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IDENTITY CRISIS IN SELECT NOVELS OF SALMAN RUSHDIE

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ABSTRACT

Salman Rushdie's novels deal with the themes of diaspora and post colonialism; his characters seem lost in-between two worlds and they must create a new space, a 'third space'. Since the dawn of human civilization, the urge and the longing of human beings for 'Identity' is unique. The efforts made by each person lead to the goal of 'Identity.' Without identity, a human being is nothing. In order to ascertain one's own identity here on the earth, human beings prefer different mediums such as name, house, fame, property, popularity, etc. The question of identity is the most controversial issue in postcolonial time and literature and it can be regarded the most important because of its crisis exist in all postcolonial communities. Due to the circumstances of post colonial era and the problematic conditions that faced newly freed nations and countries in their search and formation of self identity the crisis floated on the surface. The issue of identity is not a clear and fixed concept as it may imagined, that led to the crisis and became a phenomena as Mercer argues "identity only becomes an issue when it is in crisis, when something assumed to be fixed, coherent and stable is displaced by the experience of doubt and uncertainty." In the following of World War II, the act of decolonization and libration of nations under colonial rule provoked a noteworthy move in the direction of recreating social and individual identities. Through this paper, I present the issue of Identity Crisis making use of characters and situations from 'Midnight's Children' 'Shame' and 'Grimus' by Salman Rushdie in the most comprehensive manner.

Keywords: Identity crisis, Longing for independence, Quest for identity, Social Content.

Introduction

The psychological term 'Identity Crisis' is defined as 'a period of uncertainty and confusion in which a person's sense of identity becomes insecure, typically due to a change in their expected aims or role in society. Ericson, a German born psychologist and psychoanalyst known for his theory on 'psychological development of human beings,' coined the term. Identity develops through experiences of the crisis and contradictions which every individual had to overcome, in order to raise to the next development phase.

Question of identity has remained a source of conflicts and has led to wars in history. The search for and discovery of identity has been a recurrent journey throughout humanity's history, defined and explored in literary works.

Identity crisis is the major suffering of the many people in the present day world. It is quite natural every one thinks of their own identity to grow themselves with self respect. Afro-American, British and Indian every writer nowadays focused their writings keeping in the mind the sense of identity. There is no exception to the writer like Salman Rushdie. His novels also reflect the question of identity and explore the philosophical significance of ideals and concepts. He introduces a number of characters who are so intimately connected and when they separate they share the identity of one another.

The present study comprises the concept of lost identity in Rushdie's novels and the quest of individuals for the self. Rushdie's field of fiction constitutes a major segment and the characters struggle to establish their identity but all in vain. To have the deep observation of the characters that lose their identity and self are as they are puppets in the hands of fate. The characters that lose their identity, do not always know what they are searching for but still the search persists for some dynamic quality which burns within them. In his novels, Rushdie tries his best to express the identity crisis and concentrates on the submerged internal world of an individual. A keen observation of the lost identity of individuals in society brings to the fore, the pathetic condition of their being, which at the center of all human beings has sadly been robbed of from their own identity.

SALMAN RUSHDIE

Salman Rushdie is one of the most talked-about novelists of modern times widely acclaimed for the bold conception of history, politics and identity for about a period of seventy years covering major incidents of various countries. The problem of identity crises plagues many characters, right from the very start in the novels of Salman Rushdie, and also reflects the fragmented identity with its autobiographical shades. It is not surprising that the identification is made and tasted. Salman Rushdie himself is the victim of identity through migraines and cultural dislocation early in his life in England. Most of his novels deal with the theme of identity in a hostile world and the other themes of migrancy-cultural heterogeneity, the fragmented and hybrid nature of identity that are equally the pet themes of literary postmodernism that finds more expression. His novels reflect the question of identity and explore the philosophical significance of ideals and concepts. He introduces a number of characters who are so intimately connected and when they separate they share the identity of one another. The study of the novels written by him reveals how the characters suffer from the identity crisis. He also finds solutions to resolve the problem of crisis. He discusses ones identity is a part of universe and individual identity is its entity. Most of Rushdie's novels concern themselves with the identity of character and describe the violent struggles between different religions, classes, languages, and geographical regions.

