International Journal of Science and Research Archive
eISSN: 2582-8185
Cross Ref DOI: 10.30574/ijsra
Journal homepage: https://ijsra.net/

(RESEARCH ARTICLE)

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Navigating parental expectations and identity struggles: A literary analysis of child psychology in South Asian Narratives

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International Journal of Science and Research Archive, 2025, 14(03), 776-782

Publication history: Received on 01February 2025; revised on 13March 2025; accepted on 15March 2025

Article DOI: https://doi.org/10.30574/ijsra.2025.14.3.0692

Abstract

This research critically examines the intersection of parental expectations and identity struggles in South Asian literature, revealing how rigid cultural norms and familial pressures shape childhood psychology. Through the works of authors like Samit Basu, the study interrogates the psychological and emotional costs of conforming to societal ideals, particularly the tension between individual aspirations and collective familial duty. These narratives expose the pervasive influence of cultural traditions, often rooted in colonial histories and economic ambitions, which enforce conformity at the expense of personal autonomy. Employing psychoanalytic frameworks, such as Freuds concept of repression and Eriksons stages of identity development, the analysis uncovers how children internalize societal expectations, leading to the formation of a false self. This suppression of authentic identity results in emotional conflicts, achievement anxiety, and a fractured sense of self. The study critiques the deterministic nature of these familial structures, arguing that they perpetuate cycles of psychological distress, particularly in postcolonial contexts where historical trauma and migration further complicate identity formation. However, the research also highlights acts of resistance and resilience. Drawing on Frantz Fanons postcolonial theories and Judith Butlers concept of performativity, it reveals how young protagonists subvert oppressive norms through storytelling, self-expression, and subtle defiance. These acts, though often constrained by systemic forces, challenge narratives of victimhood and underscore the agency of children in reclaiming their identities. Ultimately, the study critiques the dominant parenting ideologies depicted in South Asian literature, arguing that they reflect broader societal failures to balance cultural heritage with individual autonomy. It calls for a reimagining of childhood that prioritizes emotional well-being over rigid conformity, emphasizing the need for systemic change to support healthier identity formation. By integrating literary analysis with psychological and postcolonial theories, this research critiques existing norms and advocates for a more nuanced understanding of childhood in South Asian contexts.

Keywords: Child Psychology; Parental Expectations; Identity Formation; Trauma and Resilience; Postcolonial Childhood Studies; South Asian Literature

1. Introduction

South Asian literature, with its rich tapestry of cultural, social, and historical nuances, offers a profound and intricate exploration of childhood, rendering it a site of innocence and complexity. Through its narratives, the regions literary canon provides a prismatic lens to examine the interplay of cultural traditions, societal expectations, and historical forces that shape the lives of young individuals. Unlike Western paradigms of childhood, which often emphasize individualism, autonomy, and self-actualization, South Asian conceptions of childhood are deeply rooted in collectivism, familial honour, and intergenerational continuity. These cultural underpinnings frame the very ontology of childhood in the region, rendering it a phase of life that is both sheltered and constrained, innocent yet burdened by the weight of societal imperatives. In the South Asian literary imagination, childhood is frequently idealized as a sanctuary of purity and protection, yet rigid societal norms simultaneously circumscribe it. Children are often cocooned from the harsher

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realities of existence, yet their lives are indelibly shaped by the cultural mores and values that govern their communities. The concept of izzat (honour), a cornerstone of familial and social dynamics, looms large in these narratives, casting a long shadow over the lives of children. The psychological and emotional toll of upholding familial honour is a recurring motif in South Asian literature, as children are often compelled to sublimate their aspirations in service of the collective good. This tension between individual desire and familial duty gives rise to profound internal conflicts as young protagonists grapple with the dual imperatives of selfhood and societal expectations. The dialectic between the individual and the collective is a central theme in South Asian literary representations of childhood, offering a nuanced examination of the intersection between personal identity and societal expectations. This tension is explored with depth and precision in the works of authors like Samit Basu, whose narratives often depict young protagonists struggling between familial obligations and personal dreams. In Basu's *Chosen Spirit*, for instance, the protagonist Joey's tragic highlights childhoods harsh realities for those emerging from marginalized socio-economic backgrounds. The narrative intricately traces the journey from innocence to experience, often marked by the abrupt loss of childhood's protective veil. This loss compels young characters to face adult responsibilities before they are ready. As the narrator reflects:

