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PLATH AND IDENTITY DIFFUSION: REVISITING

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ABSTRACT

The question of identity is one of the debatable issues in the modern age. It takes a wider range in many different fields and approaches, including literature. It is considered a pivot issue because the crisis impacts the life of the new generation. The purpose of this study is to explore Plath's identity diffusion in *The Bell Jar and Letters Home*. Plath suffered from identity diffusion that reflected in her works and drove her to experience an identity crisis. In this qualitative study, the researcher adopts Erikson's psychosocial identity development using textual and content analysis. Plath becomes a model for all generations. The study concludes the negative sequences of social norms and male dominating system in the life of Plath with her adolescent age that drive her to plan many attempts to commit suicide and yet succeeded in the third one.

INTRODUCTION

Identity diffusion is one of the essential parts of Marcian identity status (Marcia, 2002) that can lead to identity crises for adolescents. Identity diffusion can be described as "the apathetic state that represents the relative lack of both exploration and commitment" (Schwartz, 2001, p. 16). In other words, one is unable to make a selection of personal goals and values in this state (Maier, 1998). Moreover, while intersecting with schizophrenia and depression, sometimes, identity diffusion can be explained as a lack of identity structure.

Erikson's psychosocial identity development described identity diffusion when the adolescent failed to have a healthy identity; he will face a conflict and be trapped in the role of diffusion (Erikson, 1963; Crowne, 2009). The fifth psychosocial stage symbolises the end of childhood. It offers adolescents standing on the verge of adulthood, and at this stage, a person must successfully resolve the conflict between ego identity and role diffusion

(Erikson, 1963; Crowne, 2009). Reportedly, this concept is considered the most fundamental one of all the psychosocial developments because at this stage, the ideas of “identity moratorium” and “self-definition” emerge. An adolescent tries on various identities until s/he gets the desired one, such as a player’s identity, the identity of a writer and others. The parents and guardians with open mind shall provide a favourable environment to the teen to explore this identity moratorium. At this stage, significant substantial changes, mental development, sexual maturity, and social outlooks lead the adolescent to re-examine his/her life in the quest for identity (McAdams, 1994; Meyer et al., 2008). Erikson (1958) describes this quest as the young person searches for the following:

central perspective and direction, some working unity, out of the effective remnants of his childhood and the hopes of his anticipated adulthood; he must detect some meaningful resemblance between what he has come to see in himself and what his sharpened awareness tells him others judge and expect him to be. (p. 12).

From Erikson’s quotation above, we can draw an analogy that the realisation of identity involves making significant decisions about the person’s being and becoming (e.g., who one is and what one will become) that is related to three categories such as body, cognition and society; and as a result, the person commits to three main aspects that cover the way to adulthood, for instance, commitment to a professional identity; commitment to affection with a partner; and commitment to an ideology (Crowne, 2009; McAdams, 1994). All of them allow for the formation of what Erikson (1968) calls “a firm commitment to the freedom of self-realisation” (p.133). Significantly, accomplishing a sense of identity depends on the resolution of the sub-conflict’s representative of the first four stages of childhood (Erikson, 1958, 1963, 1968, 1980). Identity diffusion will be looked in Plath’s selected works depending on Erikson’s Psychosocial Development Theory. I will examine her works chosen to identify the elements reflecting identity diffusion.

Marcia in the 1960s developed the notion of identity diffusion as an extension of Erik Erikson’s work (1965) on adolescent identity development. According to Kroger and Marcia (2011), adolescents who are unable to encounter the obligations of identity development, escape from exploring or making commitments by remaining in a nebulous state of identity confusion/diffusion; something that may produce societal sequestration. Identity Diffusion as the least complicated and mature status of the identity development (Levine, 2002) is considered a sign of people who are deficient either in exploring or making commitments across life-defining areas, such type of people cannot select personal goals and values for themselves.

Resultantly, their indecisive attitudes may create an identity crisis like what we experience in the character of Sylvia Plath, who remained suffered from identity crises throughout her life. However, at this stage, as suggested by Marcia, people with identity diffusion "do not experience much anxiety because there is little in which they are invested. As they begin to care more...they move to the moratorium status (another status), or they become so

disturbed that they are diagnosed schizophrenic" (Marcia, 1993) or "may end up adopting a negative and self-destructive identity-role" (Côté & Levine, 2014). Notably, in determining this status, parents' attitudes and behaviours play a crucial role in determining children's identity.