There are many writers who deal with the theme of identity, but Rushdie has explored the theme of identity in such a way that no one has dealt with it. It is unique and interesting that he has portrayed, sketched and exaggerated the theme of identity among many characters, seems bizarre to all. He makes them play in such a way that it seems real how they become the victim of lost identity.

IDENTITY CRISIS

Rushdie's novels faithfully delineate the predicament of people with a partial identity. The emphasis and the sense is never absent from his mind. The novel *Midnight's Children* records the experiences of three generations of the Sinai family. But alongside of the contemporary history of the nation, we have an account of the personal dilemma of the narrator-protagonist, Saleem Sinai. The novel turns out to be .the novel of national angst. The novelist makes it a point to convey the national confusion and crisis through the protagonists: But imagine the confusion in my head! Where, behind the hideous face, above the tongue tasting of soap, hard by the perforated eardrum, lurked a not-very-tidy mind, as full of bric-a-brac as nine-year-old pockets(p.202).abysmal lack of character is indicated by something lacking in the region of the chin. (p.124). Although Saleem claims to be a swallower of lives and initiator of actions, his personality is fractured and fragmented and merged and superimposed. This confusion is a major source of Saleem's plight. The

novelist has tried to deal with the issue of Saleem's identity in considerable detail. The two most important correlates of his identity presented in the novel are his personal appearance and his equivocal heritage. There is something uncanny about Saleem's personal appearance. As he himself confides, his large moon-face was too large: too perfectly round (p.124). This fact suggests a lunatic touch about him. His unseemly birthmarks spread down my western hairline, a dark patch colored my eastern ear., which are aggravated by his rampant cucumber of the nose. And temples like stunted horns. (p.124). These features are symbolic of lack of harmony not only in his face but also in his personality and certain bestiality. "All my life, he adds, consciously or unconsciously I have sought out fathers." (p.426). Thus giving birth to parents has been one of my stranger talents. (p.243). Besides his real mother Vanita and his putative mother Amina, the midwife Mary Pereira, who gave a new life to Saleem by baby-swapping, was a kind of mother to him. Later, he was entrusted to the care of his aunt Pia and was thereby promoted to occupy the sacred place of the son she never had. (p.243). There is the snake charmer Picture Singh, who rescued him from Bangladesh, and was the last in the line of men who have been willing to become my fathers. (p.378). How can a person whose heritage is so nebulous, be certain about his identity!

Names, in the Indian context, have peculiar pertinence; they grow inward and influence the conduct and psychology of the bearer. As Michael Murphy points out, the name surrounds us all our life like a cloak. A name can shape a life. When an adult forgets his name, it does not auger well for him. Saleem acquires a makeshift name, i.e. Buddha, which really means here an old senile person and not Gautam Buddha the Enlightened, as is clear from the contextual clues. Moreover, despite all efforts on the part of Parma, he becomes sterile. Both the loss of name and of virility are analogues suggesting Saleem's identity crisis. He is, in fact, an identity-defying compound of Moslem, Hindu and British. He also seems to typify the ambiguous identity of India itself. Significantly enough, his teacher, who incidentally pulls out a handful of air and thus leaves a Kashmir-like tonsure on his head, compares his face to the whole map of India. (p.9). Even otherwise, Saleem's fortune is indissolubly chained to those of my country. (p.9). Like his national identity his personal identity is always at flux.

His problems, plights and misfortunes are typical of those who have failed to realize and assert their identity. As he himself confides, his catastrophe is irreversible: I'm tearing myself apart, can't even agree with myself, talking, arguing like a wild fellow, cracking up, memory going, yes, memory plunging into chasms and being swallowed by the dark, only fragments remain, none of it makes sense any more (p.503)

What makes his case even more pitiable is the fact that Saleem makes little serious efforts to realize his potential and that what little efforts are made by him are doomed to result in failure. Thus, the saga of Saleem Sinai's 'clock ridden' crime-stained birth and the various experiences that he subsequently acquires is thus a pathetic account of the sad loss of identity and merciless 'chutnification' of possibilities of an otherwise promising person.

