

## Gender Autonomy as a Feminist Premise of Identity and Its Impact Upon Female Protagonists in Fictional Narratives

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### Abstract

This paper examines ethnic identity in selected narrative works, namely, Tanushree Podder's *Escape from Harem* (2013), R. K. Narayan's *The Guide* (1958) and Dipika Rai's *Someone Else's Garden* (2010). The study argues that the ethnic groups could be grasped in terms of their identity features, which are blatantly portrayed in the novels. The study of any ethnic group, furthermore, leads directly to the understanding of its people, culture, tradition, manner and so forth. In this respect, the concept of identity will be approached as an implicative conceptualization of any community. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to examine the complexities of identity and its effects on the characters in the selected novels. First, it will study the conceptualization of identity in *Escape from Harem* (2013). In this novel, the notions of identity will be elaborated in relation to feminism. Second, it will apply the concept of identity in terms of the main character's life in *The Guide* (1958). Third, it will discuss women poor conditions in *Someone Else's Garden* (2010) to identify the author's depiction of gender autonomy as a way of gaining identity in the novel.

**Key words:** Culture; Feminism; Gender; Identity; Society

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### 1. INTRODUCTION

Identity is one of the most striking socio-cultural phenomena in the world due to its vitality in representing social groups and their cultural traits. The issue of identity is a crucial in different fields of humanities. Critical scholars tried their hands to accentuate the importance of studying identity in order to cope with new socio-cultural insights regarding many ethnicities (Bailey, p.14). The concept of identity occupies distinctive cultural significance since it provides scholars with the appropriate ethnic tools to discern the peculiarities of many human communities. Therefore, the concept of identity is of paramount importance because it has some interdisciplinary relations with other critical fields "appropriated within the broad scope of discursive narratives" (Abu Jweid, 2023b, p.17). It is associated with the field of anthropology through the "the proponents of finding, identifying, allocating, inspecting and appraising a growing body of knowledge on indigenous identity" (Abu Jweid, 2016, p.532). The concept of identity, when viewed from different textual points of view, offers genuine meanings about the behaviors of people in their national communities.

The concept of identity is also associated with psychoanalysis. Studying the ethnical identity of certain communities paves the way for different and various types of human psyches. In this way, scholars would explore new ideas and themes concerning the importance of identity in literary works (Gallois, p.28). Being so, literary works become vital tools to discover the latent meanings of identity in communities. Furthermore, the concept of identity is a key factor to the cultural implications of

human behavior tackled in the field of psychoanalysis. Consequently, it provides psychoanalysts with the psychic clues leading to the discovery of collective unconsciousness. For this reason, the concept of identity enhances psychoanalytic interpretations of the human psyche and its pertinent complexities (Marks, p.35).

This study will mainly rely on the concept of identity throughout the discussion. It is tackled from different social and cultural points of view. The concept of identity has another breakthrough implication of cultural matters. For example, it is politics which is exerted against certain human ethnicity for the sake of subjugation and suppression in political studies. Colonial politics, furthermore, would be the background for any issues related to identity. The purpose of this study, therefore, is to apply the concept of identity in the light of social and feminist perspectives. In a specific way, it will look into identity through the lens of feminist issues in Tanushree Podder's *Escape from Harem* (2013) and Dipika Rai's *Someone Else's Garden* (2010); and identity in terms of the social backgrounds in R. K. Narayan's *The Guide* (1958). In discussing the feminist issues, the study will refer to Julia Kristeva's arguments about the concept of identity.

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## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

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Tanushree Podder's *Escape from Harem* (2013) has been studied from different critical perspectives. Diren Ashok Khandhar and Manimangai Mani tackles the social and cultural attributes of the novel. They claim that any novel has an intrinsic value concerning the promotion of the cultural background in which it is written. Consequently, culture is the core of their study is the duality of culture and society as the two inextricable dominating factors the shape the ultimate features of the novel's plot and characters. On the one hand, the plot reflects the events and incidents that represent the integral parts of the whole novel and its function to deal with society and culture. On the other hand, the characters are the representative literary figures that convey the essence society and its pertinent cultural peculiarities: "culture and society plays the essence in a novel as it constructs these main ideas in engaging the interest of a reader and also extends the intended message of the particular writer" (p.44). In this sense, the concomitant relationship between culture and society is appropriated with the scope of the novel. Such relationship is reinforced by the dual affinity between the text and the readers who perceive the novel's message.