On the other hand, *Letters Home* is the collection of letters that personified her reflection of her state of mind and hence, included in the sample of the study. This collection of her letters was published in 1975 by her mother, Aurelia Plath. *Letters Home* comprises a portion of the 696 letters Plath wrote to her family, mainly to her mother, from the fall of 1950 to February 1963 (Brans, 1976). In these letters, Plath describes her sufferings with identity, her state of mind and mental illness such as depression and isolation (Wooten, 2015). In this regard, Plath writes to her mother, "The world is splitting open at my feet like a ripe, juicy watermelon" (Plath, 2011b, p. letter 118). In short, these examples of her mental developments will contribute to the researcher in finding the answer to the aim of the study and achieving objectives.

METHODOLOGY

The paper aims to examine the selected text of Sylvia Plath *The Bell Jar* and *Letters Home* which followed qualitative research requirements. The texts are examined through the themes and in given situations of Plath's life. The Psychosocial Development theory (Erikson, 1998) deals with human identity development and crisis in society, and also the texts will be utilized as the conceptual framework to analyse identity diffusion existed in the selected literary texts. Erikson (1963, 1968) classified his theory into eight developmental stages, 1, 2, 3, ... According to Erikson (as cited in Brown and Lewis, 2003, p. 416-17), a person who completes these stages will be considered a psychologically healthy personality, in such case, will have successful interactions with others. Failure to do so is considered a sign of an unhealthy negative personality that forces the person towards mental illness and even suicide. Based on these stages, this paper deals with the fifth stage because it focuses on the identity diffusion that drives Plath to identity crisis. The fifth psychosocial stage symbolises the end of childhood. It offers adolescents standing on the verge of adulthood, and at this stage, a person must successfully resolve the conflict between ego identity and role diffusion (Erikson, 1963; Crowne, 2009). The identifications and selection of the analysis are based on the textual analysis of the text by reading them sentence by sentence. Coding is done by highlighting the selected lines or sentences and tagged accordingly for easier reference. The presentation of the findings is discussed through narrative explanation.

Findings And Discussion

It was found that the transition from childhood to adulthood, along with the adolescent's sensitivity to social and historical changes, can result in identity diffusion that may also be the result of unsuccessful ego resolutions during the four preceding stages of psychosocial development (Erikson, 1980). Thus, identity diffusion is linked to more than just not knowing who one is (identity), but it is also much related to not knowing what an individual could do (initiative, industry), not knowing whether an individual can do what needs

to be done (autonomy), and not knowing whether others could help (trust) (Hamachek, 1995). Such identity diffusion symptoms are vividly found in Esther, who has a split personality and who suffers from “a split of self-images ... a loss of centre and a dispersion” (Erikson, 1968, p. 212). Esther suffers from an identity crisis manifested in feelings of isolation, emptiness, anxiety, indecisiveness, lack of self-confidence, apathy, hopelessness about the future, and depression.

Identity diffusion in the Bell Jar

In *The Bell Jar*, Plath seems to be diffused and despaired. In the retelling of her experience in New York and its aftermath, Plath fully captured her sense of diffusion and despair with the unsettling opening: “It was a queer, sultry summer, the summer they electrocuted the Rosenberg’s, and I didn’t know what I was doing in New York” (Plath, 1963, p. 4). Plath describes the atmosphere quotation, which describes the condition of New York by Esther and how she feels lost. The first sentence in *The Bell Jar* directly provides readers with a hint of the conflicts. Then, the narrator declares that she is “stupid” and that she feels “sick” and consumed with ending her life. The character, a college-age young woman experiencing an adolescent crisis, bears a resemblance to another character, Holden Caulfield, in *Catcher in the Rye*. Sylvia was writing as her fictional self. Esther admits that although she is aware that she should have been excited about her month in New York, she felt incapable of reacting and metaphors her feelings as the following “very still and empty, the way the eye of a tornado must feel, moving dully along in the middle of the surrounding hullabaloo” (Plath, 1963, p. 6). In a letter to her only brother, she confessed that her head wanted to split open when she thought of everything she saw and experienced in New York (Plath, 1963). In the same letter, she metaphorized the train from New York to Wellesley to a coffin. This macabre image confirms that the author (Plath) was emotionally unstable by the time she left New York: “Look what can happen in this country, they’d say. A girl lives in some out-of-the-way town . . . I felt very still and very empty, the way the eye of a tornado must feel, moving dully along in the middle of the surrounding hullabaloo (Plath, 1963, 10)”.

