

Nirmalya (Chaudhuri's novel *The Immortals*) Rebellious

Character Nirmalya Sengupta is the son of son of a rich man, who has the leisure to indulge in reading philosophy and take singing lessons and think about the 'higher' things in life, while his friends seek jobs with salaries. He can walk about the streets of Bombay and hang out in expensive hotels and restaurants in a torn kurta and sandals, while others dress to gain respectability. In fact, he makes it a point to turn up at his parents' dinner parties in a dishevelled state. But he is only fifteen or sixteen years old, and we forgive him his self-importance and irresponsibility as the natural qualities of an adolescent. His reading fires his imagination, to admire the transcendental things in life and scorn the squalid practicalities. He is critical of classically-trained musicians who spurn tradition and teach the wives of wealthy men to earn a living. He is similarly upset with his own mother (one of his guru's students) for the same reason: that she is contributing to the decay of tradition. He is fired by the ideas of philosophy, rather than the demands of the workplace, and, as his mother gently points out, he has a tendency to turn 'simple things into 'portentous adventures.' For all his teenage faults, we like this dreamy young boy. He is a loner and avoids boys of his own age. He even refuses to take part in the great Hindu festivals because he dislikes the recent addition of fire crackers and sparklers. He prefers the serenity of his own mind, of his own home and even (shock horror for a teenager) of his parents.

Activities The teenage Nirmalya spends most of his time reading, practicing music and wandering about Bombay. He goes to coffee shops and book stores, always with torn clothes and a well-thumbed copy of Will Durant's *The Story of Philosophy* in his back pocket.

Illustrative moments

Rebellious Nirmalya's rebellious nature simmers away beneath the surface of even scene, growing steadily as the comforts he enjoys from his father's business increase. One scene, in an early chapter, displays his puritanical streak that clashes with his parents' life-style. His father has brought him and his mother to an expensive restaurant on the Bombay seafront to take afternoon tea. After sitting down at a specially reserved table with a fine view over the harbour, Nirmalya declares, with a shake of the head, 'I can't eat here.' He has seen a scavenger boy, about his age, defecating on the seafront. Nirmalya explains that he won't eat there until Shyam, his music guru, who comes from a poorer family, can also eat there. His parents, ever indulgent, are dismayed but rise and leave with their son, although Mrs Sengupta glanced back at the tray of cakes with disappointment.

Withdrawn The philosophical Nirmalya is also a reserved and withdrawn character, almost ascetic in his disdain for wealth and its luxuries. A good illustration of this quality is described when his father buys a new luxury flat in a high-rise, and Nirmalya wants to stay behind in the old house, which 'faced the sea with its roaring waves, yet seemed serene to him.' As the author elaborates, 'Nirmalya felt bitter and unhappy at the idea of moving house, and wandered sullenly about the flat in La Terrasse [the old house] as if he were looking for a hiding-place in which to secrete himself.' It is this interior quality that, paradoxically, draws us to him. We feel that we are let inside him, where no one else is allowed.