

# Exploring the Phase of Adolescence in Anne Tyler's 'Ladder of Years'

**Ms.Neha Motwani**

*Ph.D. Research Scholar*

*Devi AhilyaVishwavidhyalaya, Indore (M.P.)(India)*

## **ABSTRACT**

*This paper aims at highlighting the nuances of adolescence age, the most difficult phase in the life of a child as well as the parents, in the work of Anne Tyler, 'Ladder of Years'. The paper demonstrates how the pre-adulthood of the children turns into a period of storm and stress in the life of the protagonist character of the novel, Delia Grinstead, who finds it extremely hard to come to grips with the mannerisms and distinct approach of her adolescent children. It brings into play the polar-opposite approach of the caregiver with that of the children, and surfaces the chaos that results as a consequence of the rift and chasm in the attitudes.*

**Keywords: adolescence, distinct approaches, chaos, chasm**

“Rejoice, O young man, in your youth, and let your heart cheer you in the days of your youth; Walk in the ways of your heart, and in the sight of your eyes; But know that for all these God will bring you into judgment” (Bibles 1088).

The vitality of bond shared by a child with its primary nurturer has been persistently stamped by psychologists. They have certified that their ties unbolt the tapestry, which acts as an archetype for later life liaisons. The good or bad impact, which the psyche of a child derives from its relationship with the caregiver, is a driving force in the development of its interpersonal affairs. Raising a child is a herculean task; fostering healthy liaison with the offspring is all the more arduous. The situation turns extremely winding from the moment the child enters into the phase of adolescence – a stage marked by great tumult and irksomeness, for it brings a drastic change and transition in the life of the child. The phase of adolescence brings physical transformation that a child has to come to grips with, which is unparalleled by the mental growth required to deal with all such major metamorphoses. Apparently, this chapter of life tremendously alters the attitude of the child and rather turns him into a sullen and boorish teen from that of an obedient and polite individual.

The adolescence age is rightly remarked as “a period of stress and storm. [It] can be traced back as far as writings of Plato and Aristotle. Plato (1953) described adolescent boys as constantly arguing and very easily excited. Aristotle (1941) described adolescents as “lacking in sexual self-restraint, fickle in their desires, passionate and impulsive” (“Time of Storm and Stress” 23 Mar. 2015). There was a point in time, when less regard was granted to the adolescence phase, in fact, it was not considered as a stage of existence in isolation with the other chapters of human life. A child and a teenager were previously regarded as closely-knit episodes. No distinction was granted to the two phases of life. Jean-Jaques Rousseau is the first person who brought into play segregation between the two. He posits adolescence as “[a] change in humour, frequent anger, a mind in

constant agitation, makes the child almost unmanageable. His feverishness turns him into a lion. He disregards his guide; he no longer wishes to be governed.”(Rousseau, 361)

Tension creeps into most of the parent-child ties, when the progeny enters the doorstep of adolescence. This trend is not inexorable, but has a run-of-the-mill propensity. Undoubtedly, it is, acutely, upsetting for both the entities. Be it the caregiver or the child, the two feel equally miserable and, often, wonder the things hampering the horse and buggy days of merry-making and family attunement. The teenagers, often, view their caregivers as unreasonably bitter, inconsiderate and iron-handed. Parents are equally amazed with the change in the child's behaviour and ponder over the issues, which challenge and alter the outlook of the child. They seem perplexed, for they hardly understand the reasons for such 'not-so-welcoming' alteration in their adolescent, who, explicitly, manifests traits of a hostile individual, who once happened to be complaint and culpable. This distinction of frame in reference, between the parent and the child, often rubs the salt in the already messed-up liaison. Adolescence, generally, knocks undesirable aperture in the bond of a parent and a child. Tyler has, diligently, highlighted these issues in her works, which rather gains momentum in its depiction in the *Ladder of Years*.

The writer has, strikingly, portrayed the afflictions that upset the central character of the novel, Delia Grinstead, and at the same time, has juxtaposed the things that bother her two children, Susie and Ramsay, who are in their late adolescence. The tantrums thrown by her mid-adolescent child, Carroll, all the more intensify her suffering. This piece of fiction not only divulges the wretchedness that Delia faces, as a consequence of her disparaged conjugal bond with her husband, Sam, but also explores the aches of motherhood that her adolescent children compel her to meet with. The very first instance of strained parent-child ties is, vividly, evinced in the illustration where Delia, after returning from the grocery shop early in the Saturday morning, finds Carroll, her “youngest child”, “the one who most resembled her”, in high horses (Tyler *Ladder* 16). Carroll's runnel of trivial issues that he cannot help to neglect is related to his annoyance over his disturbed sleep, all owing to his elder brother, Ramsay. In order to quick fix this problem, he demands a space of his own, “let me move across the hall”, he says (Tyler *Ladder* 17). Through the characterization of Carroll, Tyler has, remarkably, portrayed the stubbornness of will that teenagers resonate and the grimace they reflect over issues that hardly require so much pain. The tolerant air, Delia carries with her, even to the malfeasance of her children, in addition to her pacifism and pampering ways, muddles the liaisons of Grinstead children with their mother. The children take her for granted and turn a blind eye to her. They would overlook her requests and commands, viewing her as a worrisome individual. Often, Carroll would say, “What's your problem, Mom?” (Tyler *Ladder* 18). The only reaction she would give is “press a hand to her forehead” (Tyler *Ladder* 18). The animosity, Carroll displays, often, switches her into contemplative moods. She would muse over and worry for what replaced “her sweet, winsome Carroll” into “this rude adolescent, flinching from his mother's hugs and criticizing her clothes and rolling his eyes disgustedly at every word she uttered” (Tyler *Ladder* 18).

