
IDENTITY FORMATION AND PATRIARCHAL DOMINANCE: A STUDY OF SELECT FEMALE NARRATIVES

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Abstract: Psychology deals with analyzing the behavior of the individual. Behavior mainly constitutes of a stimulus and a response. An individual's identity is determined by his response to the stimulus. Socialization and personal experience shapes the identity of the individual. Behavioral analysis studies an individual's functioning in the society. This paper attempts to answer queries related to identity formation and psychological disorders. Is identity formation a process? Can woman suffer from psychological disorders during the formation of identity? Margaret Atwood and Tsitsi Dangarembga are female authors who focus on woman and her role in the society. This paper attempts to analyze the psychological implications that the identity formation could lead to and the ways in which the individual can attain relief from these states.

Keywords: Behavioral Analysis, Identity, Patriarchy.

Introduction: Psychology deals with analyzing the behavior of the individual. Behavior mainly constitutes of a stimulus and a response. The response to the stimulus determines the individual's identity. Identity can be defined as the attributes and characteristics by which the individual relates and defines oneself. This identity is shaped by the society. Behavioral analysis helps one to explore the individual's identity and the way in which one functions in the society. Is identity formation a process? If yes, is it an individual (self) process or a social process? Can woman suffer from psychological disorders during the formation of identity? Can woman form an individual identity free from the dictates of the patriarchy? Margaret Atwood and Tsitsi Dangarembga are female authors who focus on woman and her role in the society. This paper attempts to analyze the identity formation as a process, the psychological implications that the process could lead to and the ways in which the individual can attain relief from these states.

The term identity is defined as "the fact of being who or what a person or thing is" [707]. Identity plays a crucial role in defining one's personality. The attitudes, traits and behavioral aspects of an individual are determined by the identity. Pramod K. Nayar, opines that, "Identity is constituted through experience, and representation is a significant part of experience.... Identity is the consequence of representation and the effect of discourse. Identity is based on the location within a system of relationships and discourses" [25]-[26]. With regard to femininity and the identity, he states that, "girls assimilate qualities of the 'feminine' because they are brought up within the discourse of femininity" [25]. According to Bracken, a school psychologist, social, competence, affect, physical, academic and family are the six specific domains related to the self-concept. Identity, therefore, is a social, cultural, and personal

concept.

The Edible Woman by Margaret Atwood is a (1969) novel that deals with the portrayal of an emerging independent woman who seeks to unfold her true potential. She is Marian McAlpin, who half heartedly agrees to marry her boyfriend, Peter Wollander. She is an economically independent woman who works as a marketing analyst. Marrying Peter would mean to give up her independent status and being the dependent home maker to an upcoming lawyer. This definite dependency puts her in a mental conflict. She cannot control the situation; she displaces the control over herself by succumbing to the eating disorder. Tsitsi Dangarembga's *Nervous Conditions* (1988) portrays the emerging African independent woman. Tambu and Nyasha are the two young women characters who suffer from the dictates of the patriarchy. Both the girls are in the growing ages. Nyasha is brought up in a well to do family and provided with good education. Her exposure to the western culture has enlightened her with the western ideals of equality. She is now forced by her family to unlearn this thinking and relearn the acceptance of patriarchal dominance. Tambu, on the other hand, is brought up in a poor family. She succumbs to the patriarchal dominance, yet fights for herself to fulfill some of her earnest desires such as being educated. Tambu understands her need to succumb to the patriarchal dominance till she asserts a financial independence. But Nyasha, who is exposed to the African and the western culture, finds herself in a dilemma to relearn the African patriarchal discourse. Unable to control the situation around her, she displaces the control on herself by developing an eating disorder.