As for R. K. Narayan's *The Guide* (1958), Santanu Panda, furthermore, explores the affinity between the Western and native Indian culture by applying the concept of cultural juxtaposition. Panda argues that the novel is an obtrusive example on how cultural assimilation could result in the mixing of the native Indian traditions and the

Western ones. He interprets the novel as a combination of reality and myth in order to discover the author's obsession with the Western assimilation in the Indian society. The role of cultural juxtaposition, therefore, is inferred by the novel's narrative episodes, especially the first and the third narrative points of view: "the first person narrative is Raju's recollection of past life to Velan. The novel *The Guide* has myth and reality blended in the plot" (p.28). These narrative perspectives reflect the author's deliberate conceptualization of the cultural mixture in India. Panda, accordingly, interprets the two narrative points of view to deduce the inherent relationship between the Indian culture and its preservation of the inherited traditions despite the advent of the Western culture.

Subhadrika Sen approaches the thematic aspects of *Someone Else's Garden* (2010). The most recurrent thematic concerns of feminism are the concomitant male-dominated society and gender inferiority. These themes are considered as basic premise for treating any subject within the limits of colonial issues. In essence, feminism provides new insights of how females are oppressed in the patriarchal societies. Rai, similarity, provides a live panoramic picture of how females are oppressed in their societies. In this regard, the sense of deprivation comes out. As a matter of fact, deprivation, in feminist discourses, refers to women's loss of certain primary essentials in their lives, such as equality. Therefore, the lack of equality between males and females leads to the disintegration of female identity in the feminist discourses. Rai, accordingly, is an advocate of this feminist trend. This is due to the fact that her *Someone Else's Garden* (2010) exemplifies the fantasy of females: "Rai tries to incorporate a very thought provoking issue in the minds of the people in the society- that of gender bias and its outcome. She shows the strong character of a woman who can fight against all odds and earn respect and success in the eyes of the society" (p.35). Such literary fantasy is created by the absence of mere equality. The protagonist, Mamta suffers from deprivation and paternal negligence. As such, this leads her to live in wishful thinking. She aspires to marry an ideal husband. Yet she fails as she marries a common man from her society. This marriage is an indication of the patriarchal dominance of her character. That is she does not have any control over her life.

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## 3. ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

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### 3.1 Tanushree Podder's *Escape from Harem*

Podder's *Escape from Harem* (2013) depiction of identity occurs at the beginning of the actions, where females appear as if they were deeply marginalized by men. Podder's writing style is very rich with thematic and textual insights. She provides the reader with the comprehensive panoramic view on contemporary issues

that stormed in her country. She is primarily dedicated to the Indian problems that took place in different historical epochs. Critics have almost a united consensus on her writings as real portrayals of the experiences undergone by Indian people during intermittent. In general, Podder's writing style is precise presenting critical themes via erudite narrative expressions. In so doing, she copes with the cultural requirements regarding the contemporary literary vogues. Her writing precision renders her novels a special literary sense that could be decoded by applying different critical approaches (Ganguly, p.15). More specifically, she conveys this through the notions of identity, namely, female identity in the patriarchal society. This is true to the whimsical marriage of Jahangir: "the entire city was agog with excitement. Jahangir was marrying the woman he had been pursuing for the past four years" (p.29). This marital scene embodies the feminist identity lacked in the Indian traditional society.