After many years, goodbyes, and regrets, she still cannot accept that she made a huge mistake. But sometimes it feels like everyone she thought shed grow up around has left — so many of her peers, the generation her parents learned to admire as the children of blood and fire who were para dropped straight out of their adolescence into a citizens uprising against totalitarianism, simply got tired and faded away, or changed into something unrecognizable. (7)

This poignant portrayal of innocence lost and the premature acquisition of worldly wisdom is a recurring motif in South Asian literature, imbuing it with an elegiac quality that underscores the emotional weight of childhoods collapse. Furthermore, gender plays a critical role in shaping the experience of childhood in these narratives. The deeply entrenched patriarchal structures of South Asian societies enforce a stark division of gender roles, significantly shaping the expectations placed on boys and girls from an early age. Boys are typically burdened with the responsibility to excel academically and professionally. At the same time, girls face additional pressures, not only regarding their behaviour but also concerning their marriage prospects and prescribed domestic roles. This gendered bifurcation reflects broader societal norms, where children are socialized into rigid gender roles, perpetuating inequality. As Nikhil notes, Indis awareness of these gender dynamics is keen, asserting:

Ive been a strong feminist since my fucking mid-teens," Indi says. "I didnt have to unlearn anything. We used to joke about older people, you know, how they had to learn things we already knew. Thats why you never had to teach me feminism when we met. Id be the first person to say always believe the woman, never blame the victim, fuck the patriarchy, cancel abusers. (108)

This statement reveals the self-awareness of youth in navigating entrenched gender ideologies and, importantly, the possibility of transcending traditional educational boundaries on these issues. It also highlights how literature serves as both a reflection and critique of these normative structures, creating a platform for characters to resist or subvert societal limitations. Through such engagements, South Asian literature becomes a site for questioning and challenging the gender expectations that shape childhood, offering a fertile ground for resistance. As characters confront societal structures, their struggles and rebellions reveal the deep fissures in the traditional edifice that governs childhood. These moments push the reader to reconsider the gendered and societal norms that regulate the lives of children. However, the complexities of childhood in South Asian literature extend beyond gender. Socio-economic and caste-based hierarchies further complicate these portrayals, particularly for children from marginalized communities—whether Dalit, tribal, or economically disenfranchised. For these children, childhood is often marked by systemic inequities, denying them fundamental rights such as access to education, healthcare, and social mobility. Their lived experiences underscore a harsh reality where their very existence is shaped by oppression and exclusion, highlighting the intersectionality of social injustice in their lives. Thus, South Asian literature not only critiques gender norms but also exposes the broader socio-economic and caste structures that trap children in cycles of deprivation and marginalization.

Yet, South Asian literature does not merely depict these children as passive victims but celebrates their resilience, ingenuity, and agency in the face of adversity. Samit Basu poignantly captures the dualities of such childhoods—marked by suffering and strength, oppression and resistance. These narratives are a powerful indictment of the social injustices plaguing the region while affirming its youngest inhabitant's indomitable spirit. In South Asian literature, children are often portrayed as figures navigating a dual existence—both vulnerable and capable of remarkable agency. While they endure systemic discrimination and restrictive social norms, their ability to adapt, resist, and reimagine their circumstances challenges the notion of childhood as a passive state. Their resilience is evident in how they construct alternative kinship networks, defy societal constraints to pursue their aspirations and reshape their realities through creativity and determination. As the narrator illustrates:

When they are not eating or sleeping or going at it, she talks about her plans constantly — what should her solo Flow be about? What demographics should she target? What are her top strengths and weaknesses? How should she be the bridge between mainstreamers and that mythical global audience? Could Rudra do some research and figure out a list of alternative paths for her? Could Rudra manage her, or should she get Jin-Young? (117)

This depiction underscores that their narratives extend beyond victimhood, offering instead a compelling counterpoint to the forces that seek to marginalize them. Their stories highlight the resilience of the human spirit, positioning children not as mere recipients of societal expectations but as active agents shaping their destinies. Beyond these sociocultural and economic struggles, South Asian childhood is deeply enmeshed in spiritual and religious traditions. The philosophical foundations of Hinduism, Islam, Sikhism, and Buddhism inform children's self-conceptions and worldviews, embedding moral and existential dimensions into their lived experiences. The emphasis on dharma righteousness and the cyclical nature of existence frames childhood not as a transient secular stage but a period imbued with spiritual significance. Consequently, children are shaped by educational and professional aspirations and religious teachings and rituals that mould their ethical and moral identities. This spiritual element complicates literary representations of childhood, transforming it into a dynamic space where the metaphysical and the mundane intersect, further reinforcing the intricate layers of agency and self-definition in South Asian narratives.

