

The Changing Identities: Analysis of the short stories ‘Sweat-Marks’ and ‘No man’s Land’

Aparna TV

Head of the Department,
Department of Languages
T.John College, Bangalore, India

This paper attempts to capture the issues of identity caused by the factors like place and social factors in the short stories, Sara Joseph and Anuradha Sharma Pujari. The identity experiences are a product of the cross-cultural experiences and the possible condition of belonging simultaneously – psychologically and experientially – in the maze of cultural plurality. The paper aims to study the characters in the short stories and provides an overview of the changing cultural norms and altering controversies of identity. The issues of identity due to cultural clashes have already been vastly explored. Therefore, the present approach extends the scope of debate on how Place- identity theory and Social-Identity theory create and recreate an individual’s sense of belonging. This paper intends to foreground this newness of reading the changing identity of people due to various soci,cultural and political factors, caught in the dichotomies of acculturation and dissociation. This paper reveals the different aspects of personal and political experiences and how these experiences further diverge into preservation and appropriation under the sway of globalization, which is a challenge to cultures, to marginalized communities and their identities.

Keywords : globalization, identity, sense of belonging

Introduction:

In the postmodern world, where new world order needs definition, the identities of an individual is constantly reduced and multiplied giving rise to the concepts such as globalization and multiculturalism. With the world getting unified under a global village where, differences turn into similarities, cultural groups outside the ideology seek to put forward their diversity. The contemporary literature has been transformed by the new world order; texts are now crossing the borders of nations and cultures as enabling the voices of the subaltern to be heard.

According to Richard, theories are formulated to *explain, predict, and understand phenomena* and, to challenge and the existing knowledge within the limits of dominating assumptions. A theory provides an explanatory framework for some observation and from the assumptions follows a number of possible hypotheses that can be tested in order to provide support for, or challenge, the theory. It encompasses set of ideas that have greatly influenced the way we have thought about and taught. Literary theory stems from multiple disciplines which includes linguistics, psychology, anthropology, history, gender studies, economics, ethnic studies and political sciences. According to Peter Barry, the reason for multiplicity of theories is because each literary theory arise in “*reaction against something which went before*”, hence literary theory is constantly evolving, developing and changing, paving way for multiple interpretations and meanings in a text. Due to the rise in the publications, especially in Europe and North America, the arena of literary studies had opened up to new fields of research like the theories of Identities and Trauma theories.

Identity Theory

The history of identity is troubled as the lines drawn between the power structures embrace racial, ethnic, or gender construct. According to Chris Barker, “identity is an essence that can be signified through signs of taste, beliefs, attitudes and lifestyles” (2003: 220). Identity has personal and social dimension both of which has the potential of becoming more and more complex and wealthy thanks to the interactive relationships of our postmodern world. On the other hand, the trend of globalization, which is shaped by the dominant powers, creates a standard identity within which none of the differences are welcome.

As a natural outcome of this clash between the opposing powers of multiculturalism and globalization, postmodern self is de-centred and fragmented and that is why “persons are composed not of one but of several, sometimes contradictory, identities” (Barker, 2003: 224). The tension between the mentioned opposite powers bring identity crisis forth for many individuals and groups, which can be summarized as a difficulty of finding a fixed place for oneself and of creating any sense of life and meaning. Identity is shaped by sexual preferences, religious beliefs, childhood experience, ethnicity, culture, and biology. Research shows that people prefer to label themselves, resisting those labels (such as lesbian, Catholic, or African American) that they have not chosen.

Identity theory developed in the 1950s and is associated with such philosophers as J.J.C. Smart, U.T. Place and Herbert Feigl. The theory goes all the way back to the 17th century, but was especially influenced by modern research into brain function that suggested that different parts of the brain seemed to be associated with different actions. This had long been suggested by earlier research conducted in the 19th century by such figures as Dr. Paul Broca (1824-1880) and Dr. Carl Wernicke (1848-1904). The theory further branched into Place-Identity theory, Social- Identity theory and Identity Process theory.

Place and identity are bound to one another. The identity of an individual stems from where they live, shaped by the environments, creating *environmental autobiographies*, which are the narratives from the memories of those spaces and places that shaped us. It is vital in understanding the relationship between place and identity, as it takes an important role in the social and psychological development. The relationship, therefore can influence social formations, cultural practices, and political actions. It may be seen, for instance, in the efforts of groups of emigrants to establish roots in their new homes through the planting of particular tree species or architectural ornamentation (e.g., Mitchell 2004). The readings selected here highlight research from a number of fields in order to show the various and multiple ways in which place and identity intertwine, and the varied stakes in understanding them.

