
9. Identity Crisis Experienced by Indians in Foreign Lands

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Abstract:

Identity Crisis is a common challenge faced by many people who move from their own country to a foreign country. Especially, Indians face a lot of shifts when switching from one country to another. While they must endure discrimination in lands abroad, based on their race, skin color, accents, or cultural practices, they are no longer considered the normal “typical” Indian Citizens, in the eyes of their people, generally distinguishing them as NRIs (Non-Resident Indian) with different cultural beliefs, practices, and customs than the people of the country, marking them with the “tag” of being more like foreigners than Indians. This turmoil leads the “moved out” Indians to feel alienated, and isolated and can be accompanied by the sense of not belonging and Identity Crisis.

To promote the discussion of the concept in the Indian context, it becomes important and a matter of utter significance, to make a mention of “The Namesake”, a novel published by an American author, Jhumpa Lahiri. The experience of an identity crisis for Indians in foreign lands can be complex and multifaceted. These are the result of various discriminations and varying behavioral characteristics faced by the Indians in the outside world. Whenever the issue of identity crisis faced by Indians in foreign lands is brought into perspective and attention of the public, it is a common notion, for the thought/issue to be questioned by the First-World nations. These issues regarding the different treatment faced by the citizens of a few Third-World nations are generally recognized as nothing more than a fallacy. There have been instances of discrimination and prejudice towards Indians and other South Asians in Western countries. This paper highlights the cultural and racial discrimination made towards Indians in foreign lands and the different treatment offered to them in their homeland, despite them being a citizen of the country themselves.

Keywords:

Identity crisis, alienation, isolation, cultural and racial discriminations, Indian diaspora, post-colonial conceptions, and Western impacts.

Introduction:

The publication of Johann Wolfgang von Goethe’s novel “The Sorrows of Young Werther”, in the year 1774, introduced the concept of Identity Crisis to the world. However, the novel simplifies this concept and does not explore the widened perspective that is generally (in modern times) associated with it. Werther, the protagonist, grapples with issues of a personal sense of loss of identity, impacting his relationship with the societal norms surrounding him and later leading him to question his sense of self-worth. His struggles have reverberated with readers for the following centuries and have served as a citation as well as a key influence on later literary movements including Romanticism.

Here, it is important to note that this also served as the introduction of the concept in the Western part of the world. In India, however, the term didn't attract any attention until the late 20th century, when she was introduced (to the concept) through the work of Amitav Ghosh in 1988, named, "The Shadow Lines". The novel, dealing with the psychological segment of the human consciousness, talks about "the theme of identity crisis in the context of the Partition of India and the subsequent riots and displacement of people." After the introduction of the concept, many Indians, residing in foreign countries, began relating their tumultuous life in different lands and comparing it with that of Tridib, the protagonist of the novel.

This evaluation of the novel led to the rise of a simple question among the masses. What is Identity Crisis? This brought down the definition of the term, more to psychological grounds than any other area. Erik Erikson, a well-known psychologist of the 20th century, defines the term as a stage in life when "individuals may question their values, beliefs, and goals, as well as their place in society. They may struggle to determine their true identity and may feel lost, confused, or uncertain about who they are and what they want in life" (Erikson, 2005). Erikson's theory of psychosocial development states the theory that an identity crisis is a normal stage of development that occurs in adolescence/growing up teenagers. However, it becomes important to note that this "confusion about self" not only takes place in adolescents but also serves as a major disorder in people of varying age groups. Resuming the discussion of the concept in the Indian context, it becomes important and a matter of utter significance, to make a mention of "The Namesake", a novel published by an American author, Jhumpa Lahiri. A reader familiar with the story of Gogol Ganguli, the protagonist of the novel, would know that he is of Indian-American origin, and is named after the Russian writer Nikolai Gogol. And it is due to this "naming" of this individual, that "he (Gogol) experiences a sense of disconnection from both cultures, leading him to question his identity and search for a sense of belonging" (Mona Verma, Richland Library, 2020).

This novel brings into perspective the struggle faced by Indians who reside or have migrated to foreign lands, where they live as "outsiders", never fully accepted and welcomed "as their own" by the citizens of those countries. However, the problem of "acceptance" into and by society, does not end here. When these "Indians" return to their motherland, they carry with themselves from abroad, the tag of being an "NRI". This further leads to an issue of isolation and alienation from society among the conscience of these Indians. They get this feeling of "not-belonging" to any nation, of not having the support and identity of any state/country as their backbone, neither of the host country nor their own.