This concluding reflection demonstrates the disconnection between how Esther views her life experiences and how others perceive them. This disconnection drives her diffusion. Despite her talent that justifiably won her a scholarship, she often disparages herself when comparing her lives to the magazine’s rich girls. At one glance, Esther should feel proud of herself. In this regard, she managed to leave her middle-income, small-town life along with some hard work and talent and was rewarded with a gorgeous month in New York. However, even though she is aware of her blessings, Esther is still doubtful of her abilities and feels insecure over her rewards. To her surprise, she found that New York is depressing and confusing, rather than thrilling and romantic, as she imagined. Moreover, she began to feel discontent with the fashion world and deemed it as dizzying and superficial. Esther feels a sense of numbness while in New York. The madness she feels has eventually overtaken her identity. Tragically, she could no longer overcome her diffusion

as the conflict between her feelings and societal expectations experiences become malevolent.

Esther, a college student from Massachusetts, was provided with the chance to become an invitee editor for a New York fashion magazine. During the short but turbulent stay, she encountered different people and events, questioning her identity. She initially interpreted women's beauty as a reflection of female identity. Her colleague, Doreen, dressed like a sexual goddess and en-route to a party hosted by the *Lady Magazine* where several men invited them for a drink "She was wearing a strapless white lace dress zipped up . . . She smelled strong as a whole perfume store (Plath, 1963, 12)".

Plath used interior monologue to show Esther's identity diffusion. The description above reflects Esther's keen observation of Doreen's particular beauty and style, and at the same time, Esther's uncertainty on whether she should copy Doreen's style and behaviour. Ostensibly, Esther feels the loss in the fast-paced life of New York City and finds it hard to keep up. She began to question her own decisions over others. She reluctantly followed her friends to the party, where Doreen brought her to the inn with Lenny and Frankie. She fell sleeping at Lenny's flat before waking up to look at the couple having sex, and she returned home feeling more lost. Likewise, the reader could sense a sense of treat as Doreen and Esther engaged in a conversation with the men when they were stuck in a traffic jam during a cab ride "He threaded his way out between the stopped cars and leaned engagingly on the sill of our open window . . . cab just as it was edging ahead again and started to walk over to the bar (Plath, 1963, p. 13)".

Plath used the last three lines to drive home the full irony of the situation since Esther and Doreen simply left the party to go to a bar with strangers. According to Erikson, this portrayal reveals several identity diffusion characteristics. It shows that Esther began to act differently, contrary to her former character, as she started attending parties, socializing with men, and mixing with others. She was never social and did not have many friends to go out with her. This indicates that she did not trust her societies' values and traditions, as Erikson describes character loss. Besides, Erikson emphasises that one of the characteristics of identity is the full knowledge of people. Here, we could sense the loss of Esther's identity after a very short period. In this light, she did not indulge herself with others' full knowledge by harmonizing, adapting, imitating their actions, and becoming fully aware of them. The text also highlights Esther's desire to satisfy her needs and her wants. This portrayal is the main hint in Esther's identity diffusion. It reveals how she drifted into the world of parties and sex after a short period, indicating her repressed desires.

As guest editors, Esther and the other girls are obliged to follow a strict schedule of activities, attending a party. Esther seems to question her self-identity. Concerning diffusion, Esther's impulsiveness is aligned with Erikson's description that individuals with a lack of identity sense will feel depressed and lack confidence. As a result, they become trapped in the state of "diffusion". They drift away from themselves or adopt a "negative identity" to

become a “black sheep”, a “delinquent”, a “rebel”, or a “loser”. During the incident at Lenny’s apartment, Esther gradually felt isolated and unattractive, as opposed to the sexually assured Doreen, who is having a great time “It was so dark in the bar I could hardly make out anything except Doreen . . . I felt myself melting into the shadows like the negative of a person I'd never seen before in my life (Plath, 1963, p.15)”.

The phrase, “...I'd never seen before in my life...” accentuates Esther’s lack of a true sense of self in the absence of recognition by others. This highlights Plath's metaphorical depiction of Esther feels like she does not belong as she is being ignored and overlooked. Her incompetence and inability to acclimatize herself with the new environment led to feelings of isolation and disjuncture evident in the introduction of Esther when she used another name to introduce herself to a man in the party, “My name's Elly Higginbottom,” I said. “I come from Chicago.” After that, I felt safer” (Plath, 1963, p. 17). In essence, “Esther is insecure; Elly is supremely self-confident”. Here, Esther used another name to conceal her identity and hide her real self. Elly, her alter ego, has a contrasting Esther’s, who could hide her past and feel free. Coming home from her night with Doreen and one of the men, Esther took a bath and felt “pure and sweet as a new baby”. She feels like she’s been reborn and forgotten the fictional Elly: “‘Elly, Elly, Elly, let me in’, and I didn’t know any Elly.”