Place identity is a core concept in the field of environmental psychology which proposes that identities form in relation to environments. The term was introduced by environmental and social psychologists **Harold M. Proshansky, Abbe K. Fabian, and Robert Kaminoff**, who argue that place identity is a sub-structure of a person's self-identity, and consists of knowledge and feelings developed through everyday experiences of physical spaces. In a related vein, social psychologist Irwin Altman and anthropologist Setha Low's (1992) concept of *place attachment* defines the ways in which people connect to various places, and the subsequent effect of the bonds on the identity development, perception, and practice. Both of these concepts help to understand where and why people feel at home, as well as why displacement—forced or voluntary—can be so traumatic for individuals and groups.

“Place makes memories cohere in complex ways. People's experiences of the urban landscape intertwine the sense of place and the politics of space,” writes architectural historian **Dolores Hayden**. Hayden's work is concerned with how some identities are hidden when we represent or talk about place through certain narratives, or fail to talk about the histories of places at all. Place is an integral part in establishing an individual's identity.

Social Identity Theory

Henri Tajfel's greatest contribution to psychology was social identity theory. Social Identity The theory was originally developed to understand the psychological basis of intergroup discrimination. Tajfel et al (1971) tries to identify the the *minimal* conditions that leads members of one group to discriminate in favor of the in group to which they belonged and against another out group.

In the Social Identity Theory, a person has not one, “personal self”, but rather several selves that correspond to the wider circles of the society. Multiple social contexts may trigger an individual to think, feel and act on basis of his personal, family or national “level of self” (Turner et al, 1987). Apart from the “level of self”, an individual has multiple “social identities”. Social identity is the individual's self-concept derived from perceived membership of social groups (Hogg & Vaughan, 2002). Social Identity Theory has also implications on the way people deal with social and organizational change.

The Indian authors Joy Goswami, Volga, Sara Joseph, AnuradhaSarma Pujari portrays the cultural and social conflict in their stories. By employing qualitative analysis, the paper will try to answer the effect of environment (place) and society on a person's identity; Are the personal and the political identities interwoven?. These major questions will be answered in the analysis of the stories ‘*Sweat-marks*’ by Sara Joseph, and ‘*No man's Land*’ by Anuradha Sharma Pujari using the social- identity theory and place identity theory.

The Changing Identities:

Sarah Joseph, Anovelist and short story writer in Malayalam has won the Kendra Sahitya Akademi Award for her novel *Aalahayude Penmakal*. Sarah has been active in the feminist movement in Kerala. She and Madhavikutty are considered among the leading women writers in Malayalam. Her works are embody liberalism and voices the messages of various oppressed groups. The short story ‘*Sweat-Marks*’ is taken from *The Masculine of 'Virgin'*, a collection of 21 Malayalam stories translated into English by J. Devika and published by the Oxford University Press. This powerful short story throws light on the issues of social discrimination. The story told from the perspective of a female narrator, questions the existing practice of discrimination in the name of sustaining the social standards. The listless existence of individuals caught between the society and the domestic sphere are articulated. The story introduces the readers to multiple characters, from the docile ‘Feminine Character’ the narrator, the reluctant Professor Thevan, the strong-willed passionate woman Chandrika Chechi and Namita. The story begins by foreshadowing the issues of identity created by the power structures through the means of social discrimination.

‘These stairs are not mine.. Nor are these corridors, these roofs-beams... The building, books, the teachers... none of these will consider me theirs.’

The girl's powerful and innocent voice highlights the injustice which are ignored willingly by the society. The girl fails to recognize herself with the society. She is accepting the fact that the society will never consider her as theirs due to the social group which she belongs. In terms of Tajfel, an individual defines himself based on the qualities of the group. The girl clearly is seen to have marginalized herself due to her identity as a dalit, which is constructed by the society.

‘My sandals are covered with dust. The distance between a lowly One Lakh Housing Colony and this college is huge.’

She metaphorically describes that the distance to bridge the gap between the two different social groups is huge owing to their diversity. The social identity of a person belong to the quality of the group which the individual belong. It depends on the nationality, culture, religion, family and the neighborhood. The girl's reluctant nature to lodge a complaint against the injustice of ostracizing her from the general merit list and to address before the Admission Committee portrays the way power works in silencing a social group completely. Though the girl is able to identify the injustice she isn't able to rebel against the hegemony as she is bounded by the identity of her social group.