Shame, the third novel of Salman Rushdie, deals with a smaller canvas and the main characters are representations of the real people. The main figures in the story resemble the historical personages, but most of the specific details are not historically true. The exploration of an individual's as well as a community's history gets complicated mainly due to three reasons:

(a) Time and space always impose certain restrictions on history. A creative writer-turned-historian intends to transcend these limitations.

(b) There is a strong likeliness of history turning into a legend.

(c) History encompasses a wide area of study involving various as well as different aspects and happenings in a society.

Rushdie adopts many strategies to overcome the problems of a historical novelist. They include using surrealism and symbolism in the place of realism, discarding chronology, intertwining the past and the present and taking recourse to allegory. The limited abstract world of Shame abounds in symbols and suggestive images, typical of the tales of The Arabian Nights, The narrator of the novel, like that of Midnight's Children, is a symbol of the country he belongs to. Thus the writer implements a further important strategy of presenting the history of the nation with a lot of human interest.

Rushdie's *Shame* reflects the emotions of embarrassment, humility, decency, repentance of hostile words and sense of guilt for a crime. He enumerates shameless acts like untruths, ill treatment of women or gender bias, smuggling, lack of patriotism, and incorrect way of exercising franchise; ironically and politically. Rushdie tries to show how shame is a part of "the architecture of the society that the novel describes." He says; "Shameful things are done; lies, loose living, disrespect for one's elders, failure to love one's national flag, incorrect voting at elections, overeating, extramarital sex, autobiographical novels, cheating at cards, maltreatment of women-folk, examination failures, smuggling, throwing one's wicket away at the crucial point of a Test Match: and they are done shamelessly."

Gender is a topic that is often viewed through a one-dimensional lens. The distinction between members of the opposite sex and the physical attributes that each should possess appear to be quite obvious. However, the typical assumption of male versus female being the only defining aspect of gender is not so simplistic. When viewed in terms of masculinity and femininity, the idea of gender can be explored on a much more broad and complex level. In the context of postcolonial literature, this is frequently the case. Post colonialism focuses on cultural and national identity in literature produced by the people of current or former colonies in places like the Middle East, South Asia, Africa, and the Caribbean. Many postcolonial authors delve into the issue of gender when expressing their ideas about post colonialism. How does an individual that lives in, comes from, or has history with a certain country or region which has been colonized, shape his or her identity? In the work of many Middle Eastern and South Asian authors, gender is one of the best tools to use when exploring identity. In Salman Rushdie's novel *Shame*, masculinity and femininity are important factors in how certain characters function. This growing desire to define identity as it relates to the characters in *Shame* is not only confined to the individuals in the story, but it is also an issue relevant to the nation of Pakistan as well. Most of the characters in the story are symbolic references to actual political figures in Pakistan. In addition, they also represent different periods in the country's history, both political and social.

Gender identity is an individual's self-conception as being male or female. Who we are and how we learn to think and act is very much a matter of whether we are male or female, that is, gender determines the identity of an individual. The term 'gender' refers to non-biological, culturally and socially produced distinctions between men and women, between masculinity and femininity, that reflects power and culture as well as social function. Gender differences result from socialization. Society establishes a set of cultural expectations for each gender and children are taught to conform to what society expects.

Biologically there are clear differences between men and women. But culturally and socially the differences are used to set the stereotypes of gender roles. They are viewed as different and unequal. So from clothing to choosing career they are expected to be different and unequal. Mukherjee's heroines are presented accordingly in the social and cultural roles. It is expected that a woman should rear children, be a caretaker, do household chores, be protected, be a wife and mother. She is to be emotional, compassionate, less material but have superior verbal abilities and better language skills. It is a fixed or 'essential' identity of woman.

