

Identity Crisis: The Fragmented Self in Elif Shafak's Saint of Incipient Insanities

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Abstract

This research, Identity Crisis: The Fragmented Self in Elif Shafak's Saint of Incipient Insanities, explores the determinants of identity crises, focusing on the characterization of Gail and Omer. The researcher employed a qualitative method, and the data were analyzed using the Close Reading technique by David Greenham. The theory of the third space, by Homi K. Bhabha, is used in this study. Identity crisis is a genuine practical challenge, and the characters Gails and Omer are subject to this issue in this novel. The study examines the contributory elements of an identity crisis and the character's approach to confronting and navigating this challenge to find a safe place. This study finds that the establishment of the third space results in a tragic ending, and to preserve and sustain their sanity, the characters grapple with their incipient insanities. The findings offer valuable insights into the practical implications of identity crises in real-world settings.

Keywords: Identity Crisis, Third Space, Belonging, Trauma, Cultural Diversity, Dissociative Identity Syndrome.

Introduction

The escalating significance of self-identification has garnered substantial attention to the concept of identity. Identity is a fundamental aspect defined by name, language, culture, gender, and religion.

Stets and Burke (2000) argue that reviewing the concept of identity is essential because identity theories attribute two dimensions — individual and collective — to the idea of identity. The particular dimension of identity has two aspects. The first one is personal, emphasizing the internalization of social positions and their meaning within the sense of self. The second dimension is the social dimension, which focuses on the influence of cultural meanings and social situations on an individual's identification within a group.

The Young generation migrates abroad to achieve a better lifestyle and opportunities. They face considerable challenges, among which the language barrier is the most prominent, which hinders their communication and integration with the host culture. Cultural differences and religious diversity can lead to feelings of alienation. These differences ultimately lead to the loss of individual identity among migrants. Bhabha (1994) states that colonized individuals experience identity crises while attempting to adopt the colonizer's culture. This adaptation leads to a hybrid identity. This establishes a "third space" where individuals experience a feeling of displacement and lack of belonging to the host culture. Byrne (2009) proposes a balanced viewpoint between two contrasting perspectives, accentuating the "third space" as an escape.

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Limited research has explored the causes and actionable solutions to the identity crisis in Literature. The researcher selected Elif Shafak's novel, *Saint of Incipient Insanities*, for its rigorous exploration and insightful portrayal of real-world challenges. Shafak's book serves as a suitable resource for this study as it delves deeply into personal and cultural challenges. It offers a realistic portrayal of the challenges individuals face as they navigate multiple cultural contexts and address identity issues. The researcher will identify the factors that contribute to the identity crises of the characters Gail and Omer in Shafak's novel, *Saint of Incipient Insanities*, with consideration for the concept of Third Space.

The findings from this research hold significant potential to enhance educational practices and mental health support services. This study offers a profound insight into the primary causes of identity crisis, mainly found among foreign people, and their impact on mental well-being. This study aims to provide support to individuals struggling with an identity crisis. This study contributes to the field of cultural studies by offering an understanding of the interplay between cultural hybridity, identity, and migration. This study highlights the struggles of identity in a connected global world. This study highlights the significance and relevance of research by connecting literary analysis to cultural and practical issues. This study recommends embracing diversity, inclusivity, and self-awareness.

This study aims to analyze the identity crisis experienced by the characters Gail and Omer in the novel "*Saint of Incipient Insanities*." This study focuses on identifying and exploring the underlying factors that contribute to identity crisis, including cultural hybridity, displacement, and social expectations. Furthermore, this study also aims to propose practical strategies and theoretical approaches to address and resolve the identity crisis.

The third space theory, as proposed by Homi K. Bhabha, is employed to analyze and achieve the research objective. Bhabha's third space encompasses diverse cultures, fostering a blended identity known as hybridity. This middle space emerges as a result of the encounter between the colonized and the colonizers' cultures or other groups. Thus, the third space is a critical site of cultural negotiations and resistance where new identities are developed and reconstructed.

Research Methodology

This study is fundamentally qualitative. The primary source of data is Shafak's novel, *Saint of Incipient Insanities*. At the same time, secondary data are collected from various scholarly sources, including articles, journals, and books, to support and enrich the study. Following the interpretivist paradigm, this study utilizes the Close Reading Techniques presented by David Greenham for the close analysis of the text. The researcher has employed the third space theory and Homi K. Bhabha's theory of Hybridity. By integrating textual analysis and a theoretical lens, this study aims to analyze the issues of identity, complex realities, and cultural hybridity in Elif Shafak's novel, *Saint of Incipient Insanities*.