Podder portrays the plights of women plights in the patriarchal society where women seem to be deprived of their basic needs as human being. This is because there is no social equilibrium between men and women. As a result, the ordeals of women intensify and they become prone to bias because "feminism has multifarious and diverse critical insights involving the themes and ideas of the position of women in any society" (Abu Jweid, 2023a, p.29). In other cases, she deals with the complexities of the interaction between man and nature in order to strengthen the necessity of natural awareness. She also tackles feminist problems at the expense of the fictional narrative technique for the sake of providing remedial solutions to the poor positions of women in societies (Perera, p.29). However, the most apparent style in her novels is the treatment of identity crisis through semi-experiential plots. Podder's reader might feel that he/she is reading the exact life of Podder's family, or at least the historical recounts of her ancestors. Literary critics have explored several themes concerning the influence of colonialism upon the lives of people and individuals. She appropriates identity to the contemporary cultural crisis as a way of grasping the bitter realities of societies to large extents. In *Escape from Harem* (2013), Podder deals with this issue precisely; she carries out such notion through Jahanara's characterization: "As for Jahanara, she was entrusted with the duties of running the harem and supervising all the work. It was a job generally assigned to dowagers, or the chief queen" (p.163).

Reading Podder's writing style, therefore, is of paramount importance since it gives us a picture of Indian people during different diachronic historical phases. The significance of tracing these styles, presumably, would illustrate the way by which Podder tells the stories of real events and people in a fictional plot. Moreover, understanding these styles might explain the diverse facades of Podder's narrative techniques that could lead

to important interpretations to construct some hypotheses about the essence of man's existence (Perera, p.29). Podder's writing styles are not limited to one study. The academic as well as the scholarly investigations of her fictional traits may be various; and critics might come up with original ideas about the manifestation of identity in her *Escape from Harem* (2013). Once we grasp the sense of her writing, we could live of her fictional charters and enjoying discovering some facts that have ever eluded us. At this point, the study of her writing styles can facilitate the process of reading her fiction in a critical manner concerning identity. Such manner is evident in women who seek their identity midst several problems: "From dawn to dusk, the girl dealt with different kinds of problems" (p.163).

The issue of identity is considered a distinctive theme in Podder's writings because identity matters are a token of the social schism between women and their female counterparts is created by making women devoid of dignity through suppression (Huq, p.16). In *Escape from Harem* (2013), Shahjahan exemplifies the feminist suppression. She does not feel independent. Instead, she is dependent on other people in her life. She is exploited for patriarchal purposes in her society: "Shahjahan depended on her sagacity and consulted her on many state matters" (p.163). Consequently, Podder portrays the complexes of female identity in the Indian traditional society. She tries to make identity a means of empowering females' position in their society. Yet, she uses characters, like Shahjahan, who extremely suffer from exploitation and marginalization. From this point, identity gets into cultural complexities as there is not equality between males and females in such a traditional society. Therefore, the novel becomes a way of perceiving these feminist poor conditions in the eyes of patriarchal narrative depiction.

In *Escape from Harem* (2013), the masters are males who suppress and harness females for their own interests. Females, on the other hand, hold some responsibilities as they serve their masters. Shahjahan, for example, is assigned to undertake many responsibilities because she is female: "At an age when she should have led a carefree life, she was burdened with enormous responsibilities" (p.163). These "enormous responsibilities" make Shahjahan tired and fed up with her position in society. She seems to be profoundly persecuted by her male oppressors. Consequently, she could not be able to gain her identity as a female being.

The exploitation of women in this way indicates the harsh position of women in their society due to the controlling masculine mainstream that does not consider the suffering of women (Khasnabish, p.54). Moreover, women are the victims of this exploitation since they are marginalized (Khader, p.81). Podder looks into this experience through the dynasty that was influenced by the oriental culture to some extent. Being so, the novels offers

a mere vivid portrayal of how women undergo bitter experience during the reign of this dynasty. Consequently, the superior masters could exploit the suppressed; and they could deal with the suppressed people in whatever way because they have a colonial power. Colonial identity incarnates the racial practices that suppress the colonized people could not obtain their identity as a human being. In *Escape from Harem* (2013), similarly, women are marginalized in an extreme way. However, they attempt to oppose men because they treat them in a negative way: “blinding was a common punishment for these men who managed to lay their eyes on the harem women” (p.72). In this quotation, men, who investigate women by looking at them, must be punished. The act of punishment is a way of seeking female identity that could be explored within the wide scope of thematic “outright narrative events to provide the reader with comprehensive impression that they truly portray” (Abu Jweid, 2022, p.23).

