

THE LONGING TO BELONG IN BEING

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Abstract

Francis Scott Key Fitzgerald encapsulated the theme of connectivity between literature, and the emotional conflict of being and belonging with the following words: "That is part of the beauty of a literature. You discover that your longings are universal longings, that you're not lonely and isolated from anyone. You belong." The purpose of this study is partially based upon the aforementioned belief that literature serves as an amalgamation between the universality of existential crises and the individuality of psychological dwellings.

Further exploration brings us in proximity with the degeneration of William Shakespeare's Othello, who has gained the title of 'a tragic, most romantic hero' over time. The degeneration occurs at the expense of his 'Self', by surrendering to the longing to belong in the mainstream Venetian society. Milton's of criticised usage of "And justify the ways of God to men" (I,25-26) is, in actuality, a subtle indication of man's free will in picking out his identity, without restraints or moderated supervision. In the Marathi novels, Yugandhar, and Mahamrityunjaya, by Shivaji Sawant, the characters of Krishna and Karna are portrayed to have possessed almost a parallel ambivalence in their contradictory choices throughout the epic of Mahabharata. Evolutionary activities, taking form within the materialistic environment, have paved the path for a renewed yet conventionally witnessed dilemma of being and belonging.

Jodi Picoult's My Sister's Keeper chronicles the emotional upheaval in Anna Fitzgerald's thirteen-year-old mind as her existence is utilised as a mere scapegoat for the survival of her chronically ill elder sister. The sheer firmness she delivers through her actions brings out the desperate hope to exist for her own sense of belonging, which serves as an inclination to invoke a rebellion within her. The journey of mapping out one's intrinsic necessity to envisage one's longings, as one recognizes the universal and individual ways in which one belongs to a more cosmic, social and spiritual purpose by the involuntary sense of being, is connected across eras by the lines drawn through literature, as experienced by every human heart.

Keywords : *Longing, Belonging, Being, Self, Identity (Individual and Universal)*

Robert Herrick wrote: "Gather ye rosebuds while ye may" (Herrick 357). Herrick has captured the essence of 'seizing the day' into these words in poem, *To the Virgins, to Make Much of Time*, so as to evoke the whirlwind of action within each of our souls, and tug at the restlessness within. When one takes a stroll back in time, both prose and poetry would be found envisaging the conflict in our minds with one ultimate question: 'Who am I?'

The inevitable, lingering sense of restlessness is what leads us to ponder about the core of our identity. Had the entire world been devoid of transitions and constant change, then nobody would have wondered about the ways in which one is capable of being. The need to identify would not have existed in such a scenario. One perceives the various ways of being and belonging by first realising what he does not want to be and the path which leads to free exploration of self. The transit of time has been a silent witness to one element of the mortal mind, and it is the personal craving to identify with a satisfactory purpose in life. What Herrick urged man to seek through 'carpe diem' in the seventeenth century has preserved its meaning through every era.

"He is a fool that practices truth, without knowing the difference between truth and falsehood"(Bhatt). This was the lesson of wisdom imparted by Lord Krishna to his friend and disciple, Arjuna, when the latter was stranded in a labyrinth of moral and personal dilemmas with respect to the war of Mahabharata against his kin. During those times, as Shivaji Sawant has portrayed through the mindset of Kunti in *Yugandhar*, the overwhelming knowledge of not being able to have a whole identity haunts a person continuously. She was a palpable victim of the tragedy of abandoning her child, and then finding the abandoned son blood thirsty for her legitimate progeny. But on evaluating the core of her lifelong sorrow and the struggles of identity crisis that she had faced one deciphers the many layers of her twisted fate mangle in her consciousness.

Sawant helps us to delve into the plight of a victimised Kunti, but then brings in the saga as seen from the eyes of her abandoned son, Karna. The former is seen to be the victim of patriarchy, while the latter is suffering due to his own choices. In a quest for maintaining a respectable, elite reputation within her society, Kunti surrendered herself by giving up on a part of her soul, in her offspring, and this played a significant role in vanquishing her sense of individuality. Karna, on the contrary, attempted to mould the core of his identity in accordance with the perceptions that deemed him extraordinary enough to attain acceptance in a community that looked down upon the likes of him. All the choices he dreamt of, chased and made throughout the course of his lifetime were driven by the sole need of acceptance. The mother sinned in disowning her son because of her cowardice in defending her identity, while the son meets a tragic end on a path of foolhardy decision making because of arrogance in attempting to defend his.