Literature Review

Fearon (1999) explains that personal identity involves an individual's traits, which encompass their sense of value and uniqueness, and provides multiple examples to challenge this notion. Thus, identity refers to two things: (a) a class-based society represented by norms and expected behaviors, or (b) a social identifier that an individual holds in high regard and celebrates, or, of course, both (a) and (b).

Erikson (1998) introduced the idea of the sense of identity, suggesting that adolescents frequently feel anxiety and discomfort during their growth, prompting ambiguity about current and future roles. Terry (2007) contributes to the concept of identity by suggesting that identity conflicts can be triggered when individuals encounter difficulties in determining how to present

themselves, particularly in making swift selections among different identities to choose according to the social context.

Achieving a sense of self necessitates a constant maintenance of equilibrium between individual and external forces. When external forces disrupt this balance, fragmentation of identity occurs. Identity is shaped and reshaped by early life experiences and personality characteristics.

Bhabha (1994) analyses colonization not from a historical perspective but by examining the intricate, hybrid, and transactional nature of colonization. He argues that cultural identity is not static but is shaped by power relations and cross-cultural exchanges.

Raj (2014) highlights that the third space represents an essential hybrid perspective that has no direct representation. This concept encompasses and evaluates the fluidity of cultural constructs and binary oppositions within a significant framework that reveals and cautions against discursive and hierarchical situations.

Bhabha's third space (1994) describes an intermediary space between the colonizer and the colonized, where cultural enunciation occurs. In this context, rigid identities and traditional ideas formed by colonialism are fundamentally called into question. This space enables the convergence of diverse cultural exchanges within complex environments, giving rise to new cultural identities. This space allows for the development of a universal language and shared cultural norms and values. This is not a tangible place, but rather one that emerged from fluid cultural symbols and meanings. The process of creating new ideas involves contextualizing, appropriating, adapting, and interpreting cultural signs and symbols. This framework of the third space provides diversity and multiple perspectives.

Bhabha (1990) examines the relationship between colonizers and colonized, focusing on differences in identity. He deconstructs the view of east and west, as well as the uncertainty surrounding this relationship. According to Bhabha (1994), the concept of the postmodern self is intricately linked to essential concepts such as fluidity, subjectivity, decentering, uncertainty, and fragmentation. This idea is encompassed within the broader idea of the individual self. However, there exists a tendency to simultaneously revive the notion of the authentic self in an unstable context. Postmodern individuals, frequently characterized as hybrid, lack a fixed and stable identity. Instead, their sense of self is perpetually in flux, as they continuously construct and deconstruct their identity through interactions with themselves and others.

Liang (2020) and Stadtler (2009) noted several ways in which Salman Rushdie constructed the concept of space in his stories. These are: (1) space is shown as a lived negotiation; (2) a marginalized and othered self exists external to societal norms; (3) there are in-between places where different cultures blend and discussions happen; (4) Rushdie's work creates third space as an escape for his characters; (5) Rushdie's space is not fixed but constructed socially; (6) The representation of time and space in language and Literature facilitates understanding of genre and making generic choices in literary criticism.

Previous research has analyzed the topics and themes of identity crisis, migration, cultural hybridity, and displacement. However, few studies have examined these topics in contemporary works that reflect the realities of migrants' experiences. Similarly, Elif Shafaq's novel, *Saint of Incipient Insanities*, has received limited attention, which reflects the identity formation and negotiation through the characters Gail and Omer. This study addresses the gap by exploring the causes and consequences of identity issues, applying the third space theory and the concept of Hybridity.

Analysis and Discussion

Cultural diversity presents a significant challenge for those individuals attempting to navigate the complexities of acculturation. They disconnect from their cultural roots while striving for

integration into the new culture. This transitional phase prompts a complex existential question about their identity.