### 3.2 R. K. Narayan's *The Guide*

The novel revolves around the main character Raju and his gradual change in society. His identity is shaped by the social atmosphere around him. His social position incarnates Raju's loss of identity through which he seeks stability in his life. In this sense, he seeks refuge from arbitrary life which he attempts to get rid of. In fact, this scattered life refers to the essence of lack of Raju's identity. In addition, suffers from social restrictions imposed upon him by people around him. As such, defies people by searching for a distinctive life. In so doing, he establishes his own identity because identity involves relations among different people of the same social circumstances (Kalant, p.113).

In some cases, Raju keeps repeating, “Not a bad place” (p.29); referring to the jail, “I am not so great as you imagine. I am just ordinary” (p.83). This relation lays the premise of Raju's search for identity in a seemingly disturbed society since obtaining identity comes out of human relations. Therefore, this cultural encounter is an indication of Raju's ethnic identity that is “met with some socio-cultural obstacles” (Thieme, p.23). It resembles his encounter with Rosie. This is due to the fact that he is from an Indian background. At this point, he feels nostalgic for the past that embodies his need for personal identity; which “is the meticulous incarnation of the consistent fluctuation between one ethnic identity and its exact opposite. It embodies the simultaneous binary opposition of attraction and repulsion” (Abu Jweid, and Al-Khamisi, 2024, p.54).

After the wedding celebration, the little girl considers Raju as being the source of her support; and she informs everyone about him, “He doesn't speak to anyone, but if he looks at you, you are changed” (p.62). In this respect, his freedom is an allusion to his desired identity. This is because “he is a big man, he may go anywhere, he may have a thousand things to do” (p.65). Another

man said, “Yogis can travel to the Himalayas just by a thought” (p.65). Raju and Velan develop rapidly. They are introduced to other characters. They meet a group of people on the banks of Sarayu. Raju, for example, meets the villagers; and he begins to know about Velan's sister and her cousin. Raju's father still does not move. Raju just keeps remembering him. We do not see any actions related to the father who is depicted in a static mode. Most interestingly, Raju becomes more dynamic than before. This is because he is the protagonist of the novel.

Here, Raju meets new characters. This indicates his character's dynamism. He develops persistently because Narayan renders him the feature of dynamic interaction with other characters, such as his father, the stationmaster, and the porter who do not develop in the plot. He also undergoes significant inner change as described by Narayan. His remembrance of father embodies his inner dynamic development; and such development is an embodiment of his longing for individual identity. At this situation, he is divided between loyalty to conventional traditions and his own need for a stable identity.

Raju keeps interacting with other people from the same society. He adheres to good social discourses as an indication of his personality: “Give a discourse, Sir” (p.81). In this respect, he says that “All things have to wait their hour” (p.80). Consequently, he becomes alone. He begins to recognize his own personality due to this harsh experience. Therefore, Raju continues: “Mother, she is a good girl, not a snake-worshipper. She is a dancer” (p.94). Therefore, Raju becomes more aware for his social peripheries; which means that he is about to gain a distinctive personal identity.

This situation, furthermore, depicts the downward deterioration of Raju's life. He is taken again to the jail. Most importantly, he becomes a model prisoner. This is an apparent allusion to the dynamic development of his character. Mani, who has been a minor character, becomes dynamic a little bit since she visits Raju and Rosie. The development of Raju's character is an indication of his strenuous quest for personal identity. He interacts with so many people who influence his personality and finally get an independent identity.

This social background incarnates Raju's development through different phases, especially when he interacts with Velan who asked Raju, “I don't know why you tell me this, entire Swami” (p.96). Yet, Raju calmly told Swami that things are going to be confidential then he went to the village. This chapter is a whole documentation of Raju's life. He narrates his past with passion. This refers to his conspicuous actions. He has been a dynamic character throughout the plot even after his release from the jail. Raju and Velan appear in this chapter. That is because they remain dynamic in the events. They are not like the other characters who do not play any effective role in the story. Consequently, this bitter experience, alongside personal

interactions with people in the same society, paves the way for Raju's independent and mature personality.