2. Parental Expectations and Their Impact on Child Development

Parental expectations are crucial in shaping child development, exerting explicit and implicit pressures that manifest differently across cultural and societal landscapes. In South Asian literature, these expectations often function as a double-edged sword—providing a structured path towards success while imposing an oppressive burden curtailing personal autonomy. The tension between aspiration and coercion forms a recurring motif in narratives that explore the weight of familial hopes, particularly regarding education, career choices, and marriage. A comparative examination of South Asian literary texts, such as *Chosen Spirits*, highlights the complexity of these expectations and their far-reaching consequences. As the narrator describes:

He rescues her from this life and plans to marry her, but his parents wisely intervene. A family friend, a magician, finds through a spell that the girl is not even from Swarga: she is from the dreaded land of Narak, opposite to Swarga in every way. Discovered, the girl disappears, but the hero cannot forget her. He becomes convinced she has been abducted by a demon from Narak and sets off against his family's wishes to bring her back. (143)

This passage encapsulates a broader struggle within South Asian narratives—where parental intervention, often justified as wisdom, conflicts with the protagonists desires, leading to existential dilemmas and defiant pursuits of self-actualization. From a sociocultural perspective, Lev Vygotsky's theory suggests that parental expectations serve as scaffolding mechanisms to elevate children's potential by steering them toward socially prestigious careers such as medicine, engineering, and law. This emphasis on academic excellence, deeply entrenched in postcolonial narratives, is not merely an individual pursuit but a reflection of collective aspirations for upward mobility and economic security. However, Pierre Bourdieu's concept of cultural capital sheds light on the inherent inequities of these expectations, as they privilege those who can assimilate into dominant educational and professional structures while marginalizing alternative talents and creative inclinations.

The psychological ramifications of these pressures are profound. Erik Eriksons theory of psychosocial development underscores the critical role of identity formation during adolescence—a process often disrupted when parental ambitions overshadow personal aspirations. Many South Asian literary protagonists embody what Donald Winnicott describes as the "false self" syndrome, wherein individuals suppress their intrinsic desires to conform to external pressures. The internalized struggle stemming from parental expectations often materializes as achievement anxiety, manifesting in psychological disorders such as anxiety, depression, and impostor syndrome. Basu critiques these rigid paradigms of success through the characters of Joey and Indi. It illuminates the emotional and psychological costs of conforming to societal ideals, raising fundamental questions about the actual cost of validation through external achievement.

However, a more nuanced reading reveals that parental expectations are not purely oppressive. Frantz Fanons postcolonial perspective suggests that these aspirations are deeply rooted in a history of colonial subjugation, where education and professional success became symbols of resistance and self-determination. The desire for upward mobility, often perceived as coercion, is frequently driven by an awareness of historical disenfranchisement and the precarious socio-economic realities marginalized communities face. As the narrator states, "It's not their fault; its hard for the middle-aged to change. She's seen the way they used to live. Before the Years Not To Be Discussed, before every smart person in the country had removed their opinion archives from their first-gen social media accounts, her mother

had saved screenshots of her favourite posts"(13). This notion underscores how parental guidance, often portrayed as rigid and authoritarian, is usually underpinned by genuine concern for their children's stability in an unpredictable world. The challenge is not to reject these expectations outright but to negotiate a space where parental authority fosters discipline without suppressing individuality. South Asian literary narratives, particularly those by diasporic writers, further complicate this discourse by introducing cultural hybridity and generational dissonance themes. Homi Bhabha's concept of the third space is especially relevant here, as second-generation immigrants grapple with reconciling their parent's traditional values with the individualistic ethos of Western societies. This cultural liminality often results in identity crises, a recurring theme in diasporic literature that explores the fractured yet evolving sense of self among children of immigrants. A critical engagement with South Asian literature thus allows for an interrogation of the complex dialectic between parental expectations and individual development. By synthesizing sociocultural, psychological, and postcolonial theoretical frameworks, these narratives reveal the intricate interplay of tradition, modernity, autonomy, and familial obligation in shaping childhood and adolescence. Rather than viewing parental expectations as monolithic forces of oppression, these texts encourage a more critical and empathetic understanding of their historical, economic, and cultural foundations.

