



Representation of Holden Caulfield as a Problematic Adolescent in J. D. Salinger's The Catcher in the Rye

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Abstract

*T*his paper examines Holden Caulfield's adolescent problems in J. D. Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye*. The paper argues that the psychological or mental states of the central, adolescent narrator-character together with the represented dominant social structure prevent Holden's psychological development alienating him from the society. The present paper moreover holds that Holden's adolescent problems and his maladjustment into the represented fictional society are mainly caused by the adult world or the established dominant conventions. The paper therefore firstly explores some terminologies related with the issue of adolescence period and the problems related with that relying on the terminologies offered primarily by the critics David Elkind, Erik Erikson and Kojin Karatani. Secondly, the paper, focusing on the textual and contextual elements, analyses Holden's adolescent problems within the fictional society focusing respectively on his *egocentrism, ego identity and repudiation of the adulthood* and finally his state as a *real child*.

Key Words Adolescent Problems, Egocentrism, Ego Identity, Repudiation of Adulthood, Real Child, Holden Caulfield, *The Catcher in the Rye*

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HOLDEN CAULFIELD AS A PROBLEMATIC ADOLESCENT

This paper analyses J.D. Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye* as a representation of Holden Caulfield's adolescent problems using the related terminologies offered by David Elkind, Erik Erikson and Kojin Karatani. The paper argues that the age-related psychological states of the central narrator-character together with the represented social structure can be taken as the primary socio-personal markers which, alienating him, prevent Holden's psychological development as a whole.

Being widely regarded as one of the most controversial novels of the 20th century, *The Catcher in the Rye* is about the adolescent Holden's four days of life. The narrative recounts the story of his leaving Pencey Prep and spending four days here and there in New York before facing his parent with the bad news. It is a psychological novel exploring the world of a seventeen-year-old adolescent, Holden Caulfield (Bloom 25). From the date of its publication, the novel has been either banned or charged several times for various reasons such as disregarding the conventional religious and social beliefs and instead revealing immoral and obscene sexual themes using an uncommon language. The novel nevertheless, on the one hand, has not been explored, the way it is done in this study, from the perspective of representing primarily adolescent problems and, on the other, it has not been analysed

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according to the terminologies offered by Elkind, Erikson and Karatani simultaneously.

Adolescence period is “relatively a new area of study” (Nayebpour 17). As defined by the famous child psychologist David Elkind, it is a “fantasy period of personal fables, imaginary audiences and feeling invulnerable” (“Egocentrism” 1029). Holden undergoes such experience within his narrative during 1950s Manhattan, New York. As his first person accounts show, the artificiality and *phoniness* of the adult world irritates him not allowing to fit into the social norms. It was not until the 20th century that adolescence became a burning topic for researchers in many fields ranging from psychology to sociology. Although most of the available literature on the novel is largely concerned with the adolescents’ biological development, the sociocultural setting has not gained enough attention while it deserves critical attention equally. Commonly referred to as a transitional stage, adolescence is directly linked to the norms of the adult society and the expectation that they are assumed to achieve is closely related to the skills and qualities of the adults in a specific society (Crockett 23). As Frank Furstenberg observes, scholars working on the adolescence field place much importance on this period as a “problematic life stage in modern society.” The number of problematic adolescents, according to him, boomed in modern society because of various reasons such as unemployment and the extension of education creating a social class of people neither child nor adult (897). Moreover, urbanization has its own role in the emergence of the new social class called adolescence too (Dehne and Riedner 13). This study however explores the relationship between Holden’s personal psychology in his adolescence period and the social conventions or the adult culture in order to show how the latter mould(s) the former affecting it destructively.

DAVID ELKIND’S EGOCENTRISM

Elkind defines adolescents as the developing peers in a society that have not yet reached their decision making stage and hence they are not able to proceed with their own decisions. However, the dominant social structure, as Elkind points out, does not recognize the problems related with the so-called adolescence period since “there is no place for teenagers in today’s society; consequently, teenagers are made more vulnerable to stress than ever before.” Compared to their early generations, adolescents are exposed to more kinds of problems throughout the 20th century (*All* 27, 18 and 25). Moreover, the young adolescents, according to Elkind, are usually haunted with the thought of being at the very centre all the time. Elkind is one of the psychologists mostly concerned with the problems related with the adolescents and their relation to the social environments. Elkind emphasizes that adolescence