Whenever the issue of identity crisis faced by Indians in foreign lands is brought into perspective and attention of the public, it is a common notion, for the thought/issue to be questioned by the First-World nations. These issues, regarding the different treatment faced by the citizens of a few Third-World nations, are generally recognized as nothing more than a fallacy.

The experience of an identity crisis for Indians in foreign lands can be complex and multifaceted. These are the result of various discriminations and varying behavioral characteristics faced by the Indians in the outside world. There have been instances of discrimination and prejudice towards Indians and other South Asians in Western countries. This includes the impact of the post-colonial influences on Third-world nations.

Historically, there have been several factors that have contributed to this. One major factor is racism, topping every other factor on the list, which has been prevalent in many Western countries and has often led to discrimination against people of varying colors. Another factor is cultural differences, which can sometimes lead to misunderstandings and stereotypes among other citizens, or sometimes, more preferably referred to as the “immigrant” class. Additionally, the varying perspective of the people on economic and political factors also contribute to tensions between Western countries and India, which can impact the way that Indians are perceived and treated by the people of foreign lands. For example, issues related to trade, politics, immigration, and geopolitical tensions can all play a role in shaping the perspectives, viewpoints, and ideologies of Indians and other groups.

When mention is made of causes related to Racism as a major contributing factor in the psychological concept of Identity Crisis in humans, it becomes almost important to highlight the racial discrimination faced by Indians in foreign lands. Case studies done by major writers and psychologists of our times, do contribute to highlighting this major factor. For example, “the tragic shooting of Srinivas Kuchibhotla”, an Indian software engineer, in a Kansas City bar in February 2017. The incident occurred when a man named Adam Purinton, who was, according to the local news agency, drinking at the bar, suddenly started yelling out racial slurs at Srinivas and his friend Alok Madasani, both of whom were of Indian descent. Purinton then escalated his outrageous behavior further by pulling out a gun and shooting both men, killing Srinivas at the sight and gravely injuring Alok. The incident was widely condemned in both countries, the United States as well as in India, and was seen as a hate crime motivated by racism, xenophobia, and intolerance. The local newspaper reported the event, “The shooting sparked outrage and concern among the Indian-American community, as well as among many other immigrant communities in the United States” (Times of India, 2017).

It becomes almost important for the colored communities around the world, experiencing this discrimination, to note that this case of racial discrimination, however, is neither the first nor would it be the last of its kind to happen in these First-World nations. It is therefore important to move forward to another pressing issue that asks the question, why are NRIs not fully accepted as their own by the Indian Society? Well, in an attempt to answer this question, Anand C. Paranjpe, a renowned Indian Psychologist, says that “The issue of acceptance of Non-Resident Indians (NRIs) by Indian society is complex and multi-faceted, and there is no one-size-fits-all answer to this question”. (Paranjpe, 2015). He then gives certain parameters that generally act as contributing factors that ultimately result in this aloofness faced by the NRIs. One of the primary reasons why NRIs may not be fully accepted as their own by Indian society is due to their “lack of physical presence in the country” (Paranjpe, 2015). Many NRIs live, educate themselves, work, and serve these foreign nations abroad for extended periods, which can lead to a sense of disconnection, and sometimes even abandonment, from the day-to-day realities of life in India. This ultimately results in making the normal day-to-day things challenging for them to fully understand, grasp, and relate to the experiences and concerns of those living in India. NRIs may also face cultural differences, resulting in discrimination and challenges when they return to India. While they might have tried to retain a strong connection to their Indian roots, their time spent abroad ultimately results in a “blending of cultural influences” (Rao Ramakrishnan, 2015). This often makes it difficult for them to fit in with the cultural norms and expectations of Indian society.

There is a notion that often marks the NRIs to be seen as being privileged, given their financial status and the opportunities that they receive for educational purposes and career advancement abroad. This perception of privilege can sometimes lead to resentment, discontentment among the masses, and a sense of alienation from the broader Indian society. In recent years, there has been growing polarization and political divisions in India. NRIs may hold differing political views than those in India, and this can sometimes result in a sense of alienation or conflict. These are a few of the points mentioned by Anand C. Paranjpe in his work, "Self and Identity in Modern Psychology and Indian Thought", related to the identity crisis in the Indian context.