2.1. Positive Aspects

- Sense of security and stability
- Clear direction and motivation
- Preservation of cultural heritage

2.2. Negative Aspects

- Psychological distress and achievement anxiety
- Suppression of individuality and creativity
- Generational and cultural conflicts

Ultimately, the discourse surrounding parental expectations necessitates a multidimensional analysis, recognizing these influences protective and restrictive dimensions. The challenge remains in fostering an environment where children can navigate their aspirations while honouring the cultural and familial legacies that shape their identities.

3. Trauma, Resilience, and Identity Formation

South Asian children's narratives intricately explore themes of trauma, resilience, and identity formation, offering a lens into the socio-political realities that shape their lives. These stories function as both testimony and resistance, shedding light on how children navigate systemic violence, displacement, discrimination, and personal loss. A critical engagement with such narratives reveals not only the deep psychological wounds inflicted by trauma but also the mechanisms of resilience and identity reconstruction that enable survival and adaptation. As the narrator states:

Joey can't bring herself to stop Tara. Why should she not talk about what shes been through? And what better opportunity could she have to pitch herself to her next employer? But if shes doing it to win over the audience, its not working, and Joey can't find a polite way to tell Tara this. Shes had to talk Jin-Young out of warning Tara about her dipping numbers and increasingly irritated live feedback: it just seems wrong to silence someone talking about their trauma. (99)

This passage highlights the tensions between personal storytelling, the need for validation, and the risks of commodifying trauma, underscoring the complex ways in which individuals process and present their suffering. From a psychoanalytic perspective, the works of Sigmund Freud and Melanie Klein provide insight into how trauma disrupts a childs psychic development. Freuds concept of repression is particularly relevant, as many children in these narratives internalize their traumatic experiences, leading to long-term manifestations of anxiety, depression, and dissociation. Kleins object relations theory further illuminates how children internalized relationships with caregivers and communities can either cushion or amplify the effects of trauma. A postcolonial reading, mainly through the works of Frantz Fanon and Homi Bhabha, offers a compelling framework for understanding how historical violence and colonial legacies continue to shape childhood experiences in South Asia. These narratives reveal how cycles of marginalization and resilience are perpetuated across generations as children inherit the weight of collective trauma stemming from armed conflicts, communal violence, and environmental catastrophes. The intersection of personal and historical trauma not only informs their sense of identity but also compels them to negotiate between inherited pain and the pursuit of agency. Thus, South Asian literature does more than document trauma; it interrogates the processes of survival and resistance, revealing how children narratives become sites of vulnerability and empowerment. By weaving

together psychological, sociopolitical, and postcolonial analyses, these texts expose the layered complexities of childhood, emphasizing the transformative potential of storytelling as both a means of healing and a mode of defiance.

The psychological impact of such experiences is often devastating, leading to post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), chronic anxiety, and deeply ingrained fears of instability. These narratives also highlight the perils of intergenerational trauma, a phenomenon articulated by scholars such as Marianne Hirsch through the concept of "post-memory." The inherited psychological wounds of parents and grandparents manifest in children's self-perception and worldview, complicating their process of identity formation. This dynamic is particularly evident in diasporic literature, where children of immigrants struggle to reconcile the historical pain of their ancestors with their present-day realities. Despite these formidable challenges, South Asian children's narratives frequently foreground resilience as a counterforce to trauma. Drawing from Judith Butlers notions of performativity, we see how children actively reconstruct their identities through acts of defiance, solidarity, and creative expression. Their resilience is often mediated by cultural traditions, familial bonds, and grassroots activism, underscoring the role of collective identity in psychological recovery. Narrative therapy, as advocated by Michael White and David Epston, becomes a vital tool in these stories—where children utilize storytelling, art, and activism to reclaim agency and construct meaning from their fragmented experiences. Literary perspectives on these narratives further reveal how trauma and resilience are thematized. South Asian authors such as Basu depict children navigating violent political upheavals, gendered oppression, and economic precarity. Their works provide insight into how narrative structures reflect the discontinuities of trauma—through fragmented storytelling, nonlinear timelines, and shifting perspectives. Analyzing these literary techniques gives us a deeper appreciation of how form mirrors content in representing psychological turmoil and recovery. By engaging critically with these narratives, we not only acknowledge the psychological burden carried by South Asian children but also celebrate their capacity for resistance and renewal. Educators, psychologists, and policymakers must recognize the intricate relationship between trauma, resilience, and identity formation in shaping the developmental trajectories of these young individuals. Future research must integrate interdisciplinary approaches—drawing from psychology, literary studies, and postcolonial theory—to craft nuanced strategies for intervention and support.