is not a transitional period in which a person matures learning how to behave in the society; rather, it is a period that has its own place between childhood and adulthood (*Ties* 145). Likewise, Elkind argues that the pre-adult years are no more training years for the teens but a different period of life resembling adulthood in some aspects. Therefore, the newly emerged culture of adolescence, according to Elkind, has become more apparent in a way that this period can no longer be regarded as merely a transitional period (*The Hurried* 24). Apart from the maturing or developmental process between childhood and adulthood, the adolescence period has its own maturation beginning from early-adolescence and ending with late-adolescence. In their process into late-adolescence, the teens, according to Elkind, are forced to reach in this own words as soon as possible and Elkind refers to this as “hurried child” (*The Hurried* 31).

Elkind builds his famous “Egocentrism Theory” upon his argument that the way adolescents think is more idealistic than realistic. He names three features of his egocentrism theory; “the imagery audience,” “the personal fable,” and “apparent hypocrisy.” The first term refers to a self-conscious state in early adolescence period when the adolescent thinks of a hypocritical mass of people around him or her. The second term, “the personal fable,” refers to a state in adolescence period when the adolescent thinks of himself/herself as an unbeatable and untouchable person (Elkind, “Egocentrism” 1029 and 1031). Elkind’s last term, “apparent hypocrisy,” refers to a state that the adolescents live as if in a fable, meaning that they judge people around themselves with rules which are not valid or ruling for themselves. According to Elkind, one of many consequences of adolescent egocentrism is that the adolescent presumes a hypothetical attitude of the other people towards him/herself (“Egocentrism” 1030).

ERIK ERIKSON’S DEVELOPMENTAL STAGES

Erik Erikson’s theory of children’s psychological development is one of the best known and widely cited theories in psychological studies. In his theory, Erikson argues that psychological development consists of eight separate stages. His theory is mainly based on the effect of communal or social experience starting from birth and extending to death. The *ego identity* is what Erikson bases his theory on claiming that it is the conscious sense of a person developing through being exposed to the social interactions (Erikson, *Childhood* 222). Besides ego identity, according to Erikson, *a sense of competence* is also another issue which takes an active role in human beings’ psychological development. It prompts humans to handle with each of the stages and survive them successfully. According to Erikson, every



single person experiences some conflicts during and between these stages. Erikson coins “ego strength,” which implies a sense of fulfilment, to refer to the end of each stage if it is survived with glory. However, when a stage comes to its end with a sense of dissatisfaction, the adolescent becomes disappointed and most probably the consequences of the previous stage would affect the next stage negatively (Erikson, *Childhood* 222 and 223). Moreover, in each of the stages the person should get involved in clashes with opposite forces. In order to have a healthy psychological development, a balance between each of these opposite forces is needed. As his narrative reveals, Holden lacks such a balance.

The driving force in Erikson’s first stage, “Basic Trust versus Basic Mistrust,” is “hope.” The child in every challenge or difficult case would expect to end with a positive outcome. Furthermore, Erikson acknowledges that the sense of trust is in direct proportion to the development of the ego; however, he notes that the mother takes an active role in the development of the child’s sense of trust (*Childhood* 223). In the second stage, “Autonomy versus Shame and Doubt,” the child struggles to obtain autonomous body control. During this stage, powered mainly by “will,” the child wants to stand alone ignoring adult help in situations such as eating, walking or urinating, however; if the child fails in either of these situations, the consequence turns out to be something like shame or doubt (*Childhood* 226-227). Erikson’s third stage, “Initiative versus Guilt,” is when oedipal variables are important in relation to social interventions. The driving force of this state is however “purpose.” Erikson states that infantile sexuality, incest taboo, castration complex and superego all unite here to bring about that specifically human crisis during which the child must turn from an exclusive, pre-genital attachment to his parents to the slow process of becoming a parent, a carrier of tradition (*Childhood* 230). In this sense “initiative” is more related with parent imitation, and guilt occurs when the child is conscious about his or her imitation of the parents (*Childhood* 232). In the fourth stage (5-12 years), “Industry versus Inferiority,” the driving force is “competence.” Erikson states that for most children this is a stage calm, free from action, full of inner conflicts which would prepare required skills for later stages (*Childhood* 234).