Review of Literature:

Identity crisis is a major theme in the Indian Diaspora of literary works because of the unique experiences and challenges faced by members of the Indian diaspora. The Indian diaspora consists of people of Indian origin who have migrated to various parts of the world, including North America, Europe, and Australia. These individuals often experience a clash between their Indian heritage and the culture of their adopted country, leading to questions of identity and a search for a sense of belonging.

Literary works by Indian diaspora authors explore these themes of identity and belonging through various perspectives and experiences. These works often address issues such as cultural dislocation and displacement, alienation, and the struggle to reconcile different cultural identities. The characters in these works may feel torn between their ancestral culture and the new culture they are adapting to, and may struggle to find a sense of identity and purpose in their lives. Furthermore, the Indian diaspora is diverse and multifaceted, with members coming from various regions of India and holding different religious and cultural beliefs. This diversity can create additional challenges in terms of identity, as individuals may struggle to reconcile their unique backgrounds with the broader cultural norms of Indian society. The several literary works that inspire and influence this paper are, namely, "*The Shadow Lines*" (1988) by Amitav Ghosh; "*Interpreter of Maladies*" (1999), "*The Namesake*" (2003), "*Unaccustomed Earth*" (2008) and "*The Lowland*" (2013) by Jhumpa Lahiri; "*Americanah*" (2013) by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie; "*The Good Immigrant*" (2016) edited by Nikesh Shukla; "*The Sleepwalker's Guide to Dancing*" (2014) by Mira Jacob; "*The Inheritance of Loss*" (2006) by Kiran Desai; "*Coolie Woman: The Odyssey of Indenture*" (2013) by Gaiutra Bahadur; and "*The White Tiger*" (2008) by Aravind Adiga.

The novel, "The Shadow Lines" is considered by many critics as the discoverer of the concept of identity crisis concerning the Indian subcontinent. Written and published around 1988, the novel also explores the popular theme of post-Colonialism and is an exact representation of the society during the Partition of India. The novel serves in highlighting the impact that this historical event has on the lives of people and prompts an individual to question his own identity, as a result of all the intricate and complex fragments of the present society close on him.

In the end, Ghosh sums up that Identity is a "fluid concept" that is shaped not by the region and culture we live in but by the experiences of one's life, and how they come out of it. In 1999, the other famous work that attracted the attention of readers about this concept is the much-celebrated work of Jhumpa Lahiri, "Interpreter of Maladies".

With its focus directed on removing the layers of reasons that result in an Individual's loss of identity, the novel points them out almost in a chronological manner, point by point, through the various characters present in the story. Focusing on the effects of Cultural displacement, the effect of their past, and coping with the changing trends of time, that demand one's undivided attention (if one doesn't want to be lost and left out), the novel serves as base for Lahiri's later works in the field of Identity crisis. Published in 2003, "The Namesake", talks about the young generation and the problems faced by them in their growing years. However, it must be noted that it is not just any other psychological work that defines the struggle of growing teenage life into adult life, rather it has its focuses on the struggles of a boy who is suffering from an identity crisis, alienation, and isolation from the society because of his lack in understanding the base of the discrimination faced by him (in a minute and insignificant things) in his home as well as the host country. The novel very aptly describes the effects of Cultural Displacement and the sense of loss of identity and the clash between traditionality and modernity.

Other works of Jhumpa Lahiri, exploring the same theme of cultural displacement and a sense of isolation and alienation from the world, the problem of not being able to find one's place in the world, include, "*Unaccustomed Earth*" and "*The Lowland*". The latter also explores the consequences that political violence has on an Individual's life. It recounts the experience of growing up in a lowland region of Calcutta, India. The impact of getting involved in a radical political movement and how it can alter the course of life of an individual and his near and dear ones are portrayed aptly by Lahiri. Relating to the context of immigration and displacement, the novel reflects how social and political factors can contribute to a sense of loss of identity for an individual. "Americanah" by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, published in 2013, is not a work that centralizes the "Indian Loss of identity" as its theme but successfully recounts the story of two African-Americans, Ifemelu and Obinze, who struggle in America and England, respectively, to find their identities and to connect with the outer world. From changing their outward appearance to their accents, they pursue every option available to blend in with the crowd. However, even after putting in all the efforts, they often face discrimination in their everyday lives based on cultural, social, racial, and economic conditions.