Sara Joseph introduces us to the fact on how power works in the social hierarchy. The unnamed narrator, Professor Thevan are shown as the ones assimilated in their social groups, which establish their identity. Whereas, Chandrika Chechi, a news agent and Namita, the daughter of Professor Thevan challenges and resists the hierarchy and society.

'Chandrika Chechi said they include you not only on the basis of marks, but also on many other considerations... Lineages, complexion, caste, religion, dress, language.'

Throughout the story the identity of the characters is built on their social identity. The committee silences and threatens the girl to accept her position in the reservation list. Though she excelled the SSLC examination, she was forced to accept her position in the reservation list.

'But how could I stand erect with pride on the strength of that alone? Lineage, complexion, caste, religion, dress and language. I am a dark, diminutive girl...'

Namita on the other hand questions her father's attitude of ignorance and reluctance stating that the social group shapes up a person's identity.

'No way of any redemption because this fear of yours- reasonable sometimes, but mostly unreasonable. I too have got this damned fear, through my genes.'

Namita identifies Thevan as a cause of all her fears 'big and small, of darkness, of thieves, of the devil, of her father, of God.' The aspect of fear is deeply rooted in the minds of the people through their families and the social group which they belong.

'He too believes that he got the fear from his fathers and forefathers, standing, throughout history, bent forward, obsequiously covering their mouths with their palms.'

Though professor Thevan knows that the 'sweaty footprints' demand justice, he blindfolds himself from the entire scenario, subduing the flame within him to rebel with his fear- the fear he had acquired. The social group influences a person in constructing the perception of the self and defines the identity of an individual with the characteristics of the social group. Thevan and the girl are accustomed to the social group and find themselves belong to the social order by accepting their powerlessness.

'The girl who moves away with her head bent is the continuation of history. These are junctures in history that go unrecorded.'

The story also shows how hybridizing the social groups creates angst and the conflicts that arises when Thevan looks at his wedding photograph makes him to reject his 'self' and accept the existing, imbibed identity. The watchman Balan Nair's addressing of professor Thevan as 'Thevammasha' and Renuka's rejection of the word as a derogatory one, insisting him to change the spelling of his name from 'T' to 'D' reveals the identity crisis caused due to the social setup.

'If you replace the 'T' if your name with 'D' all shame would vanish.'

The identity of a person is reduced to a letter, a word, which defines himself rather than his true self. He realizes that the smell of his sweat will continue to remain in his genes. The formulations of the identity of an individual is guided by different principles of the society to which they identify themselves. According to Tajfel, Identity crisis of an individual will stem from their inability to leave the group and reinterpret the negative characteristics of the group to positive 'self-concepts' like the unnamed narrator and Professor Thevan. The social identity plays a vital role in shaping up an individual's identity and identifying them as a part of the society. The story shows how social identities shape up the characteristics of individuals, their thoughts and attitudes towards the social changes.

Anuradha Sharma Pujari is an influential Assamese journalist and author. She is the editor of *Sadin* and *Satsori*. Her contributions to Assamese literature include fiction and essays. Her first novel is *Hriday Ek Bigyapan*, which became popular among the youth of Assam. The short story 'No man's Land', highlights the issues of hyphenated identity, the struggle to fit in the multicultural setup bounded by place. The title of the story introduces to the idea of dissemination by Homi Bhabha. According to him, 'the communities live in the interstitial spaces... whose narratives continually evoke and erase the boundaries of the modern nation-state.' Home and dwelling are important in most people's lives and influence their identity. Identity crisis stems from a person's attachment to a place. 'Place attachment' is the feeling that an individual develops to a place which he belong. The influence that the place has on the identity of the individual is due to the interaction between the people and their environment. The interaction between the people and the environment has become dynamic, which includes the social, cultural, psychological meaning of a place.

In the story, 'No man's land' the author discusses the issues of nations and the borders which are constructed by the hegemony. This construct manipulates the identity of an individual in terms of cultural practices. The place Dauki, located between Meghalaya and Bangladesh is identifies as the 'last town on Indian Soil.' It is identifies by the narrator as a 'border town.' The story begins with the description of the town which is preparing itself for the upcoming friendly football match between India and Bangladesh. Situated near the border, the town has access to the

cultural and materialistic products of India and Bangladesh. Their complexities further increases in identifying themselves to a place which infuses the hybrid culture of both the nations. This small town can be read as the microcosm of India, which houses Bengalis, Biharis, Hindus, Muslims, Jains, Christians and Jaintias.