The fifth stage (13-19 years), “Identity versus Role Confusion,” is the stage when adolescence period takes place and “fidelity” is its dominant drive. Holden belongs to this stage. Erikson points out that “With the establishment of a good initial relationship to the world of skills and tools, and with the advent of puberty, childhood proper comes to an end. Youth begins” (*Childhood* 234). “Identity Crisis” is what shapes this stage defined by Erikson as “turning point of increased vulnerability and heightened potential” (*Identity* 96).



The overall goal of this stage is to achieve “fidelity” and “ego identity” at the end of the adolescence period by avoiding “role confusion” (Boeree 5). Erikson insists that the danger in this stage is to be trapped in role confusion and “in most instances, it is the ability to settle on an occupational identity which disturbs individual young people” (*Childhood* 235). C. Boeree, on Erikson’s role confusion, states that “a common question adolescents in our society ask is a straightforward question of identity: “Who am I?”” (6). As an answer to this question, Erikson coins the word “Psychosocial Moratorium” claiming that “The adolescent mind is essentially a mind of the moratorium, a psychosocial stage between childhood and adulthood, and between the morality learned by the child, and the ethics to be developed by the adult” (*Childhood* 236). As a consequence of the failure in this stage through being trapped in “role confusion,” comes what Erikson calls “Repudiation.” The adolescent, at first step, repudiates his place in adult world, s/he can even repudiates his or her need for a distinct identity. Such adolescents tend to involve in any kind of action in order to avoid the irksome or troublesome demands of the common society (Boeree 6). According to Nicole Zarrett and Jacquelynne Eccles, during these years of turmoil (13-19 years), adolescents must also deal with changes in many of their social relationships, providing opportunities to develop and exercise their personal and social identities and further explore their autonomy (20). The main struggle for parents in this stage is to adjust the balance between “how much freedom to grant, and how much control to assume over the young person who is at once both a child and an adult” (Fleming 9-11).

Erikson’s sixth stage is “Intimacy versus Isolation” which acts based on “love.” The adult stages are much more unpredictable than the earlier stages as people vary in the way they succeeded in the previous stages (*Childhood* 237). The main goal in this stage is to achieve “intimacy” in social relationships and avoid “isolation.” Whether an acceptable one or not, in this stage one has a clear sense of identity, so unlike the adolescence period, this one is free from identity problems. Erikson’s developmental stages extend to the end of one’s life following with the seventh and eight stages, “Generativity vs. Stagnation (Middle adulthood, 25-64, or 40-64 years)” and “Ego Integrity vs. Despair (Late adulthood, 65-death),” when “care” and “wisdom” are respectively the dominant drives in the person’s life.

Pointing out the mysterious nature of transition from childhood into adulthood, Zarrett and Eccles argue that “It is also critical to understand what assets and needs are essential for keeping youth on healthy, productive pathways into adulthood” (14). Moreover, in agreement with Erik Erikson, Zarrett and Eccles emphasize that tasks of adolescence are



played out in a complex set of social contexts as well as in cultural and historical settings (15). Developmental theorists accordingly have identified several specific personal assets which are critical for healthy development— “having confidence in one’s ability to achieve one’s goals and make a difference in the world and strong desires to engage in important activities (intrinsic motivation), master learning tasks, and be socially connected” (Zarrett and Eccles 23).

Elkind criticizes Erikson’s theory stating that “The adolescent matures mentally as well as physiologically and, in addition to the new feelings, sensations and desires he experiences as a result of changes in his body, he develops a multitude of new ways of looking at and thinking about the world” (“Erik” 13). Elkind and Erikson share the idea that in the adolescence period a person has the ability to think of other person(s) and is highly concerned with what other thinks of him although, as Elkind points out, s/he may fail to “differentiate between the cognitive concerns of others and those of the self” (“Egocentrism” 1025). Following that, Elkind points out that “The adolescent, in a word, is an impatient idealist who believes that it is as easy to realize an ideal as it is to imagine it;” he nevertheless adds that “to the extent that the young person succeeds in this endeavour, he arrives at a sense of psychosocial identity, a sense of who he is, where he had been where he is going” (“Erik”13). Holden is represented as being unable of coming out of his *imaginary* world.