Jerome David Salinger's teenage the protagonist from *The Catcher in the Rye*, Holden Caulfield, expresses his detachment from the lifestyle he has been living, by saying, "I don't even know what I was running for—I guess I just felt like it" (Salinger 3). The usage of the phrase 'running for', instead of 'running from' discerns a void in the life of Caulfield, as it is this search of a satisfactory and filling sense of being and the need to belong in his present identity, which makes him endeavour towards extremities. When Holden narrates his story, one is immediately struck by the detached manner in which he identifies, or rather fails to, with the traits of his personality and the reader has to reach out, gather and design the character from the narratives that he imparts in a random fashion of thought.

Throughout the course of his teenage years, Salinger's Holden is tied up, in a redundant manner, to the confined norms of his family's idea of a right, uplifting role in the society. There is particularly no struggle for the basic survival necessities in his account, but his frequent undertaking of the unpredictable somehow appears to be a craving to find a sense of connection between his mind and his identity.

Most manoeuvres of apparent rebellion are, in fact, embarked upon when the ongoing course of activity ceases to gratify the rebel's mindset. This can be directly discerned with the scrutinised analysis of the following reference from *The Catcher in the Rye*: "I don't give a damn, except that I get bored sometimes when people tell me to act my age. Sometimes, I act a lot older than I am- I really does but people never notice it. People never notice anything" (Salinger 9).

Holden feels disconnected from the ideas of idealism set by the society because he is at war with pieces of himself that he, himself, is unaware about. It is this paucity of emotional association to his conscious mind and his traits that cause his mainstream detachment. This occurrence from his account brings out a key-consequence. The the aftermath of not identifying with your own self, as required, is the reason many of the society's "rebels" rise, who find themselves incessantly at crossroads with the guidelines designed for righteous and upright, moralistic attitude.

One suitable exhibit of the aforementioned trait is found in Ayn Rand's brilliant and popular work, *The Fountainhead*, which emphasizes the uniqueness and individuality of thought one is capable of possessing and, more significantly, exercising.

A touching line of dialogue from the novel explains the need for belonging to oneself more before fitting in everyone's bias of idealism. Howard Roark addresses Peter Keating, saying, "To sell your soul is the easiest thing in the world. That's what everybody does every hour of his life. If I asked you to keep your soul, would you understand why that's much harder?" (Rand 625). In the labyrinth of materialistic aspirations and spiritualistic dilemmas, it has always been uncomplicated to surrender one's sense of belonging to the paradigm of the crowd, because it is, to a certain extent, the apt junction of achievement and comfort. This is why Rand's Howard is visualized as a counter-culturist in 20th century society.

A majority of the characters associated with Roark are portrayed to be in his individuality's opposition, but, in actuality, they are threatened by the ease with which Roark, belongs fully in his own being and its uniqueness. This fear of acknowledgement of their own insecurities is the cause that Howard and his art suffer segregation. Yet Rand depicts that the honest passion with which her protagonist, Howard Roark, embraces his art's exclusivity makes his mind and soul impervious to the fuel of fright or fret for isolation or scrutiny. This is where the soul and heart of this literary piece lies.

Many would argue that the universality of this urge to experience a sense of belonging is inevitable. Rand has tackled this outlook through an exchange between her fiercely individualist characters, Howard and Dominique. The excerpt of that exchange goes as follows, where Howard says to Dominique: "To say 'I love you', one must first know how to say the 'I' (Rand, 400). Roark implies in a blatant manner, fitting to his honest uniqueness, that if a person is not aware of his flaws and appeasing qualities, or is stubborn enough to cling to all the poor traits, then he would not be able to fill himself with enough emotion to deliver to another soul. One cannot give pieces of oneself to others, unless he is acquainted with the whole of his being, completely. This holds true for the previous deliberation of universality in the sense of belonging.

Another aspect of the longing to belong has been expressed through the saga of Peter Keating, who, throughout the course of his lifetime, attempts to attain the epitome of success by pleasing the ideals set by society. His actions are steered by this conjecture that contentment would come to him, only if he

chases the herd. Keating lacks the courage to crusade in favour of his desires, therefore his passion perishes out of his soul, and he is rendered a hollow man running after the profane.