Orientalism stems from European Imperialism, which critically emphasized the way the West perceived the east. As Gail belongs to the West, she names her female cat "West" and her male cat "Rest." Gail, as an American, occupies a position of superiority and identifies herself with the female cat who is admired and followed. It suggests that the reason behind Omer's frustration is the east's yearning to copy the West. Omer has a connection with the male cat, "Rest," as he follows Gail, but Gail does not respond to him. This symbolizes that the east always chases the west, while the west has labeled it as the rest. Cole (2022) states that diversity encompasses not only embracing differences but also acknowledging each other's uniqueness. Religion is another factor that plays a vital role in shaping an individual's identity. Individuals who are unable to fulfill their religious obligations feel a sense of psychological displacement and self-doubt. An individual's ignorance of their own religion is a form of disconnection from it. The consumption of alcohol and drugs is to suppress the inner self, escape, and find shelter. Hefner et al. (2018) argue that alcohol and drugs ultimately numb emotions and feelings. Those who resort to these substances are often dissatisfied with their lives, leading them to disregard their religious creeds. Omer, in this novel, uses drugs to escape from his inner turmoil. He creates a third space for himself by neglecting his spiritual teachings. He makes a new identity but sacrifices his core religious beliefs.

Religion demands sacrifices, provides identity and meaning to life, and a lack of religious adherence often results in feelings of delusion, hypocrisy, and restlessness. When an individual is unable to fulfill religious duties due to the laws and restrictions imposed in foreign lands, such as the inability to "sacrifice a ram in the middle of Boston" (p. 199), they are caught between performing their religious obligations and abiding by the laws of the host country. It leads to questioning their coherent identity and pondering over their belonging to one side. It also fails in both this life and the afterlife, causing an identity crisis.

Similarly, peer pressure impacts confidence, character, and behavior, while family pressure influences a person's entire life. This theme is prominently depicted in this novel. Omer encounters a series of questions, i.e., where is he going? What is he doing? Why is he leaving his homeland? What difference would it make to have a Ph.D.? (Shafak, 2004, p. 77) It is a common practice among middle and upper-class families to send their children abroad for higher education and better opportunities without soliciting their choices or preferences. Banksy (2005) contends that parents do not allow their children to express themselves but provide support to make their lives better. This contributes to identity conflicts and uncertainty that consume the child. In Omer's case, his decision to relocate to America was primarily influenced by pressure from his family and society, as well as the complexities of his identity. One prime factor contributing to an identity crisis is peer pressure. Those who experience acculturation and a new environment spend considerable time with their peers, absorbing the latest ideas and norms of the host culture, which has an impact on their sense of identity. Whedon (2013) states that identity is constantly developed. Omer encounters similar challenges from his peers. Omer harbors some desires and aspirations, but the pressure and objections from his friends exert a significant influence on him, causing him to disregard his decisions. Such peer pressure can both impede and facilitate an individual's growth in life, particularly his identity. As Omer disregards his decision because of the recurrent opposition from his peers,

One of the primary concerns of international students is obtaining health insurance. In some host countries, the high cost of healthcare creates hurdles for those students who have limited financial resources. Health-related challenges become a daunting situation, prompting them to take precautionary measures to avoid hospitalization. It is because their savings and allocated monthly expenditures cannot afford the medical costs and hospital bills. Omer's situation

mirrors his reality. He is an alcoholic wracked by guilt and falls short of proving his potential. This further pushes him to seek refuge in the third space. Omer symbolizes the expatriates whose wishes silently collapse underneath the unrealized dreams. They constantly struggle with various sorts of pressures. Feeling ill can lead to financial difficulties and ultimately cause feelings of vulnerability and inadequacy. This complex interplay between health issues, economic instability, and lack of emotional support underscores that all these facets of hardships have a profound influence on shaping an individual's identity.

Successful marriages require contributions from both partners, with self-awareness and vulnerability being two vital factors for a happy marriage. When an individual feels emotionally detached from their partner and lacks self-awareness about their identity, marriage becomes a burden. The absence of self-awareness and the feeling of isolation stem from identity issues. If individuals do not find satisfaction within themselves, they are likely to seek emotional support and fulfillment from others. Omer experiences a comparable sense of detachment from his partner, describing himself as "thrown into a well" (p. 313). Omer and his partner are grappling with identity crises, hindering their ability to reassure each other of love and unwavering commitment. Such crises impede emotional intimacy between partners, leading to detachment and unhappiness, which can result in the creation of a third space, either mentally or physically. Brown (2010) asserts that to experience love and belonging fully, individuals must first believe in their self-worth and the worthiness of such emotions.

It is a personal observation that an identity crisis often results in significant psychological challenges. Questioning one's existence and identity leads to considerable depression or anxiety. Zarpanidit, a pertinent instance of such a situation, suffered mental instability due to childhood traumas and abuse. Additionally, her mother is described as "her mother did not look sane at all" (p. 57), indicating that mental illness may be hereditary and transmitted to subsequent generations. Individuals grappling with identity issues often ask themselves the fundamental question. Consequently, such individuals struggle to find a position in life and suffer profound identity crises.