KOJIN KARATANI’S REAL CHILD PERSPECTIVE

In his book *Origins of Modern Japanese Literature*, Kojin Karatani discusses the discovery of the child claiming that “Although the objective existence of children seems self- evident, the ‘child’ we see today was discovered and constituted only recently” (115). Karatani describes adolescence as “the very state of conflicted consciousness” and he believes that the division between play and labour has a great deal of effect on the division between childhood and adulthood (121 and 133). Karatani suggests “The ‘discovery of the child,’ then, is a matter that cannot be considered in isolation but must be placed in the context of the capitalistic reorganization of contemporary society” (121). Scholars of children literature, according to Karatani, not only did fail to understand the phenomenon of child but also they did not or could not find the “real child” in literature (Karatani 118). Accordingly, he articulates that

The further “objective” psychological studies concerning the child progress, the more we lose sight of the historicity of “the child” itself. Of course, children have existed



since ancient times, yet "the child" as we conceive of it and objectify it did not exist prior to a particular period. The question is not what is elucidated by psychological research about children, but what is obscured by the very concept of "the child." (118).

Karatani derives some part of his argument from Van den Berg's discussion in *The Changing Nature of Man* that the first one to stop treating the child as an adult and treating the child as a child was Rousseau and that before Rousseau the child didn't exist. Karatani also comments on Erikson's concepts of identity and moratorium stating that although they are widely used in literary criticism, "we can no longer call these 'critical' concepts. This is because the writers do not perceive the historicity of the problematic of maturation itself, but rather treat it as if it were inherently human" (123 and 124). According to Karatani, the appearance of the youth was the consequence of the division between childhood and adulthood. Karatani therefore insists that "Psychologists who assume 'development' and 'maturation' to be self-evident fail to perceive that this division between childhood and adulthood is itself a historical product" (119). Karatani moreover compares achieving adulthood by means of a rite of passage to changing of masks; "depending on the culture, this may involve a change in hairstyle, dress, or name, or it may involve circumcision or the application of make-up or a tattoo. But we should not conclude that a substantive "self" is concealed behind these masks" (124). However, he notes that it would be a mistake to search for a *concrete self* under those masks which seems to be the main problem in Holden's case.

HOLDEN'S EGOCENTRISM

Egocentrism is mostly related with one's internal world and the person who shows egocentric qualities regards himself or herself and their own opinion as the most important and the most valid one. Before the term egocentrism, Elkind coined the word *hurried child*. Elkind's egocentrism theory mainly has three sub-categories which are the *imaginary audience*, the *personal fable* and *apparent hypocrisy*. Holden as a character is a good example that shows egocentric qualities as he exhibits what Elkind suggests by the world hurried child: "I don't give a damn, except that I get bored sometimes when people tell me to act my age. Sometimes I act a lot older than I am - I really do - but people never notice it. People never notice anything" (Salinger 9). Holden tries to act differently from his peers as he is indirectly forced by his society; however, people around him are unbalancing his psychological efforts. While some push Holden to act as if he is much older than his real age, only a few accept his



actions as those of an adolescent's. Such complex and complicated emotions result in as a sense of in-betweenness.

The reader encounters Holden in a scene where he is in a movie theatre although he is does not movies that much. The lady sitting next to Holden is crying since the movie is so touchy; however, she asks her little son who wants to use the bathroom to behave himself. The lady is unaware of the fact that her little son is already behaving himself. The mother wants the kid to hurry into some kind of adulthood by urging him to sit still. The adult world ignores what Holden observed in the movie theatre (Salinger 139 and 140). Children who suffer stress, which belongs to the adult world, are more likely to exhibit the syndromes of adults resulting in the adolescents like Holden. Furthermore, Holden recounts a situation when, while visiting the Museum of Natural History, he is killing time just before his date with Sally. His account here suggests the apparent hypocrisy:

The best thing, though, in that museum was that everything always stayed right where it was. Nobody'd move. You could go there a hundred thousand times, and that Eskimo would still be just finished catching those two fish, the birds would still be on their way south, [...]. Nobody'd be different. The only thing that would be different would be you. (Salinger 121)

The first point to notice in this quotation is the last word in the last sentence— *you*. Holden is not talking on behalf of himself but addresses the second singular pronoun. During the course of the novel, he shows his fears not knowing how to deal with conflicts, confusion and change. He does not want to accept the fact that he is also going to change in his next visit to the museum. He is pleased with the scene that he encounters in the museum. According to his understanding of the world, this is a liveable one which is always silent, unchanging and free from confusion.