This novel also introduces the concept of how "personal will and preference" can usually contribute as a cause to loss of identity in an individual (this can be justified by Ifemelu's behavior when she tries to blend in to be accepted by the American society by straightening her hair and changing her accent). This novel also highlights the issue of the existence of the "identity crisis" disorder almost in all post-colonial countries and their struggles in connecting to their cultural, art, and economic grounds. P. Michael Arokiasamy, and M. Mary Jayanthi, highlight this issue of identity crisis in post-colonial countries concerning Western countries. In their paper, Identity Crisis of African Immigrants in the West as Represented in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's Americanah, they talk about this issue, quoting, "After World War II, the decolonized nations decided to recreate their social and individual identities. They struggled to reconnect to the roots of their identities in all spheres such as culture, art, and economy, which was quashed and lost during the period of colonization." (Arokiasamy and Jayanthi, 2019).

A similar theme is followed by Nikesh Shukla in "The Good Immigrant", published in 2016, where the author talks about the label of being a "good" immigrant in the host country.

This work is a collection of essays brought together under the theme of discrimination of different races in the first world nations and recounts the tales of first-hand experiences of the mentioned discrimination faced by the Immigrants, and the tag of being outsiders that they carry their whole lives. This collection shares many personal and powerful stories of immigrants and describes the first-hand experience of living between cultures, societies, and languages and figuring out one's persona in this "advanced outside" (Arokiasamy and Jayanthi, 2019) world. "The Sleepwalker's Guide to Dancing" by Mira Jacobs, published in 2014, is the story of an Indian-American protagonist, Amina Eapen, a successful photographer, who grapples with her identity as she tries to find out how to manage her Indian-American heritage with her American upbringing. The novel by Jacobs dives into the entanglement of cultural, personal, and familial identity and how these strands shape an individual's sense of self. The novel successfully reflects the complexity and fluidity of identity, perfectly describing how cultural heritage, personal opinions, and familial expectations can contribute as a factor in shaping one's identity.

Another novel, "The Inheritance of Loss" by Kiran Desai, published in 2006, talks about the sense of loss of identity and how immigrants fight daily to establish their own identity in this "new world" that they have moved in. One of the central characters, Biju, serves as a representative of the struggles and discriminations faced by the immigrants while trying his best to define his identity in a foreign land. The Times Magazine praises the evocation of this theme, saying, "The characters in the novel are impacted by political unrest, social inequality, and colonial legacies, which further complicate their sense of belonging. The clash between traditional values and modern aspirations adds another layer to the characters' struggle with their identities." (Time, 2005).

The novel "Coolie Woman: The Odyssey of Indenture", published in 2013, by Gaiutra Bahadur, is another of its kind, focusing on the identity crisis suffered by the emigrant Indians and their descendants. However, this novel takes the working class of the immigrant west, as its central characters. Indentured laborers, that in its most literal sense means working for an employer as a servant for a legally contracted period, often referred to as "coolies" in the novel, are shown being uprooted from their native land and transported to the "New World", to serve their employers under grueling conditions on plantations. This excruciating process of Indenture takes a mental toll on the characters, resulting in a sense of loss of identity with a profound sense of displacement, that ultimately leads to a multi-layered and very complex case of Identity Crisis. Aravind Adiga's novel, "The White Tiger", published in 2008, follows the story of Balram Halwai, the protagonist, in identifying his self-worth in the modern crowd of The Rich. The novel explores a different kind of perspective on "identity crisis", as its focus hovers around the study of loss of identity concerning caste and socio-economic status. Balram, born in a lower caste stratum of the Indian hierarchical society, serves the rich as a driver and is resigned to following his fate. Balram opts for himself the name "White Tiger", to showcase the rarity he allows himself to indulge in to reach his objective of becoming a powerful and independent individual.

The novel brings to light the injustices faced by the crowd of India, burdened by the traditional injustices (introduced by the Invaders to the country) and the societal expectations from certain classes and beings of the society, acting as a hindrance in the development and growth of the individuals mentally as well as economically.