Brain (2014) asserted that “Plath invokes the opposition between the good and the bad mother in *The Bell Jar*” (p. 166). Examples of bad mothers inhibit Dr. Gordon’s nurse, whose “fat breast muffled my face like a cloud or pillow”, as Esther (Plath) remembered in her electroconvulsive therapy session. While a female’s breast represents comfort and nourishment to a child, the nurse’s breast somehow chokes Esther, similar to the airlessness of the bell jar, which contributes to Esther’s sense of suffocation “Why did I attract all these weird old women? There was the famous poet, and Philomena Guinea, and Jay Cee, and the Christian Science lady and lord know who, and they all wanted to adopt me in some way, and, for the price of their care and influence, have me resemble them (Plath, 1963, p. 280).”

Perhaps it is not just that Esther attracts these women, but she unconsciously seeks out roles to form her own identity. These socially conforming roles somehow suffocate Esther as she was forced to conform to their standards and their expectations. Esther is forced to juggle between becoming a submissive wife and mother and her ambition to become a popular successful writer and editor. Esther is what she needs, which Esther, herself, is unable to understand or define. We can conclude that Esther becomes critical of men because she is unpersuaded by false reasoning and asserts people should be judged based on their intelligence rather than gender. In fact, she definitely wants to show to others her true self to reach her success “The last thing I wanted was infinite security and to be the place an arrow shoots off from. I wanted change (Plath, 1963, p. 89).”

On the other hand, by using an analogy, Esther represents a certain feminine possibility pattern. Esther feels pushed toward assuming various stereotypical

female roles. The senior women are unable to provide Esther with a satisfactory answer about the future. Both her own and Buddy's mother attended university but became housewives immediately after marriage, while Dodo Conway has been reduced to nothing more than a child-birth machine. The two interns at the *Ladies' Day* magazine in New York hold a particular interest in Esther. The blond and gorgeous Doreen, young but wealthy in social experience and adept at charming men, simultaneously fascinates and repels Esther. Doreen protests against social rules with an attitude that Esther likes but cannot entirely embrace. Conversely, the gentle and well-behaved Betsy has her sights firmly on marriage, motherhood, and domesticity. Esther's ideal fluctuates between these two extremes: initially instinctively rejecting Betsy first but returning to her when ultimately disillusioned by Doreen's absurdity. The senior editor, Jay Cee, is Esther's boss during the training period. Characterized as ambitious, confident, and professional, she represents the typical career woman. Identity crisis is usually observed by the juncture of three psychosocial tensions during psychosocial moratorium in adolescence: namely, identity foreclosure, identity diffusion, and negative identity. Nevertheless, we find that Esther's issue presents merely identity diffusion that drives her to negative identity.

Esther's psychosocial moratorium represents the identity crisis she suffers. Erikson (1968) calls this phenomenon identity diffusion. In this light, those who could not handle their identity conflict will suffer from identity diffusion, while those who can build a strong new sense of self. The depiction of Esther shows that she suffers from identity diffusion. In general, in the intimacy versus isolation stage, identity is very important to build a personality and connections with others. According to Erikson (1968), the symptoms of identity diffusion include "a split of self-images... a loss of centre and a dispersion" (p. 212). An adolescent experiencing such diffusion suffers an identity crisis that may manifest itself in feelings of isolation, emptiness, anxiety, indecisiveness, lack of self-confidence, apathy, hopelessness about the future, and depression, culminating in suicide (Hall & Lindsey, 1978; Shaffer & Kip, 2007). Esther deals with her confusion/diffusion by consuming fifty sleeping pills and isolates herself miserably in the basement to die. Writing a note, she has left the house for a long walk to ensure that people will not search for her and find her. However, this suicide attempt failed, and she is hospitalized. Esther survived this attempt due to her luck and began recovering by building a new identity. In this sense, Esther's suicide leads to some sort of rebirth. In her total breakdown, she reached an infancy stage from which she can grow up. Once she is institutionalised, she starts to pull together the fragments of her persona called identity diffusion.

Both texts *The Bell Jar* and *Letters Home* explore the issue of Plath's identity diffusion. The findings revealed that Plath retells her life experiences through her works. She narrates her direct experiences and the suicide attempts in a precise way. Plath became a model for all woman sufferings during her era and succeeded in conveying and spreading her ideas to all generations.

Identity diffusion in "Letters Home"

Aurelia Plath released a collection of letters she received from her daughter, entitled *Letters Home*. Plath's *Letters Home: Correspondence 1950–1963* was published in the US in 1975 and the UK in 1976. The letters were selected and edited by Plath's mother, Aurelia Plath. *Letters Home* begins with the first letter, Plath mailed from Smith College on September 27th, 1950, one month before her eighteenth birthday, and ends with extracts from a letter written on February 4th, 1963, one week before she died (the last letter by Plath in the Lilly Library's holdings).