As an egocentric inclination, Holden makes one apparent hierocratic statement denying that what is going to happen to his environment is going to pass over him first. Holden is in fact resisting against the notion of change through alienating himself from the society. He applies the rules valid for the others and when he himself is the person at the core of the event, he shows an escapist attitude. By wearing some “apparent hypocritical” attitudes, Holden repudiates the adult world. Another scene where he exhibits apparent hypocrisy is the time he encounters a mother of his classmate in the bus:

“How do you mean?”

“Well. He's a very sensitive boy. He's really never been a terribly good mixer with other boys. Perhaps he takes things a little more seriously than he should at his age.”



Sensitive. That killed me. That guy Morrow was about as sensitive as a goddam toilet seat. I gave her a good look. [...]. She looked like she might have a pretty damn good idea what a bastard she was the mother of. [...]. "Would you care for a cigarette?" I asked her. She looked all around. "I don't believe this is a smoker, Rudolf," she said. Rudolf. That killed me. (Salinger 55)

Holden seems to be very obsessed with what he calls the *phoniness* of the adult world. In every occasion, he does not refrain himself from stressing how he hates all the lies and deceits in the conversation of adults. His critique of the adult world is mostly about the artificiality that it entails. He is nevertheless unaware of the fact that he exhibits some adult practices by telling lies to Morrow's mother. By telling a different name other than his real name, he even misleads Morrow's mother. Holden fears to build an intimate relationship with his environment and so he avoids closeness with people. Even though he is well aware that Morrow is not a boy as his mother describes, still his conversation with Morrow's mother is full of lies about how Morrow is a good boy in school and how he is sociable in school. Therefore, despite his unawareness of the situation, it is quite clear that Holden displays some apparent hypocritical states.

Likewise, in the passage that Holden reveals the name of the novel, his little sister asks him about what he wants to do in his life and his replies: "I'm standing on the edge of some crazy cliff. What I have to do, I have to catch everybody if they start to go over the cliff— [...]. That's all I'd do all day. I'd just be the catcher in the rye and all" (Salinger 173). His response reveals a fantasy of idealistic childhood since he is talking as the protector of the childhood innocence. He speaks metaphorically by comparing the transition from childhood to adulthood to the crazy cliff that children go over. He has a very narrow world view and, according to him, all children are simply innocent and adults are artificial or superficial. His catcher in the rye fantasy reflects his innocence, his belief in pure, uncorrupted youth and his desire to protect that spirit; on the other hand, it represents his extreme disconnection from reality and his naive view of the world. As it is revealed, Holden's personal fable is to imagine himself as an invulnerable person unlike any other adolescent. Despite his ignorance of adulthood, Holden nevertheless fails to understand the fact that even to protect the childhood innocence one must be old enough.

Apart from the apparent hypocrisy and personal fable, another sub-category of egocentrism is *imaginary audience*. At the very beginning of the novel Holden warns his reader: "If you really want to hear about it, the first thing you'll probably want to know is where I was born, and what my lousy childhood was like, and how my parents were occupied



and all before they had me, [...], but I don't feel like going into it, if you want to know the truth" (Salinger 1). The way Holden addresses his implied reader reveals the notion of imaginary audience. Holden perceives that the outer world is particularly obsessed with doing and feeling. Holden's motive to wear the red hat is also for the same reason: "I was sixteen then, and I'm seventeen now, and sometimes I act like I'm about thirteen. Sometimes, I act a lot older than I am--I really do. But people never notice it. People never notice anything" (Salinger 9). He is obsessed with being recognized by the people in this environment. However, he finds out that his imaginary audience is ignoring him and this awareness enhances his psychological imbalance.

HOLDEN'S EGO IDENTITY AND HIS REPUDIATION OF THE ADULTHOOD

Holden is in the middle of the stage that Erik Erikson calls "Fidelity: Identity versus Role Confusion." He lacks the conscious sense of self which results in his lack of a concrete ego identity. Mr Antolini, Holden's teacher, giving him the last chance, warns him as following: "I have a feeling that you're riding for some kind of terrible, terrible fall. [. . .] The whole arrangement's designed for men who, at some time or other in their lives, were looking for something their own environment couldn't supply them with. [...] So they gave up looking" (Salinger 187). Such warning, instead of being helpful, serves as an accelerator of Holden's breakdown. Holden is experiencing both a *lack of sense of competence* and a *lack of ego strength*. He is completely unsettled and confused with an unstable ego identity in the middle of nowhere. He pictures Mr Antolini as a catcher in the rye who tries to catch him. Mr Antolini is the one who knows that Holden's end is not crystal clear. Despite all the efforts of Mr Antolini, it seems that Holden's late adolescent period comes to its end without an ego strength.