Owing to its location at the borderlands, the town witness constant crisis in social, political and cultural means. In Canter's words, 'place is seen as a product of physical attributes, human conceptions and activities.' People and place have reciprocal influence, which determine the person's identity. In the story, there are constant reference to the crossing of borders and disputes, which are accepted by the people as a part of their lives. The characters in the story are complex and exhibit hybridity and multiple identities. The character of Lily, a fish monger, who is ridiculed by the people for her association with the major is pictured as an independent woman, whose husband was jailed for 2 years for selling opium. She is shown to have association and contacts with the people across the border. In the troubled reality, she manages to survive on her own, creating and establishing her individual identity. The disputing scenario of the borderland, affects people's lives like Lily's and forces them to settle for menial jobs. This troubled existence in the borderland is also articulated by Gloria Anzaldua in her poem 'To live in Borderland means you', in which she describes the anxiety that arises due to the border disputes in life and history in identifying with a place which houses the values and cultures of both the lands.

'This No man's Land is the Holiest land on the earth. This is where the earth is independent in the truest sense'

Speller is of the opinion that the place acquires meaning as a result of a person's interaction with the space. Each individual in the story interacts with the place and identifies themselves with it. The story highlights the fact that the borders or place is just a construct by the humans highlighting that the nature doesn't discriminate or identify itself to a place.

'The trees on this road have their roots in Bangladesh but their trunks and branches fall in Indian territory.'

The author highlights the fact that like the nature, the individuals are just bound by the place and identifies themselves respectively, whereas deep within, they all have the roots in the same soil. Colonel Riyaz Ahmed from Bangladesh portray throughout the story how a place of a person influences his identity. During the narrator's visit to the borderland along with the geologists, he warmly welcomed them into their territory asserting that *'wherever you are is your own country'*

'You always speak the truth when you are standing on this zero land. People should always think it from zero perspective. Then no one would be biased. Religion, caste, country, border- everything would merge into one.'

This truth is universal. The no man's land represent the zero perspective of the individual, devoid of caste, religion, country or border. The no man's land calls for universalization of identity, which is biased by borders and boundaries. The place and the idea of home affects the identity of an individual, but No man's land makes the individual relaise that the identity is mutable. Riaz, who was considered as the 'romantic soldier' by the narrator turns to be the true soldier in capturing Lily and the unnamed man from Bangladesh, who wanted Lily to be killed for trespassing the borders. The story shows how the place establishes the identities of a person. The individual incorporates place into the concept of self. Place is always oriented with memory and forms an integral part in identifying oneself. The characters weave a complex identity among themselves and show that the place can have immense influence on them.

Conclusion:

The identity of the people be categorized as simply Eastern or Western, submissive or dominant, but rather it is comprised of numerous consciousnesses that encompass various conflicting characteristics. It is seen from the short story 'Sweat-Marks' that the personal and the political identities are interwoven. It is also seen that the social identity affect the personal identities of people, influencing their self. The story 'No Man's Land' answers how the place (environment) affects the identity of an individual. The manner in which the characters in the story Sweat-Marks and No man's land perceive themselves is based upon this multiplicity of selves, and the notion that one's relation to one's surrounding space determines the process and outcome of self-perception allows for paradoxical views of the self to exist, thereby deconstructing the concept of identity as unified and perception as singular. For them, to exist is to be many; it is to embrace the paradoxes of perception that arise as life is lived astride the boundaries of many worlds.

Works cited:

Primary sources:

1. JOSEPH, SARA. 'SWEAT-MARKS' FROM 'THE MASCULINE OF 'VIRGIN', OUP PUBLISHERS ,HARDCOVER – 13 AUG 2012
2. PUJARI. SHARMA, ANURADHA, 'NO MAN'S LAND.'

SECONDARY SOURCES:

3. Anderson, Benedict, Phoebe Griffith, and Mark Leonard. "Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism (New Edition)."
4. Anzaldúa, Gloria E. *Borderlands/La Frontera*. San Francisco: Aunt

Lute Books, 1987. Print

5. Bhabha, Homi K. *The Location of Culture*. London: Routledge, 1994.

Print.

6. Canter, D.(1977). *The Psychology of Place*. London: Architectual Press.
7. Speller, G. (2000). *A community in transition: A longitudinal study of place attachment and identity process in the context of an enforced relocation*. Unpublished PhD thesis, University of Surrey, Guildford, England.
8. Speller, G., Lyons, E., & Twigger-Ross, C. (2002). *A community in transition: The relationship between spatial change and identity processes*. *Social Psychological Review*, 4(2), 39-58.
9. Swanson, Richard A. *Theory Building in Applied Disciplines*. San Francisco, CA: Berrett-Koehler Publishers 2013.