The journey of Balram also highlights the limitations imposed on the lower-caste people and how their growth is suppressed by the higher-class people of the society so that they cannot surpass the ones higher than them in the “caste” based levels.

Implications:

The post-colonial impact of the First-World nations on the receding nations on that line, serves as one of the most factors that promote the onslaught of the cases of Identity Crisis, in the years following the “independence” of these countries from the tyranny of the English Dictatorial mindset. It is also important to take into consideration the case of the “Inferiority Complex”, which developed in the minds of Indians and other colonized states, that made them perceive themselves as ultimately inferior to the “white” men in comparison. According to some critics, this can be classified as one of the first factors that later led to the development in the cases of identity crises.

This paper, however, focuses on the concept of identity crisis that is suffered by Indians in foreign lands as well as in their homeland. This theory, stated in the paper, is supported by the various works in the fields of literature, or more specifically, in the realm of the Indian Diaspora. P. Michael Arokiasamy and M. Mary Jayanthi explore this theme on a much broader level and with a post-colonial mindset in their paper, “Identity Crisis of African Immigrants in the West as Represented in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’s *Americanah*”. This paper highlights the issue of how the colonial mindset affected the colonized countries and contributed as a major factor in the increase of cases of identity disturbances in Third-World nations. This paper by Arokiasamy and Jayanthi serves as a background study for the theories stated in this paper. This disorder that makes the Indians question their identity is one of the main factors contributing to their decline in confidence while opting for education, work, and lifestyle choices in foreign lands. The fact that they cannot even rely on the identity of their native lands is a pressurizing as well as a difficult decision to make for them. The factors affecting this level of discrimination faced by the Indians in foreign as well as their homeland is already highlighted in this paper. However, it becomes important to answer the question that how this sense of loss of identity can contribute to the decline in the confidence level of these individuals. It is a well-argued point that an identity crisis is a phase that one usually goes through while growing up, making it an uncommon part of an individual’s life. However, if this condition of alienation and isolation from society continues to remain attached to one’s personality, it becomes a matter of major concern.

The contribution of an identity crisis as a reason for a decline in one’s confidence can be perceived in different ways including important factors such as self-doubt, lack of direction, social comparison, fear of judgment, emotional distress, and many more. These issues arising from identity crises can ultimately erode an individual’s confidence and make them uncertain about their actions, goals, and aspirations. Individuals often feel aimless and unsure of their abilities to navigate life effectively.

All this stems back to the idea of identity crisis, faced by the person (of Indian origin as well as those of other social backgrounds). Therefore, it becomes foolish of a persona to ignore it as one of the major flaws in the personality of an Indian staying and living his/her life abroad.

Conclusion:

The concept of Identity crisis is not a new subject that has been recently or not been properly researched by critics over the years. However, it remains to be one of the most important fields to be constantly studied and thoroughly researched even in modern times. The conception of identity is a crucial aspect of an Individual's existence. The loss of it costs a lot from his/her life. Even though confusion about one's identity is a part and phase of growing up, its continuation might lead to grievous circumstances, sometimes permanently affecting the beliefs, ideologies, and the thought-process of one's life, not to mention a decline in the person's overall confidence. The paper covers the points and factors that contribute to this sense of loss of identity in an Indian staying abroad. It also answers the questions raised by many people that regard discrimination based on racial and cultural identity to be a concept of the past, almost insignificant, and consider it to be non-prevalent in the current Western world. The paper contains mention of many literary works that support the theory of the identity crisis experienced by many Indians in foreign lands. Mainly in the realm of the Indian Diaspora. Explaining the prevalent notions that serve as a base for the harsh discriminated way that the Indians or the NRI's are treated in their homeland by their people, the paper focuses on properly introducing some new as well as highlighting the prevalent factors that are generally related to these behaviors towards the NRIs.

It becomes important to note that this research methodology paper is not free of limitations. They are present in the form of sample size, word limitations, time constraints, and availability of resources as well as personal boundaries of knowledge on the subject, making it open to interpretations, criticisms, and suggestions by the experts on the subject. However, efforts have been made to address the limitations by assuring the validity and reliability of the data collected. A systematic research approach is provided that contributes to the existing theories and body of knowledge on the subject. The main aim of this work is to provide researchers and practitioners with an insight, gained from this study on "identity crisis", to further aid them in their decisions and advancements in the field.

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