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## FLUID IDENTITY

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### Abstract

The present paper is an attempt to analyze fluid identity with reference to *The Shadow Lines*. Different perspectives on identity formation are the central focus of the analysis. The purpose is to reevaluate the set norms vis a vis identity formation and redefine it. Fluidity in identity is not because of a person's personality characteristics but due to many other biological, geographical, social, and cultural factors. Due to the fluidity in factors, the identity always remains in a flux.

**Keywords:** Identity, Fluid, Ghosh, Social, Cultural, Belongingness

### Introduction

"No man ever steps into the same river twice." (Heraclitus 246)

Above words point to fluidity as a prevailing and all-encompassing principle of life. All things around us readily testify to this observation. At the matter, the change is explained by the theory of evolution. Evolution of human mind is equally fluid. Aristotle said, "Nature abhors a vacuum" (41). Likewise life appears to abhor stagnation.

What is identity?

Identity is one of the basic human quests. "Who am I?" is a question nearly every human asks himself/herself or somebody else sooner or later. It is as old a question as human existence. The desire to define oneself in terms of identity is very complex and needs a conscious process of thought. Identity has been variously defined. To quote Ruthleen Josselson, "Identity is the stable, consistent and reliable sense of Who one is, What one stands for in the world" (10). Contrary to what Ruthleen claims identity cannot be accepted as something stable or

consistent as Erikson points out identity formation is continuous, a never-ending process. (114)

**Analysis:** It can be verified by a very simple observation: A human being has to define himself as a member of particular society/community/religious group. However, belongingness cannot be ascertained that simplistically. The multi-dimensionality of one's existence gives way to multiple identities. Obviously one type of identity does not deny the others. However, which is more authentic and valuable cannot be determined. Here is an simple example to illustrate the above point: a human being may define himself, say as a Hindu. Later, he has to pin point which of four casts/ vernas he belongs to. Within these casts, there are further sub casts/sub groups such as Brahmanical subcasts Kanyakubz and Sarbapani. Add to it the national identity and we have such as an Indian/ Hindu/ Brahman/ Kanyakubz. Some other factors such as economic (rich/ poor/ middle-class) and regional (northern/southern). Now we need to redefine the above level as (Indian/ Hindu/ Brahman/ Kanyakubz/ Rich Brahman/ Bengali Brahman).

Likewise many other identities can be added reflecting the continuity of identity formation.

Fluidity in identity is not only due to multiple aspects of one's personality. It is also influenced by the very nature of life which is intrinsically in flux. To illustrate the above argument two perspectives have been considered below: Biological and geographical. Human body is constantly evolving. Old cells die and new are born such that all cellular system is renewed every seven years. Equally interesting is the geographical factors that physical factors surrounding human life. Geologists have found out that millions of years ago there was only one grand continent called Pangaea. It was broken down into seven by a movement of tectonic plates. Some geologists have put forward the hypothesis that the whole process may be reversed merging the fragments into the whole again. It clearly explains that identity can never be permanent as the factors that underpin it, are themselves fluid.

Moreover the problematic nature of language boldly defies all attempts of identification. The post structuralist idea of 'floating signifier' precludes the very possibility of an absolute and fluid identity. To elaborate, deconstruction emphasizes that the meaning conveyed by a signifier is not self-explanatory. It calls for a cluster of another signifier wherein each term calls for new clusters. This process goes on ad infinitum. In words it is impossible to reach the meaning. Lacan, in his theory of psychoanalysis, analyzes this problematic of language. His theory of mirror stage delves into it. According to Lacan the quest for identity of a child begins when he enters mirror stage (76-77). In this stage, his identification with his own image starts (77). At the same time he enters into language because he needs linguistic terms to define himself. But whatever he uses in this attempt are merely symbolic. As a result, identity remains undefined. It follows from the above that to form a notion of identity in linguistic terms is impossible.

The concept of fluidity is logically applicable at socio-cultural level. In the earlier times, the socio-cultural identities used to be stable, well-defined and distinct. There was a sense of belongingness to the geographical place. Further, under the impact of

globalization, socio-cultural matrix began to be restructured. Diverse groups came into contact with each other asserting their values. The exchange of values fashioned a new set of values that partook of participating cultures. This new social entity when introduced with other groups brought about new socio-cultural group. The case of Punjabi migrants illustrates this point. Over the last three decades a large population of Punjabis has moved to American and European countries. Particularly in Canada fast growing number of Punjabis has begun to influence the native culture. The Punjabis have gained a noticeable presence in the country. It is reflected in the fact that Punjabi is the second language after English in Canada. Moreover, the telltale signs of Punjabi presence in Canada can be seen on the street sign boards written in Punjabi.