4. Key Considerations for Addressing Trauma in South Asian Children's Narratives:

- **Recognizing Intergenerational Trauma:** Understanding how historical and familial traumas shape children's psyches is essential for targeted psychological interventions.
- **Encouraging Expressive Outlets:** Storytelling, art, and activism should be fostered as therapeutic tools for children coping with adversity.
- **Promoting Community-Based Support:** Strengthening cultural and familial networks can provide children with crucial resilience mechanisms.
- **Integrating Trauma-Informed Education:** Schools should implement curricula that acknowledge sociohistorical trauma while equipping children with strategies for self-empowerment.

Ultimately, South Asian children's narratives serve as critical texts that challenge dominant discourses on trauma and resilience. By amplifying these voices, we move towards a more empathetic and holistic understanding of childhood adversity and the pathways to healing.

5. Implications for Parenting and Child Psychology

A critical examination of South Asian literature reveals the complex and often turbulent intersections between childhood experiences, cultural expectations, and psychological development. These narratives expose the extent to which traditional parenting paradigms shape children's psychosocial trajectories, raising pressing questions about the psychological toll of entrenched familial and societal norms. While parental expectations are frequently framed as acts of care and protection, a more profound theoretical analysis reveals the latent harm within these structures. The challenge, then, is to move beyond rigid, hierarchical parenting models toward frameworks that are more adaptive, child-centred, and responsive to the evolving complexities of contemporary identity formation. As the narrator states about Rudra:

You know, I thought Babas death would bring you back, show you where you belong. Then that idiot Bijoyini had to stick her neck out, and, of course, you had to jump — when have you ever said no to a chance to make a fool of yourself? Rohit. Why are we here? To talk, you fool. I could have had you pulled into a van and brought home, but youre too old for that now. We have to speak like adults. You sent that van to my old place, I hear. (125)

This idea reflects the persistent power dynamics within familial relationships, where coercion and authority often overshadow genuine dialogue. The underlying tension between belonging and autonomy encapsulates the struggle many South Asian children face when negotiating their own identities within the confines of parental control. From a psychoanalytic perspective, Sigmund Freuds development theories highlight how early parental influence shapes the superego or internalized authority. While this process is essential for socialization, excessive parental control can engender deep-seated guilt and anxiety, stifling emotional and psychological growth. Erik Eriksons psychosocial development theory further emphasizes the critical period of identity formation in adolescence, during which oppressive parental expectations can lead to role confusion and hinder self-agency development. In South Asian contexts, where collectivist values often supersede individual aspirations, children may experience intense internal conflict between personal ambitions and familial duty. Pierre Bourdieus concept of *habitus*—the way social structures inscribe themselves onto individual psychology—offers a compelling lens to understand how generational cycles of expectation persist. Parents, shaped by sociohistorical contexts, may unconsciously impose aspirational models that fail to accommodate their children's changing needs and desires. Thus, South Asian literature critically engages with these tensions, revealing the psychological consequences of rigid parental expectations while acknowledging the historical and cultural forces shaping them. By interrogating these dynamics through psychoanalytic, sociological, and postcolonial frameworks, these narratives urge a reimagining of parenting models—ones that foster mutual understanding, adaptability, and respect for individual identity formation.

This transmission of cultural capital, while often well-intentioned, can engender psychological distress, including imposter syndrome, anxiety, and a profound sense of alienation. The necessity of a paradigm shift in parenting and child psychology cannot be overstated. A critical reassessment of conventional parenting styles must acknowledge the sociohistorical legacies that have shaped South Asian notions of success and failure. Mental health professionals, educators, and caregivers must integrate culturally responsive approaches that challenge deterministic narratives and empower children to forge identities that reconcile personal inclinations with cultural belonging. A more intersectional lens, as advocated by Kimberlé Crenshaw, further necessitates an understanding of how gender, class, and migration status intersect with parental expectations, compounding the psychological burdens placed upon children.