Specifically, Plath's letters provide further insight into her life and how her experiences inspired her work. Plath's letters to Aurelia are typically optimistic in maintaining a positive tone even when life grew challenging. She frequently discloses her identity struggles to her mother but generally concludes on a hopeful note, reassuring her mother that she is overcoming all challenges. One such example relates to her time with *Mademoiselle Magazine*: "Do write me letters Mommy because I am in a very dangerous of feeling sorry for myself...Just at present...life is awful. . . . I feel completely uprooted and clumsy" (Plath, 1975).

The text represents that, apart from developing a personal sense of identity, adolescence also requires searching for social identity. At this stage, young people become increasingly focused on how their views compare to society (Erikson, 1963). In the given extract, Plath describes herself as "exhausted, scared, incompetent, unenergetic and generally low in spirits" and claims that she feels "completely uprooted and clumsy". However, she signs off by reassuring her mother that all is well. Since only a few short months after this letter, Plath made the now infamous suicide attempt by overdosing and hiding in the crawl space. It also highlights Plath's inability to develop ego strength, which refers to the characteristics that qualify and prepare individuals for their roles in society's development from generation to generation. Erikson (1982) describes ego strengths as:

One can only conclude that the functioning ego, while guarding individuality, is far from being isolated, for a kind of communality links egos in a mutual activation. Something in the ego processes, then, and something in social processes is - well, practically identical. (E. Erikson, 1982, p. 224).

Since Plath was unable to develop ego strength or ego process in the social and professional depiction in *Mademoiselle Magazine*, her changing thoughts and moods concerning her identity diffusion and isolation urged her towards mental disturbance and finally towards committing suicide. The analysis reveals that in Plath's instants of breakdown, her life's natural presence lost all happiness and developed an imprisoning maze of dislocated sensations and impressions. In such a state of isolation, she considered the agony of conscious will as unnatural.

Another feature of Plath's identity diffusion, reflecting Plath's case, is revealed by the analysis in this text, based on Erikson's model. ., This shows the obvious intimacy crisis between Plath and her mother. This intimacy crisis

made her express her wish to see her mother died. Regarding this, Plath wrote on December 27th, 1958:

When she dies, what will I feel? I wish her death so I could be sure of what I am: so I could know what feelings I have, even though some resemble hers, are really my own. Now I find it hard to distinguish between the semblance and the reality. (Kukil, 2000, p. 449)

An additional characteristic of isolation and bad intimacy regarding Plath's case is given here. The analysis shows distrust and certainty of Plath and her mother's closeness, revealing divergence between them. Plath wishes her mother's death to make sure of her personality and the nature of her feelings. The text also reveals an incompatibility with herself. She waits for her mother's death to ascertain her personality's truth, whether she is her mother's character. It also highlights the lack of self-actualization, which is essential for integrating various components and forces in her life. In this regard, Erikson (1994) argued that this could only be accomplished when one accepts that all fragments of one's life constitute one "only life".

Through the examination of data, Plath is found unsuccessful at developing a healthy identity. This further reveals the intimacy crisis and isolation distortions, which, in return, confirms Erikson's theory. In conclusion, Plath is a non-adaptive and inflexible woman who is resilient to social change. The identity diffusion experienced in the adolescence stage extends into adulthood, manifesting as the intimacy crisis of a careless, impulsive, depressive and lonely woman. Resultantly, she feels terrible isolation when she paradoxically negates her isolation. In this light, when the biggest obstacle for young, female, and highly gifted is herself.

CONCLUSION

In summary, Plath possesses a complex personality. The various inconsistencies between her personal and professional writings represent her complex individual, challenging to explain or describe. This is a thorough debate on who Plath really was and how she can be understood. The climax was during December 1962, after she failed to reunite with Hughes, Plath left Court Green and lived in WB Yeat's childhood apartment in London. "Well, here I am! Safely in Yeats' house!" she wrote to her mother. "My bedroom will be my study - it faces the rising sun." She sends her last letter to Beuscher on February 4th, in which she wrote, "What appals me is the return of my madness, my paralysis, my fear & vision of the worst—cowardly withdrawal, a mental hospital, lobotomies." A week later, on February 11th, Plath turned on the gas oven, sealed her children's bedroom with tea towels and tape, and subsequently killed herself. The article had presented the elements of identity diffusion discovered in Sylvia Plath's literary texts, *The Bell Jar* and *Letters Home* through the lens of Erikson's psychological development framework.

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