Many people resort to drugs instead of embracing a healthy lifestyle because they feel an absence of personal identity. In their quest to rediscover themselves, they begin consuming substances to create a temporary sense of belonging and meaning. Gail's act of drugging herself and people around her with "lots of cannabis" (p. 129) serves as a reflection and manifestation of her existential despair and disruption of her identity. She desires to escape her reality and draw others into the hazy and ambiguous psychological state and into a liminal space where one is neither entirely dead nor alive. Reflects her lack of belonging. Drug consumption has several outcomes, but it may exacerbate identity-related issues.

Sexuality plays an essential role in identity formation. In today's contemporary world, homosexuality is increasingly recognized and acknowledged. However, those who are unaware of their sexual orientation or gender identity are significantly influenced by this. An Individual's inability to categorize oneself into a gender category or recognize the traditional binary gender categories fails to establish a stable sense of self. Blume (2020) states that sexuality is an essential aspect of self-understanding.

In adolescence, identity becomes the primary focus, and the inability to establish it in childhood leads to substantial challenges in adulthood. Individuals grappling with sexuality issues frequently remain uncertain about their overall identity. As Aristotle states, self-knowledge is the foundation of all wisdom. Gail exemplifies confusion about self and existential grounding. She is confined to a liminal state that allows for transformation and serves as a comfort zone for her. Gail struggles with sexual identity issues, often stemming from her childhood fear of acceptance or rejection regarding her sexuality. That caused potential psychological repercussions.

Dissociative Identity Syndrome (DID) is a psychological disorder in which individuals have two coexisting, distinct personalities or identities. Each identity or personality operates distinctly. It has unique patterns of perception and interaction within the world. These may come into conflict with each other- described as "angel disputing with the angel" (p. 66). This disorder often arises from an identity crisis when an individual has no cohesive sense of self. Zarpandit, in this novel, is a literal embodiment of this situation as she switches between two different personalities at two different times. In real life, people exhibit DID, but it is often misunderstood as mood fluctuations due to a lack of awareness among the masses. DID is a severe disorder that necessitates professional diagnosis and treatment for adequate recovery. Escapism is sought as a form of psychological refuge when the harshness of reality becomes devastating. It can be posited that those who are unable to confront their true selves and reality find solace in books, music, media, and films. However, persistent disengagement from reality may exacerbate identity crises by preventing individuals from addressing the root causes of their distress and the underlying reasons for their need to escape. Omer's continual immersion in music exemplifies his reluctance to the real world. This behavior is interpreted as an attempt to construct a "third space"- a personal domain marked by joy and harmony, detached from identity and real-world problems. Stevenson (2013) asserts that to be idle demands a strong sense of self. It suggests that escapism is not merely avoidance, but represents a complex psychological mechanism and the formation of a third space, which functions as a cocoon.

The desire to be invisible often stems from a profound psychological urge to escape into a fantasy or an unidentified realm. Individuals attempt to avoid self-reflection and internal conflicts, and in this struggle, they engage in self-deception. This triggers an identity crisis and leads to existential uncertainty and a fragmented self. Omer's aspiration to be nameless and entirely detached from his past, as mentioned in the novel, "he was nobody, he could be anybody" (p. 82). This illustrates his desire to redefine himself and liberate himself from societal judgment. Omer yearns for a clean slate, a fresh start, devoid of flaws and mistakes. Excessive reliance on escapism hinders an individual's ability to resolve deep-seated identity issues.

Experiences of unbelonging emerge during significant life transitions such as relocating to a new country, where individuals are suddenly confronted with an unfamiliar cultural setting and environment. This exposure to the unknown often generates a profound sense of alienation. This phenomenon is reflected in the characterization of Omer as "An expatriate who retained a deep sense of not being home here but not knowing where that home was anymore" (p. 14). Such experiences of displacement and alienation prompt people to reassess their core beliefs and values critically. Henceforth, it complicates their integration and adaptation to a new culture.

Hopelessness plays a significant role in aggravating identity crises. When an individual experiences a loss of hope, their perspective on the future is clouded by pessimistic thoughts, and their decisions are influenced by their negative mindset. Immigrants embark on a new journey with hopes for a better future, which is later dismissed by "plenty of hallucinations" (p. 222). When the expectations of migration do not align with reality, they begin to question their sense of belonging in the new environment. This disillusionment and absence of a clear purpose contribute to an identity crisis.