To cultivate a more empathetic and inclusive approach to child psychology, several interventions must be prioritized:

- **Encouraging Open Dialogue:** Constructive parent-child communication should be nurtured, allowing children to articulate their aspirations without fear of retribution or alienation.
- **Fostering Individuality:** Institutions must support children in pursuing diverse career and academic paths, resisting monolithic definitions of success.
- **Culturally Competent Mental Health Services:** Access to psychological support that is both contextually relevant and sensitive to cultural nuances is imperative.
- **Policy Advocacy:** Structural interventions that promote children's rights, equitable access to mental health resources, and educational reforms must be enacted to alleviate systemic pressures.

An empathetic approach to parenting and child development necessitates dismantling rigid orthodoxies that relegate children to predetermined life trajectories. Instead, by fostering environments honouring cultural heritage and personal agency, we can ensure that South Asian children are equipped to thrive holistically—free from the undue psychological burden and empowered to actualize their full potential.

To conclude, Samit Basu in The *Chosen Spirit* vividly explores the complexities of childhood in South Asian contexts through the characters of Joey and Rudra, illustrating the intricate balance between expectation, agency, and identity formation. The novel presents a near-future dystopia where surveillance and social control shape personal and professional lives, mirroring the rigid structures of parental and societal expectations that govern childhood experiences in South Asia. Through Joey, a former reality controller navigating the precarious world of digital influence, and Rudra, her childhood friend who remains tethered to traditional familial structures, Basu critiques the forces that shape young individuals' identities while highlighting their capacity for resilience and reinvention.The novel underscores how South Asian childhood is not merely a passive phase of growth but an active negotiation between cultural tradition and personal aspiration. Joey, having been immersed in a world where her actions and image are constantly curated, reflects how children internalize external expectations, aligning with Freuds theory of repression. Her struggle to maintain autonomy despite the pressures of social performance echoes Eriksons psychosocial development framework, which highlights the importance of identity formation during adolescence. On the other hand, Rudra represents a contrasting trajectory shaped by deeply entrenched familial obligations. His interactions with Joey illustrate how childhood friendships can serve as anchors to the past and catalysts for transformation, revealing the tensions between collective identity and individual agency.

As Joey and Rudra navigate their respective paths, Basu critiques the burden of inherited sociocultural frameworks, aligning with Bourdieus concept of habitus, which explains how structural forces shape individual dispositions. Joeys struggle with imposed roles, much like the children in Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things*, highlights the performative nature of identity, aligning with Judith Butlers theory of performativity. In a world where digital personas and surveillance replace parental oversight, Basu presents a futuristic extension of the traditional constraints imposed on children in South Asian societies.By weaving together themes of expectation, trauma, and resilience, *Chosen Spirits* extends the discourse on childhood beyond conventional narratives of victimhood. Instead, it presents young individuals as agents of change who must navigate inherited struggles while forging their identities. In doing so, Basus work affirms the need for a multidimensional understanding of childhood that integrates psychological, literary, and postcolonial perspectives to recognize both the weight of history and the potential for self-determination.

6. Conclusion

Samit Basu deftly explores the intricacies of infancy in South Asian settings in *The Chosen Spirit*, emphasizing the relationship between identity formation, human agency, and societal expectations through the characters of Joey and Rudra. The text examines how societal control, monitoring, and deeply ingrained family structures influence young people's lives, portraying childhood as a dynamic balancing act between cultural customs and individual goals. Basu challenges the constraints placed on children while also highlighting their capacity for self-determination and development by tackling topics of expectation, trauma, and resilience. This research furthers our knowledge of childhood's psychological, literary, and postcolonial aspects while providing insightful information on the ways in which social influences affect the development of identity. The necessity of a more comprehensive, multifaceted approach to children is ultimately emphasized in this work of scholarship, which will enhance public discourse and encourage further conversations about autonomy and cultural progress.

Compliance with ethical standards

Disclosure of conflict of interest

No conflict of interest to be disclosed.

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