Gender identity markers are – clothes, ornaments or jewelry, language, hairstyle, the way they behave, interact and communicate, even the size, shape and style of shoes, handkerchief etc. The quantity of food which they eat does tell the gender identity. Language and tradition in many societies insist that every individual be categorized as either man or woman. They have different functions, work, duties etc which are assigned by society. Gender consciousness is within an individual. It does express through individual's each and every act and word.

Grimus, which was an experiment to show the plight of estrangement and alienation. The story deals with immortality, generated worlds, surreal things, other scopes both interior and exterior, and castaways. The story follows Flapping Eagle, a young Indian who receives the gift of immortality after drinking a magic fluid. Flapping Eagle, an Axona Indian, is ostracized from the society because of his fairer complexion. His mother perished just after few moments of his arrival in this mortal world. His sister Bird Dog sheltered him and offered him with the preparation of interminable life and after that, she evaporates mystifyingly from the terrestrial of the Axona. Flapping exiles from his people, and mooches the world for centuries in search of his

sister and his identity and in this mission, after wandering for 777 years 7 months and 7 days; he falls through the fleapit in the Mediterranean Sea. Because of his eternity, he lands in an equivalent dimension at the preternatural Calf Island. People of this island are consecrated with immortality yet fed up with the monotony of life. However, they are disinclined in giving up their immortality and happen in a stagnant community under an understated and creepy authority. In the search of his identity Flapping is weary of the mundane reality of immortality hence wants to get rid of the Grimus effect. The novel apparently demonstrates that migrants have no future, neither on Mortal Island nor on immortal one. They could wander wherever they wish but without having their heart with them.

Salman Rushdie's first published novel, *Grimus*, follows Flapping Eagle, an immortal Axona Indian who searches an alternate dimension known as Calf Island for his missing sister, Bird-Dog. Guided by Virgil Jones—an exiled associate of Grimus, the dimensions creator—Flapping Eagle must climb Calf Mountain, survive the mind-altering dimension fever, and infiltrate the complex society of K, the town where others who have chosen immortality have come to live. By learning all he can about K, Flapping Eagle hopes to find the mysterious Grimus, uncover the secret of his sisters disappearance, and locate the source of Calf Islands shifting dimensions—the Stone Rose, an ancient instrument of imagination that controls dimensional space.

Grimus is his first novel which came out as a debut to his professional fictional career. This novel is commonly described as a science fiction; a fantasy novel set in an imaginary island beyond the scope of time and place and as a quest novel based on ideas from mystic poetry. It is pre-fixed on a twelfth-century mystic narrative poem called, *The Conference of the Birds* by the Persian Poet Fariduddin al-Attar in which twenty-nine birds are said to be persuaded by a hoopoe, a messenger of a bird god, to make a pilgrimage to the god. They set off, go through valleys, and eventually climb the mountain to meet the god at the top, but they find that there is no god there; the birds themselves have become the god. The novel raises philosophical questions about truth.

In the beginning, we come to learn that Flapping Eagle, the central character, is exiled from —Axona, a name of god as well as the hero's native place, because he —breaks the law of purity and challenges the centralized religious system there. As a result, he is displaced from his origins and thrown onto an island of exiles, Calf Island. After drinking an alexir, a magical liquid which is supposed to make him younger and immortal, the Eagle travels through the Mediterranean Sea, searching for his lost sister and also for new meanings of life. The Eagle was guided by a philosopher of history, called Virgil Jones into the place of the magician, Grimus. There, he experiences a new kind of life where people never die. Nevertheless, the Eagle expresses his feeling of rejection of the new mechanic life which is ruled by magical elements. He argues with the ruler of the island, Grimus and encourages the dwellers of Kaf to revolt against the controlled system featured by reason and rationality. Fed up with its sameness of life in the island, he decides to resurrect the island without —Stone Rose|| and to regain his human nature. In the end, the hero decides to return to his original national place of Axona with new thoughts and experience of life.

Conclusion

The quest for identity in an incessantly altering world is a daunting task for the immigrant. Rushdie has explored in several ways the difficulty of reconciling cross-cultural rituals around death, dying and love. He has been successful in projecting the issues of identity crisis in his novels.

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