As a consequence of the lack of sense of fidelity, Holden is experiencing trouble in case of any predicament. Just before leaving Pencey, he is looking for a relief by any kind of closure: "I was trying to feel some kind of a good-by. I mean I've left schools and places I didn't even know I was leaving them. [...] but when I leave a place I like to know I'm leaving it. If you don't, you feel even worse" (Salinger 4). It seems that sometimes suspension leads to an expulsion just before Holden has a chance for any closure. However, in the above scene Holden does not go without being expelled. The type of closure here is not important for him, all he wants is a sense of goodbye. When leaving Pencey, he wants at least to feel a sense of vindication, triumph, sadness or regret.

The lack of the ego identity in Holden leads him to run constantly from everything and



everyone in life: “I don’t even know what I was running for--I guess I just felt like it” (Salinger 5). This statement represents Holden’s orientation towards his present life. His failure of achieving a conscious sense of self or, in other words, the identity crisis that he is experiencing, results in run aways whenever an opportunity is available. Not only from the others, Holden is also running away from his own feelings being anxious about what might happen if he ever stops long enough to examine himself and his emotions. While he is choosing the easier option, running away, in order to avoid any artificial adult relationships, he is unaware that his ego strength is in a constant loss of power at the same time. He wants to be a catcher in the rye as he has an egocentric belief that just like himself all other children and adolescents do not want to reach adulthood because of the artificiality it entails. While Phoebe, Holden’s little sister, is on the carousel, Holden looks at the scene from a different perspective:

Then the carousel started, and I watched her go round and round...All the kids tried to grab for the gold ring, and so was old Phoebe, and I was sort of afraid she’s fall off the goddam horse, but I didn’t say or do anything. The thing with kids is, if they want to grab for the gold ring, you have to let them do it, and not say anything. If they fall off, they fall off, but it is bad to say anything to them. (Salinger 211).

Holden is picturing these kids, who are trying to grab a gold ring, as those kids playing near some crazy cliff. Because of his lack of competence, Holden is worried about the possibility of their fall from the carousel just as there is possibility of their fall from the crazy cliff in this fantasy. What Holden fails to notice is the kids on the carousel are not suffering from the lack of a sense of competence like himself. Holden however admits that it would be inappropriate to say anything as it may demoralize or discourage these kids. Whether they want to grab those gold rings or not, is their own choice.

One of the most memorable symbols in the novel is Holden’s red hat. The most enlightening discussion of Holden is the one where Holden talks about his red hat with his roommate Ackley:

[Ackley] “Up home we wear a hat like that to shoot deer in, for Chrissake,” he said. “That’s a deer shooting hat.”

“Like hell it is.” I took it off and looked at it. I sort of closed one eye, like I was taking aim at it. “This is a people shooting hat,” I said. “I shoot people in this hat.” (Salinger 22)

It is quite clear from this passage that Holden wears the hat as a sign of individuality and independence. The role confusion and the identity crisis that he is experiencing enforce him



to search independence through alienating himself. When he is in this cynical frame of mind, Holden *shoot* people out of his failure to achieve conscious sense of himself and he expends all of his mental energy in order to detach from all people around him.

As an adolescent suffering from identity crisis, Holden finally suggests the reader at the very end of the novel: “Don’t ever tell anybody anything. If you do, you start missing everybody” (Salinger 214). He is in fact opening his inner world here to talk his authentic matter perceptions. He is well aware that putting oneself in a cynical shell cannot be a solution for overcoming the identity crisis. The more he keeps himself away from the outer world and its artificiality, the more he becomes obsessed with his inner world and gets worried. Holden’s lack of the sense of competence, willingly or unwillingly, turns him towards his inner world.