Further more interaction among diverse societies often leads to hybridization of their individual values. People belonging to the hybrid place i. e. those in between place have strange identities; they belong to both cultures yet, in a way belong to neither. Their mixed identity needs for a separate sense of self.

From the above discussion it can be concluded that the identity is fluid. The following part of paper discusses the concept of identity analyzed by Amitav Ghosh in *The Shadow Lines*.

The novel under discussion as its title suggests, treats all categories of identity as unreal. Influence of time on creating new identities and erasing old ones has been emphasized all through. How floating on the river of time, the real turns into a shadow or it evolves a mirage like existence. Viewing from the vantage point of the present, the bygone events appear illusionary. For example: The riots of 1864 that took place in Calcutta hit the world news. It had deeply wounded the national psyche and seemed to have left an indelible mark, a trauma from which it seemed is unable to recover. Contrary to it, the wound evaporated soon. Its volatile existence was due to fluid nature of life. Ghosh describes it in the following words, "By the end of January 1964 the riots had faded away from the pages of newspapers, disappeared from the collective imagination of 'responsible opinion',

vanished without leaving a trace in the histories and bookshelves" (230).

Despite the impossibility of recovering any truth from the decayed memory, one cannot forget the past. There is something about the past that still draws all towards itself. It is reflected in the frequent usage of terms like memory, forgetting and remembering which have been used a number of times in the novel. Memory becomes a way of connecting to the past wherein seem to lie the roots of one's very existence. Moreover such abundant use of terms of recollection suggest writer's strong attachment with his personal history. Constant seeking in the past grows out of curious mind that the writer or the narrator possesses. Defining this urge Ghosh says, "A longing for everything that was not in oneself, a torment of the flesh, that carried one beyond the limits of one's mind to other times and other places, and even if one was lucky to a place where there was no border between oneself and one's image in the mirror" (29). It is the same torment that fuels the seeker and engages him relentlessly to attain an unattainable goal.

Further Ghosh questions the very idea of national identity. The national identity is regarded a very potential defining factor of an individual self. Such an identity is basically psychological in nature formed by socio-cultural values. These values are rooted in specific ideologies relating to particular geographical entity. However this geographical arrangement may be reconfigured anytime leading to revising the national identity. People belonging to one type of national identity may be compelled overnight to subscribe to another. It is not merely the change of label but one is required to give up one's whole thinking process in favour of another. It is often very traumatic experience. Ghosh illustrates it in the following lines:

My grandmother looking out of her window in amazement, exclaimed: when I last came here ten years ago, there were rice fields running alongside the road; it was the kind of place where rich Calcutta people built garden houses and look at it now- as filthy as a babui's nest. It's all because of refugees in like that. (131)

The appalling effect of sudden and irrational change in national identity is well illustrated in Sadat Hasan Manto's "Toba Tek Singh". It is the story of a lunatic asylum through which the line of partition (Indo-Pak) is to be drawn. The inmates of the place are required to choose their sides. The protagonist chooses to leave his place to move to either India or Pakistan. The officer in charge says that the protagonist does not have to change his place, but only the name. Such crazy word drives the crazy man crazier: "'Where is Toba Tek Singh?' he asked. 'Where? Why, it is where it has always been.' 'In India or in Pakistan?' 'In India.... No, in Pakistan.'" (Manto17). The narrator's grandmother in *the shadow Lines* views the whole issue of national identity in the same light as Toba Tek Singh does. Such concept is fundamentally fluid for further lines of partition may be drawn anywhere, robing people of their identity and thrusting upon them a new one. An old man symbolizing dusty wisdom in the novel can anticipate this turmoil when he says:

Once you start moving, you never stop. That's what I told my sons when they took the trains. I said I don't believe in this India-Shindia. It's all very well, you are going away now, but suppose when you get there, they decide to draw another line somewhere? And what will you do then? Where will you move to? No one will have you anywhere. (Ghosh 215)

### **Conclusion**

The answer to "Who am I?" can open the Pandora's box letting loose a confusing mass of answers each claiming to be the answer, however the answer cannot be given in essentialist/absolute terms. It is always in the making. It is being born with paradoxical certainty that its birth is deferred endlessly. Ghosh's characters try desperately to wriggle out of this paradoxical anguish, but in vain. The answer to the identity question always remains in the evolutionary womb to know that one is yet to be is to know what one is.

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