Based on Freud's theory on Psychoanalytical stages of development, the infant in the oral stage demands immediate gratification. The mouth and the breast feeding become the source of gratification. The child,

in this stage, is Id. The child's Mother (a female figure) becomes the external agent for need (hunger) satisfaction. Breasts (in turn the mother) become the signifier and the female figure becomes signified as the food provider. The identity or the self is formed gradually as a process. It is influenced by the socialization (several circumstances in the society) as well as the individual inferences from the same. Similarly, as the girl child gets socialized, she is trained to become a mother and the food provider. This way, hunger and the need satisfaction become associated with gender politics. This image of women as the hunger gratifiers is portrayed in Tsitsi Dangarembga's novel *Nervous Conditions* and Margaret Atwood's *The Edible Woman*. Jeremiah, Tambu's father, snapped at her saying, "Can you cook books and feed them to your husband? Stay at home with your mother. Learn to cook and clean. Grow vegetables" [15]. But Tambu was keen on receiving an education. Yet, she masters the art of cooking and taking care of her siblings. Identity formation therefore, is a social and personal process. The individual is constantly striving to find out the attributes and desires in oneself that makes one unique from the other individual. Nyasha from *Nervous Conditions* and Marian from *The Edible Woman* become the oppressors of this mother figure. Both gradually develop an aversion to this mother figure role and displace this aversion on the food in order to control the situation.

Lacan in his study on the Psychosexual stages of development mentions that the child's sense of Identity (self) develops when the child enters into a world of language. This Language is dictated by the patriarchy. Thus, the sense of identity that the child develops is influenced by the norms of the patriarchy. The language as a patriarchal discourse trains the woman to play the role of a feminine being. But when the female subject deconstructs the meaning of the different signs, they also deconstruct this patriarchal meaning. Tambu, in *Nervous Conditions* said, "I was beginning to suspect that I was not the person I was expected to be, and took it as evidence that somewhere I had taken a wrong turning. So to put myself back on the right path I took refuge in the image of the grateful poor female relative" [118]. Nyasha meanwhile was exposed to two different discourses owing to her migration to England from Africa. Her dilemma in the process of learning and unlearning the different discourses is evident throughout the novel. Similar is the case with Marin, in *The Edible Woman* who is beginning to unlearn her

independent woman's discourse to that of being a dutiful homemaker. This is affecting their idea of self (Identity) as well. Thus, patriarchal power controls the formation of a woman's identity.

We eat when we are hungry. Hunger is one of the basic physiological needs according to Abraham Maslow. When hunger is gratified it leads to the accomplishment of higher and complex needs. But when the individual's identity is threatened, women in particular try to control the situation by controlling their body. They cannot control the situation outside since it is evidently male dominated. Dangarembga and Atwood portray woman's reaction to the forced transformation in the light of their characters Tambu, Nyasha and Marian. Tambudzai, in *Nervous Conditions*, embraces the expected patriarchal norms to let her be exposed to the world of multiple discourses. But Nyasha and Marian react to this enforcement of patriarchal power by succumbing themselves to psychological disorder. They feel helpless to overthrow this power. Thus, they displace this helplessness by trying to control their 'Self'. Nyasha fails to unlearn the western and liberal discourse as well as relearn the patriarchal discourse. She reacts by controlling her hunger. Similarly, Marian's aversion grows across most of the food items, beginning from non-veg to many vegetarian foods. She understands her reason for the aversion over time. To end the aversion she confronts the situation and breaks the proposed marriage with Peter, who becomes a representative of the patriarchy. She confronts Peter, "'You've been trying to destroy me, haven't you,'" she said. "You've been trying to assimilate me. But I've made you a substitute, something you'll like much better. This is what you really wanted all along, isn't it?" [271]. Nyasha, meanwhile, has a nervous breakdown and sublimates her inner dilemma by letting out her feelings to her mother.

To conclude, identity is a social and personal process. The formation of an identity can be influenced by the society. But the development of an identity in an individual is an ongoing personal and social process. Individual's identity is always in the process of modification and transformations. The social and personal experiences cause the transformation of this identity. Women become the victims of patriarchal pressure as they explore their uniqueness and attributes. This identity or 'Self' has to be allowed to explore its potential to enable a 'self actualization'. But, 'self actualization' for a female 'self' has to pass through the rough path of patriarchy.

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