After leaving Pencey, Holden wants to give a call to some acquaintances. Despite that he suffers from a lack of identity as it is mostly developed through social interactions. This paradox is indicated in the following quotation:

The first thing I did when I got off at Penn Station, I went into this phone booth. I felt like giving somebody a buzz [...] but as soon as I was inside, I couldn’t think of anybody to call up. My brother D.B. was in Hollywood. My kid sister Phoebe [...] was out. Then I thought of giving Jane Gallagher’s mother a buzz [...]. Then I thought of calling this girl [...] Sally Hayes. [...] I thought of calling [...] Carl Luce. [...] So I ended up not calling anybody. I came out of the booth, after about twenty minutes or so. (Salinger 59)

Although Holden encounters opportunities for both physical and emotional intimacy, he gives up these opportunities all putting himself in a cynical armor. He fears to call people as he is not sure about what they would bring with them and what they would take away. As ego identity serves to protect the adolescent in the face of any change produced by the sudden changes of personal or situational factors, Holden is quite unlucky to bear such a lack of ego identity. He gives up calling all his acquaintance in the phone booth mostly because he has difficulty in creating a coherent and concrete inner state.

Now that Holden seems to be in a role confusion as well as in an identity crisis, he does not seem to be able to bring his adolescence period to its end successfully since the lack of a sense of competence prevent him to acquire an ego strength. Just as it is the case with almost every adolescent, Holden likewise repudiates the adulthood or, in other words, denies his place in the adult world. His repudiation of the adult world is mostly related with the codes and artificiality that it entails. He stresses this artificiality in every possible occasion with the



world *phony*. In a conversation with his teacher from Pencey Prep School on his failure in the courses, the teacher wants to give advice on life saying that it is a game and that one must play according to the rules:

“Life is a game, boy. Life is a game that one plays according to the rules.”

“Yes, sir. I know it is. I know it.”

Game, my ass. Some game. If you get on the side where all the hot-shots are, then it’s a game, all right—I’ll admit that. But if you get on the other side, where there aren’t any hot-shots, then what’s a game about it? Nothing. No game. (Salinger 8)

This conversation reveals the real state of Holden’s inner world and his reputation of the adult world since the reader is primarily illuminated about Holden’s silent contempt for adults. He is making a division of sides; however, his repudiation is so bitter that he is unaware of his being at the wrong side where he feels that the whole world is against him. As a consequence of his repudiation of the adult world, Holden at last builds a cynical psychological armor around himself in order to protect himself from the complexities of the world.

HOLDEN CAULFIELD AS A REAL CHILD

Although Karatani is complaining from the fact that the children in literature is a phenomenon constructed by the adult writes, his real child perspective is traceable enough in Holden’s perception of the world. Holden’s real child perspective does also function as in line with Elkind and Erikson terminologies. As a result of Holden’s egocentric qualities and his identity crisis, even if he is at the eve of his adult years, he still acquires the real child perspective:

The part that got me was, there was a lady sitting next to me that cried all through the goddam picture. The phonier it got, the more she cried. You’d have thought she did it because she was kindhearted as hell, but I was sitting right next to her, and she wasn’t. She had this little kid with her that was bored as hell and had to go to the bathroom, but she wouldn’t take him. She kept telling him to sit still and behave himself. She was about as kindhearted as a goddam wolf. You take somebody that cries their goddam eyes out over phony stuff in the movies, and nine times out of ten they’re mean bastards at heart. (Salinger 165)

The above text is a scene from a movie theatre where Holden wants to spend some time while wandering around New York. The obscurity here for Holden is the way the mother treats her child who is crying out of his need to urinate. The mother is warning him to sit still and to



behave himself in the movie theatre ignoring the fact that the way the child behaves is the natural way of behaving for a child that is crying for the thing he wants. The mother's perceptive of the child is the constructed child observed by the adult peers of the society. Under normal circumstances, being at the eve of adulthood, Holden should also perceive the child in the movie theatre the way the mother does; however, due to the identity crisis that he is suffering Holden couldn't get rid of the real child perspective.