Furthermore, hopelessness is often accompanied by self-doubt, which further erodes self-confidence and intensifies internal conflicts. In Omer's case, his failure to form a life plan reflects his overwhelming identity struggles, resulting in emotional withdrawal and identity-related issues. Gail's case exemplifies how unresolved identity issues and hopelessness impose a psychological toll on immigrants.

Persistent unresolved identity struggles and prolonged hopelessness frequently precipitate a range of difficulties, including adverse health problems. Omer exemplifies this dynamic, as he

harbors no viable future for himself and is overwhelmed by internal tensions. To ease his inner conflicts and despair and to seek temporary relief despite mental fog, he engages himself in self-soothing activities, i.e., "treat myself to cigarettes" (p. 275). His pessimistic outlook on life leads him to act impulsively, pursuing immediate gratification and disregarding the consequences of his actions. For many individuals, retreating into a third space to find solace from the hopeless world offers a temporary and safe refuge. Shaw (2023) emphasizes that "life is not about discovering oneself; it is about making yourself", highlighting how this escape, though transient, allows individuals to self-express. The brief retreat of mental disarray from harsh realities acts as a psychological sanctuary for mentally fragmented individuals. Nevertheless, this condition necessitates therapeutic intervention for a genuine treatment.

Memories and trauma play a crucial role in shaping one's identity. It can be argued that many adults with unresolved identity issues carry the weight of the mishaps and traumas of their childhood into their adulthood, which ultimately influences their emotions, perceptions, and behaviors. Despite persistent efforts to overcome past struggles, the accumulated memories and traumas of their early years lay the foundation for their identity and perception of the world around them. For instance, Gail, whose sense of self is dominated by memories of death since the age of two. That developed her outlook on life centered on impermanence and a persistent feeling of not belonging anywhere. The psychological impacts of trauma are anxiety, depression, and both mental and physical health issues. Brown (2019) states that, amidst life's struggles, there is no shame in embracing our human emotions and that vulnerability is an inherent part of being human.

Trauma impacts the development of identity. The development of identity is a complex and evolving process that is prompted by personal growth and life experiences. However, trauma plays a crucial role in destabilizing the natural progression of identity by manipulating values, beliefs, and human commitments. Herman (2021) states that following a traumatic event, the human system responsible for self-preservation remains in a heightened state of constant vigilance, as if the trauma could re-emerge at any time. This heightened state of vigilance and fear leads to a fragmented sense of self and feelings of disconnection. Trauma shakes the foundation of an individual's sense of self, causing internal conflicts. Gail's story embodies this painful struggle. Even in adulthood, she is trapped in the emotional scars and lingering effects of her childhood trauma and cannot come to a solid point of approval about who she truly is. Hopelessness as a result of unresolved trauma leads to tragic outcomes. In severe cases, it generates suicidal thoughts, progressing from ideation to action. This underscores the urgent need for awareness, support, and psychological treatment to assist those people grappling with these situations.

Identity crisis triggers diminished self-esteem and a sense of self-betrayal. Gail's character captures this inner turmoil, "shifting between two poles" (p. 234), caught in a state of confusion, unable to belong anywhere. To survive and cope with her disorientation, she creates a "third space" where she exists in a state of limbo. Her confused sense of self and living body haunt her, pushing her to death to find ultimate solace. The sense of self and identity are fragile and unreliable. It can be argued that when the soul feels trapped inside the body, the body rebels and strives to survive. Gail is in endless pain and oblivion, oscillating between life and death, eventually killing herself.

Conclusion

To conclude, numerous factors contribute to the identity crises of the characters Gail and Omer, including language barrier, family pressure, societal pressure, peer pressure, religious differences, cultural differences, psychological issues, sexuality, and personality traits (i.e., lack of belonging, pessimistic behavior, traumas, substance use, and sexuality). Psychological problems like Dissociative Identity Syndrome, anxiety, depression, and other mental illnesses

contribute to existential crises. Both characters navigate the struggles to match the pace of and find a place in a rapidly progressing world. Gail, a native of the host country, suffers from an identity crisis, whereas Omer, a foreigner, also suffers from an identity crisis. Gail and Omer construct a safe zone for themselves, third space, which provides them protection from the harsh realities of the real world. Numerous people experience the same identity crisis in real life as Gail and Omer do, due to limited guidance and awareness on how to navigate and overcome these challenges. These can lead to dangerous consequences if left unattended. Some individuals accept defeat at the hands of an identity crisis and resort to suicide, like Gail in the novel.

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