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**A CHILD TO AN INDEPENDENT WOMAN: DEPICTION OF NELL IN NEAL STEPHENSON'S
THE DIAMOND AGE**

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An independent woman is a strong woman, whose self-confidence is very high. A strong woman learns through many circumstances from her childhood. Though minor hiccups and bumps come in life, she never gets disheartened. Instead she uses them to evolve herself. Society and its culture play a major role in the growth of a child to a woman.

The Diamond Age, published in 1995, is the fourth novel of Neal Town Stephenson, an American writer. He is known for historical fiction and speculative fiction. He has also written novels under the pseudonym Stephen Bury along with his uncle George Jewsbury. All his novels draw on sociological and technological ideas. He has received many awards like Hugo Award, Arthur C. Clarke Award, Lucus Award, Prometheus Award and Science Fiction Chronicle Reader Award. *The Diamond Age* is a bildungsroman story, focused on a young girl named Nell. This novel has won both Hugo and Locus Award and also shortlisted for the Nebula Award. There is a connection between the character Y.T. in *Snow Crash* and Miss Matheson in *The Diamond Age*. Miss Matheson indirectly referred herself as a hard-edged skateboarder.

This paper deals with the life of a young Thete girl Nell, later who becomes an independent woman and leader of a group. Thete refers to a person or group who does not belong to any tribe and equal to the lowest working class people. Nell, through her self-determination, learns many things from the Primer and the society she lives. Primer is an interactive book, which is designed to react to its owner's environment. It teaches to survive and develop the intellectuality of its owner in that environment. The Primer uses lessons and stories to guide the reader on their journey to adulthood. This helps her to move towards the self-realization. She not only learns from the Primer but also from the people she meets.

In *The Diamond Age*, Nell is the protagonist, who lives in the Leased Territories, a lowland slum erected on the artificial buildings. At the age of four, Nell receives a stolen copy of Primer from her brother Harv. This Primer is actually designed by Hackworth for Elizabeth, granddaughter of wealthy Neo-Victorian Finkle McGraw. Hackworth illegally designed two other copies of Primer for his own daughter Fiona, among that two he loses one in the theatre. This crime of producing illegal copy causes Hackworth's social downfall and as a punishment he is exiled from the New Atlantis phyle for a decade. The three different copies of the primer fall into the hand of three different girls, who belong to different cultural and social backgrounds. The interaction of society, culture and education plays a role in shaping the future of each individual.

Social Anthropology is applied for the analysis of the novel. Anthropology is the study of various elements of human beings in order to understand the origin, evolution of various beliefs and social customs. The word anthropology is the combination of 'anthropos' and 'logos' which means 'humans' and 'discourse' or 'science' respectively. University of Calicut has compiled the definitions of anthropology, in that Jacobs and Stern explain that "Anthropology is the scientific study of the physical, social and cultural development and behaviour of human beings since their appearance on this earth" (5). Piddington's classification of anthropology explains that anthropology divides into two main divisions physical anthropology and cultural anthropology. Cultural anthropology further divides into prehistoric anthropology and social anthropology.

Social anthropology is the study of interaction of human beings with the society. Dr.M.N.Srinivas defines social anthropology as "it is the comparative study of human societies. Ideally it includes all societies, primitive, civilized and historic" (8).

The culture and the society in which the person lives, has some impact on the person. In *The Diamond Age*, the three girls Nell, Fiona and Elizabeth live in different culture and society. They studied in the same school and also acquire knowledge from the Primer. Nell reaches height in her life but Fiona and Elizabeth have no change in their life. This is because the situation they undergo in their life and the lack of self-determination in them. Nell observes the situation carefully even in the Primer and she learns something from that. She learns to fight from the Primer and she fights in the real life with his school senior Kevin and she knocks him out. The situation is explained as "Kevin said, "you win" (Stephenson 187). He approached Nell holding out his right hand to shake. But Nell had seen this one too, and she knew it was a trick" (Stephenson 187). Nell uses the situation in real life to express the things that she learns through the Primer. The society paves way for her to enrich herself.

After the death of Nell's father, her mother Tequila has many boyfriends. And some of them hurt Nell and Harv brutally. Nell said to the Primer that "'Sometimes he would burn their skin with cigarettes too" (Stephenson 200)... He was about to wake up and hurt her some more" (Stephenson 204). Nell gets idea from the Primer to tackle the situation and she applies it to reality. She hits Burt, Tequila's boyfriend, with screw driver and escapes from the house with Harv. The novel depicts this as "The little boy and the little girl were running away to the Land Beyond" (Stephenson 206). The decision of Nell to run away from home, instead of tolerating all the hurting, is the idea given by the Primer. It changes her future completely. The hurt caused by Burt makes her to be brave to hit him back and decide her future.

An escape from Leased Territories to Dovetail, changes Nell's life entirely. She enjoys the nature for the first time in her life. She astonishes by seeing the real horse in Dovetail. She went to Dovetail to see one of her mother's boyfriend Brad, a blacksmith. But she is supposed to live with the constable Moore, a semi-retired soldier. She started her schooling there along with Fiona and Elizabeth. Nell does the things carefully unlike the other two girls. Her past has taught her the importance of thinking and it is depicted that "The difference was that Nell always knew where she was going. Elizabeth and Fiona never did. This was a question not of native intelligence but of emotional stance" (Stephenson 287). The society makes Nell to develop her emotional stance and the incidents that she comes across her life make her stronger.

Nell's teacher Miss Matheson is very fond of Nell. Even when she is bed ridden, she calls Nell to spend her last moments with her. Nell expresses herself that she reaches the age of eligibility and she has to study the art of programming. Nell's self-determination never lets her down. Miss Matheson utters her last words as "You are different" (Stephenson 353). The way Nell thinks and the way she handles things are different from the other girls. She does not get fed up for any crucial situation, instead she thinks and handles it tactfully. Though she lives far away from her mother and brother, she does not get depressed like Fiona.

Nell has the eagerness of knowing Princess Nell's story in the Primer, which resembles the incidents of her life. After completing her schooling, she drives out for her training at the Victorian academy and starts her job as a script writer for the games to girls. She find that most of the girls, who are orphans, are the members of Han tribe, which is formed by hundreds and hundreds of orphan girls for themselves. They like the way in which Nell handles things in the society and they make Nell as their leader. "It was Nell's tribe, and they had come for their leader. Nell spun on her heel and made for the stairway" (Stephenson 478). The quality of leadership comes to her by lot of sacrifice and self-determination in her life.

Nell from her childhood undergoes many obstacles without any reason. But she comes out successfully without any failure. The society has taught her many things that mark her as a leader in the future. Her life is depicted as "One moment, her life had been a meaningless abortion, and the next it all made glorious sense" (Stephenson 478).

Nell's life is a good example for all women. Obstacles may not stay permanent in one's life. Fiona, who is fed up by her father's sentence for ten years, gets depressed and does not achieve anything. As a young girl, Nell undergoes a lot of suffering and learns many lessons from the society. Her capability of thinking and self-confidence raises her as a leader of Han's tribe. She observes and learns from the life of many people in

the society like Constable Moore, Miss Matheson, Brat and Princess Nell from the Primer. Stephenson portrays Nell as a brave girl with tolerance and self-determination. As a result, she reaches the crown of Han's leader from a young that girl.

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