Holden is obsessed with the perspective of the adults who don't bother to understand the very nature of childhood innocence and he also has difficulty in accepting the way adults behave children as if they are grown up. The problem with Holden is that the constructed perspective of childhood is too irrelevant and unacceptable for him to endure. In fact, it is evident that Holden is trapped between the authenticity of childhood and the artificiality of adulthood. One acceptable comparison here can be that the real child perspective is more related with the authenticity of childhood while the constructed child perspective is linked with the artificiality of adulthood:

Then the carousel started, and I watched her go round and round... All the kids tried to grap for the gold ring, and so was old Phoebe, and I was sort of afraid she's fall off the goddam horse, but I didn't say or do anything. The thing with kids is, if they want to grab for the gold ring, you have to let them do it, and not say anything. If they fall off, they fall off, but it is bad to say anything to them. (Salinger 211)

From Holden's real child perspective, one should allow a child, if necessary, to fall off from the carousel if it is their own choice to grab the gold ring. Holden's interpretation of this scene is of course a metaphor for the limitations and restrictions that are forced upon the children from the constructed perspectives of the adults. Furthermore, another evidence that Holden still has the real child perspective is the fact that he does not say or do anything to his little sister Phoebe on being careful and not grabbing that gold ring. The actual problem here is not that Holden still exhibits the real child perspective but is the adults' ignorance as they disregard the child as a child and instead hurry them into adulthood norms. The real child perspective can be regarded as the consequence of Holden's identity crisis and his egocentric qualities as discussed above; however, if the consequence of the real child perspective would be raised as a question, the answer is the repudiation of the adulthood. The more Holden sustains the real child perspective, the more he repudiates adulthood. When he is considered as a person going through Erikson's developmental stages, such a vicious cycle would worsen the conditions for Holden. Each tardiness or lateness in one of the stages directly or indirectly affects the progress of the following stage. As it is the case with Holden's current stage, the



repudiation of the adulthood refrains him from developing psychologically into the next stage or adulthood. However, Holden is not the one to be blamed for his problems as the case is not related with his own personal psychology as much as it is related with the sociocultural realities.

CONCLUSION

When read under the light of terminologies related with the adolescence period, Holden might be considered a problematic adolescent suffering not only from the inner conflicts deriving from his psychological state but also from the codes or norms related with adulthood and the artificiality it entails. The discussion over Holden's egocentric qualities and the identity crisis that he is experiencing is closely interconnected with his pursue of the real child perspective. It is conceivable that the adolescence period, which is already a dilemma for the adolescents in itself, is made more complicated with the affects and actions of the adult peers of the society. J. D. Salinger's novel reveals a character, Holden, going through a difficult, sustaining adolescence period. The main problem for Holden is the artificiality and the phoniness of the adulthood. It is the codes and norms of the adult world that irritates him and prevents him from fitting into the society that he lives in. The expectation for Holden's case is that he would somehow get rid of his problems at the end of novel through the narrativization of his traumatic experiences which start with turmoil, struggles with turmoil for a while and finally he ends with an emotional collapse. Moreover, his psychological as well as sociocultural states pull him towards pessimism as the adult society is pulling him into what seems to be his hell. The main reason for Holden's downfall does seemingly go back to the self-centred adults who ignore the very nature of the younger peers in the society. As a character being on the verge of adulthood, the sense of ambivalence that dominates him in that fictional society causes him, in one way or another, some troubles in his communication with the people around him. Holden is a depressed adolescent who desperately needs help, yet the biggest obstacle for him to overcome the problem, is himself. While trying to solve all his problems in his inner world, he closes all the doors connecting him to the outer world. By putting himself in a cynical armour to protect himself from the dangers of the artificial and hypocritical peers of the society, Holden makes the condition worse for himself. Although he is unaware that he has little choice, his resistance to enter adulthood through obeying its norms is very strong. Following that, it is possible to say that the artificial life style of adulthood and all their disgraces and degradations are Holden's main enemies. He communicates only with those who have not lost their purity and innocence by reaching



adulthood as he only cares for his little sister Phoebe and yearns for his dead brother Allie. In this cam, Chen's claim is acceptable as it is clear that Holden is struggling against maturity as he has an inner conflict which prevents him from communicating with his would-be adult friend and comrades (144). Holden is also well aware that he is surrounded by the artificiality and hypocrisy of the adult life. He confronts all of the *phoniness* of the adult world and endeavours not to lose his imaginary battle against dishonesty and false pretends. Being very busy in searching the phoniness around him, Holden is unaware of the fact that he himself has also quite a lot phony qualities. For one reason or another, his recounts in the novel are not based on any truth. Much of the conflict that Holden experiences are still relevant for the contemporary adolescents today as Holden can serve as a mirror to them. The adolescent problems that Holden is exposed affects deeply his life routines resulting in eccentric behaviours as well as cynical attitudes toward people, society and everything happening around him.

Note

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