Ayn Rand has made her Keating impulsive yet measured in a manner that constructs the image of a world-fearing man. This fear is the repercussion of his failure to make peace with his whole being, as he makes incessant efforts to mould his identity to suit the whims of every individual, who seems beneficial. The canvas-artist within him chokes to its end as a shrewd and cunning architect rises, trying to touch the endless sky. The bitterness experienced by Peter in the times of personal conflict is, in fact, his desperate mechanism of defense in opposition to his conscience that gnaws at him, time and again. Had Peter showcased ample vigour in exploring and acknowledging his identity, raw and unbent, then his choices would have turned out to be utterly different. The tragedy lies in his disastrous inability to do so.

Every individual identity is perceived with such intricacy in Rand's method that one is oft left to wonder whether collective connection yields happiness at all. The outcome of such wonderments in the modern-day, post-Rand era, is a vast comprehension of an existential crisis.

Delineating the delicate subject of existential crisis in an intensely engaging way of narration is Jodi Picoult's *My Sister's Keeper*, where Anna Fitzgerald struggles to break free from the grip of a false existence that hinders the path to the formation of her independent identity. Picoult delves into the psychology of a thirteen-year-old Anna and presents to her readers, what is nothing less than, a "road to redefinition" This piece of writing embarks on a journey with both the suffering sisters, Anna and Kate. The latter is a patient of acute promyelocytic leukemia and Anna is conceived by her parents in order to serve as a 'saviour sister' for an ailing Kate.

It is Anna's right to her body, as well as mental individuality that is challenged and, in most cases, sacrificed until she steps into her teenage years and decides to withdraw herself from the unsolicited responsibility of catering to the medical requirements of her sister. As a thirteen-year-old, her fragile sense of independent identity is stranded between doubt and defeat, where she almost begins to look at herself as an extension of Kate.

My Sister's Keeper makes pensive transitions from one emotional conflict to another by portraying one scenario with separate perspectives and backgrounds of the various characters closely associated with the protagonist. There is the moral dilemma of Anna's father and the relentless belief of her mother that presents an integral question of individuality and the ability to take a stance for it. A chord is struck when Anna gathers the courage to rebel and she says, "It is about a girl who is on the cusp of becoming someone... A girl who may not know what she wants right now, and she may not know who she is right now, but who deserves the chance to find out" (Picoult 199).

The revelation at the end of the book gives another train of thought, its track. Kate is the person who encourages her younger sister to revolt against the decisive ways of their parents, because of her firm understanding and desire to accept the fate assigned for her. It is this acceptance that attaches a sense of dignity in departing, to her identity. She chooses to linger not in form, but in thought, and this choice is the crux of *My Sister's Keeper*. Not only does this bold declaration evoke a sense of liberation for her own body, but it also makes an impact on her deep sense of belonging. This decisiveness in preserving her earthly form and thoughts, leads to a search for the sense of individual belonging. This individualism

ultimately attains a relatable and motivational shape through the course of the book, as Anna and her family realise the multitudes of their personalities. A universal need for the sense of individualism and belonging is then witnessed, and felt, by the characters and the readers, as well.

Every soul in the modern world deals with a situation, at least once in his lifetime, which attempts to suppress the facets of its identity, either completely or with subtle partiality. This is the foundation of an existential crisis, which gradually evolves as the suppression deepens its roots. History has been witnessed to rigorous modifications of ideas, beliefs, cultures and societies. What has remained constant is the desire for contentment in individual souls, and this desire for contentment has showcased latent longings to belong. The greatest ways of being and belonging are imbibed in the method of exploration, or rather, the freedom of exploration.

The Unabridged Journals of Sylvia Plath consists of a line from the poetess, which encapsulate the restlessness to be and identify with numerous feelings at the same time: “I can never be all the people I want and live all the lives I want. I can never train myself in all the skills I want. And why do I want? I want to live and feel all the shades, tones and variations of mental and physical experience possible in my life. And I am horribly limited”(Plath 166). This fright of being “horribly limited” conceives a sensation to find the possibilities entrapped within oneself.

As John Ronald Reuel Tolkien wrote, “Not all who wander are lost”(Tolkien 378). Those who do not wander at all do not know what good the destination will bring them.

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