relatives. They learn and imbibe the ways of living through elders.

Nirmalya is a mature youngster with keen sense of individuality. His values are strong which gives him the quality of compassion and understanding. He also represents the young self of Chaudhuri himself. In the novel *The Immortals* the protagonist Nirmalya has similarity to Chaudhuri in representing the young self of the novelist. Even Nirmalya and Sandeep show likeness in behaviour. Nirmalya too dislikes school. He feels miserable at school and finds solace at home. This novel is written in third person narrative. Many pages are devoted to the description of Nirmalya and his phases of changing persona from childhood to adolescence. Nirmalya is a cultured and pampered boy. He is mature ; grave in nature, disciplined and extremely simple in appearance. He wears kurtas and jeans, is bespectacled keeps his hair long, his face with goatee and always carries a book of

philosophy in his hand. Nirmalya is imaginative and observant. He was born with a heart defect which did not stop him from being a classical singer. He starts learning music from his guru Shyamji. Nirmalya is rough in nature since childhood. He has leadership skill .This quality is showcased through his games with maid servant Jumna. “He was Lordly with her, and at home in general, but he was afraid of the outside world”(61). Nirmalya dislikes the luxuriant life of Sengupta’s. Business doesn’t interest him much. His inclination was towards different arts. He detests the posh life and yearns for freedom. His affinity towards his gurus Shyamji and Ramlal is emotional and real. Nirmalya continuously goes through an inner dialogue. He loves philosophy. He decides to learn classical music as it mesmerizes him. He starts appreciating Eastern music over Western. He loses his friend circle due to this affinity towards Classical Music. He also thinks a lot over the riddle of birth and death. He witnesses Shyamji’s death which breaks him from inside. The tone provided to Nirmalya is melancholic in nature. He becomes disoriented. He develops uneasiness with his parents’ world of parties, luxurious living and uncertainty of life. Nirmalya takes long walks in the familiar part of Bombay where he decides his future course and reminisces lost times. Like other youngsters, he feels inclined towards sex .He is bold and unafraid. He asks his teacher to stop serving the rich people for the sake of money. Nirmalya judges his teacher. He could not get the point that for Shyamji music becomes a job and art both. Nirmalya is a lover of nature and urban landscape and scene. He has a strong inclination for sympathy and compassion. He takes a conscious decision of going abroad to study philosophy. His strong individuality helps him a lot. He is idealistic person devoted towards his guru and philosophy. “More and more, he felt philosophy was his future;”(259). He realizes the importance of words. “And words had begun to come easily to him; he’d just begun to discover he could express any desire , voice any wish”(301). Nirmalya feels miserable in the foreign country. He misses home a lot. Thus

this youngster as designed by Amit Chaudhuri is a mature person, with a unique point of view .

Adolescence is a phase where a lot of changes take place in the brain. The thoughts of an individual are formed in connection with his surroundings and experience. The child and adolescent characters introspect themselves in relation to their surroundings. Sandeep and Nirmalya are introspective in this connection. Jean Piaget has provided different phases of human development. He describes adolescence “as the stage of life in which the individual’s thoughts start taking more of an abstract form and egocentric thoughts decrease. This allows the adolescent to think and reason with a wider perspective”(“Adolescence” Boundless Psychology).

Sandeep is at his childhood phase and Nirmalya is at formal operational stage according to Piaget’s theory. “This stage of cognitive development, termed by Piaget as the formal operational stage, makes a movement from an ability to think and reason from concrete visible events to an ability to think hypothetically and entertain what-if possibilities about the world”. (“Adolescence” Boundless Psychology).

Adolescence also brings a lot of changes in the thoughts, introspection and thoughtful; activities. Nirmalya thinks a lot. He introspects and tries to decide upon his future. He is at the age where he has developed a sense of individuality and after much ponderings, he decides upon the life he loves and the life he wants to lead. He dislikes the luxurious life he is leading but doesn’t shun it all at once. He does not choose his father’s car, wears kurtas and jeans, avoids parties and chooses a career that is not focused upon money making.

Sandeep is influenced by the thoughts and point of view of his elders too. He is affected by the discussion of elders. When Chhotamama discusses the problems of his business, Sandeep listens to each word and tries to build up an understanding of it. Nirmalya questions

the thoughts and beliefs of others. He cannot accept everything. He dislikes when his teacher treats music as a profession and teaches film songs at the demands of his students. His wisdom has developed to a stage where he can judge and take risk. Erik Erikson referred to the task of the adolescent as one of identity versus role confusion. In his view “an adolescent’s main questions are “Who am I” and “Who do I want to be? (“Adolescence” Boundless Psychology). Nirmalya explores his identity in his parent’s home and Sandeep at his Chhotomama’s house at Calcutta. Both characters question themselves as well as others. Sandeep asks many questions to the female folk of the house. He is enchanted by everything.

Thus the child protagonists of these two novels present multiple possibilities for development and progress of adolescents. They maintain their self esteem on one hand and also handle a healthy parent child bonding. Due to this bonding, the child characters of Amit chaudhuri are always humble, positive and cultured. Chaudhuri has touched new dimensions in the presentation of childhood and children in literature.

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