A mother's love, like Delia's, is unconditional and untainted for her children. Subconsciously, somehow, a child is aware of this verity and, therefore, takes as gospel that no matter what, he will be taken care of. As a baby grows, the love he has in store for the mother begins to fade, as he embarks from the elementary stage of its life to the upper leg. This is carried on, not without an intent, but because the priorities in its life change with time.

Romantic partners and peers push the parents at the backseat in the ride of life. The presence of the nurturer hardly carries any weight. This holds true for Delia's children. Susie and Ramsay desire to dwell in a residence away from their parents' home. They were "miffed beyond belief that the family finances forced them to live at home" (Tyler *Ladder* 18). Though, part of their preference for it and indignation that spark are attributable to the culture of America.

The hot-headed Grinstead adolescents realize the worth of their mother, only when Delia escapes from their life. Nevertheless, they are too stubborn to admit the fact that her absence turned their world bottom-side-up. A deep hollowness strikes them. There is no one in the Grinstead clan, who could understand their pain. Even Sam fails to decode this fact. Their mother's desertion surfaces the problems in their relationship with their haughty father, who could hardly sympathies with the afflictions that his dear ones go through. Neither could he understand the psychic turmoil, his wife suffered, nor could he grasp the causes, which troubled his teenagers.

In Bay Borough, Delia takes a job of hireling to nurse Noah Miller, a twelve years old son of Joe Miller. Mr. Miller is abandoned by his wife, who was wrongly diagnosed with cancer, but when truth punched the clock, she realized the mortality of life and left her family in order to chase her dreams. Noah, a sweet and adorable boy, swiftly, alters to a sullen and overcautious adolescent. Quite like Delia's children. Once while she is on a shopping spree so as to buy clothes for Noah, she encounters her youngest son. "The feeling that swept through her was so wrenching, like the grip of some deep, internal fist, that she understood for the first time how terribly she had missed him" (Tyler *Ladder* 201). Delia showcases all the traits of a typical mother, who loves her children, despite all the hurts and negligence from them. She is unlike most of other maternal figures, who seek refuge from the offspring in Tyler's canon. She is an antithesis to Pearl Tull, Lacey Debney, Alberta and Alicia. It is quite clear that Carroll retreats to his mother, his safe haven, her walking away from them creeps a vacuum in the lives of her children. But, even after months passed to the point when he meets his mother, he does not seek physical warmth from her. "He was trying, unobtrusively, to step out from under her hand" (Tyler *Ladder* 201). He is the same adolescent child, more concerned and vigilant to the passersby, hardly paying any heed to her mother's emotions. Throughout their meet, Delia, somehow, manages to stretch the time of togetherness and enquires for home and children. Carroll, for once does not bother to ask for his mother's wellbeing. More to the point, it is the football player, Rick Rack, who runs the restaurant as well that grabs Carroll's attention, not Delia. His mother makes a demonstration of her acquaintances and friends with much pride, but too much of this offends the child, who moves away saying, "Never mind me, just tend your pals" (Tyler *Ladder* 208). This meeting with him is more painstaking than the comfort it provided to her. It is because of the edgy conduct of her children, inclusive of Ramsay, who though drives all the way to Bay Borough, but does not bother to meet his mother. It strikes to Delia that, perhaps, Susie too accompanied them, but she is not sure of it. Ultimately, she is forced to believe, "Carroll had not . . . ruined by her leaving. He had survived just fine, and so had his brother and sister" (Tyler *Ladder* 210). Delia rings the bell to the philosophy of Noah's grandfather, Nat, that, "we ought to forget our grown offspring as easily as cats forget theirs" (Tyler *Ladder* 210).

The false acumen that Delia holds onto, tremors when she returns back to her home, for the sole purpose of attending her daughter's wedding. At the point when she reaches her home, she gets acquainted to the fact that Susie is unrelenting to marry her boyfriend, until he resolves some issues that bother her. The event seems

static; it compels Delia to seek clarification of her daughter's plans for marriage. This is on account of making her travel arrangements, to swerve back to Bay Borough. This very interrogation gets on Susie's nerves, for when she needs her mother the most, Delia is making attempts to get back to her life in the other town. She explodes, "oh, just go, if you're so set on it! . . . Gallivanting off down the beach and leaving Dad just wandering the house like the ghost of someone, and your children . . . orphaned, and me setting up a whole wedding on my own without my mother!" (Tyler, *Ladder* 293). Apparently, her children's still surface is a mere illusion, which masks the emotional turmoil they wrestled with in the absence of their mother. A mature comprehension of this fact makes Delia stay with them in the same old house of her father.

Adolescence is a phase that brings in great farrago of misinterpretations. This is so true, not only for the child but for the caregivers as well. Tyler's work stamps this fact in a very strong way through the protagonist character, Delia Grinstead, and her children, who behave in a rather bewildering way towards the mother. It truly manifests the load of immense responsibility and patience required on part of the parents, especially the mother, to deal with the surly and churlish adolescence. The work, remarkably, highlights the need to bring about balance by the caregivers in their bond with the children, and a more mature approach to be adopted by them, so as to retain the love and affection as a mark of the unmatched liaison that marks the relationship of a parent and a child.

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