#### 4. DIPIKA RAI'S *SOMEONE ELSE'S GARDEN*

Dipika Rai is an Indian author. She began her career life as a journalist. Her freelance work enabled her to write about many issues in all over the world. She specifically focuses on Indian issues as well as the affairs of her Island Bali. Her fictional writing treats the national affairs, like the treatment of women and their position in society. She has another fictional characteristic i.e., she writes about natural issues. Therefore, nature is a distinctive motif in her fictional writings. She is a devoted feminist author as she writes about women's problems and their crisis whether in their societies or their psychological complications (Guttman, p.14). Her debut novel is *Someone Else's Garden* (2010).

The novel hinges on the harsh conditions of women in India. The novel's female protagonist, Mamta, is the archetypal representation of such conditions in the traditional Indian society. Women are treated in an inferior position. This inferiority is told through the depiction of the female protagonist. Mamta, the protagonist, suffers from physiological discrimination because she has a birthmark. She is taunted for this mark which stands for ugliness. Accordingly, she becomes a victim of her inferiority complex.

He does not take care of her, and he, consequently, only asks her mother to provide her with food to save her life. The social poor traditions of marriage makes girls marry at the age eight. She longs for marrying a prince-like husband. To her disappointment, she marries a man form her own rural life. Accordingly, the novel is about the lives of poverty-stricken conditions of poor women. They are dominated by masculine society.

Rai uses her female protagonist, Mamta, as a tool for patriarchal muckraking. To explain, she tries to expose the defects of the traditional patriarchal system in India. In this sense, Mamta becomes the allegorical symbol of women oppression in the novel. Rai uses an erudite style to deal with this intricate issue since the Indian community is changing in a consistent way. In so doing, Rai copes with the new social insights regarding women in the Indian society as a whole. Mamta, accordingly, carries out this authorial obsession with the conditions of females in the Indian society and its possible future. She is a fictional replica of the reality of Indian women in traditional societies. At this point, the plot simulates the authentic meaning of social bias against women. Thus, Rai offers a universal theme concerning women that might be applied to grasp the bitter reality of women in any world society. Therefore, the discussion will tackle the treatment of women in Rai's *Someone Else's Garden* (2010).

In *The Creation of Patriarchy* (1986), Gerda Lerner defines the concept of male patriarchy as the dominance of male in society; the social structure "ruled by males instead of females" (p.82). Mamta's father represents the notion of patriarchy. He hates his daughter and deprives her of care. He also neglects her: "Mamta's father was too hasty with her. He is determined to marry her off soon after the baby is born: as soon as Lata Bai can look after the marriage preparations, is how he puts it. Almost twenty, so old and still unmarried, Mamta's very presence serves as a reminder of his failure" (1). In this sense, the female (Mamta) is treated negatively in a patriarchal home.

In *Someone Else's Garden* (2010), Rai portrays Mamta's father who works strenuously to afford the living for his family. However, she neglects his sisters and he does not take care of them. He practices his superior power over them. He only decides their future. He forces Mamta's sister to marry. As a result, she commits suicide because she is utterly controlled by her father: "My father was one of the farmers interested in forming a panchayat regulate things like repayments and interest on loans .... My eldest sister was to be married one week later she killed herself". The bandit's eyes are red and burning" (p.202). These bandits embody the notion of fraud in feminist discourses. In this respect, she believes that she could obtain her gender autonomy could be sustained. She could not gain it by any way. Mamta, furthermore, responds to the treatment of her father in a whimsical way. She goes out and lives for a while in the garden. Obviously, her healthy state is not stable. She throws up and feels pain through her body. The quotation below illustrates her poor health state:

She bunches her hands round the mustard plants. They come up with their roots. She would never have pulled out mustard plants by their roots on any other day. She turns to one side, her knees pressed into her chest. She vomits. A bit of grey slime trickles into her ears. Her turns her head. The trickle climbs out of her ear and runs into her field. There is no white now, only pain. She is on one knee, then the other. She sits back on her heels, her bulbous belly slung low over her thighs. She can see it quiver. She takes her lumpy belly in her hands. She can feel her baby struggling to live inside. (p.5)

Mamta's gender autonomy state is understood in her physiological reactions. She vomits and she suffers from pain. All this refers to her unstable state. This instability, to use Kristeva's words, embodies her gender autonomy position in her patriarchal society. Mamta's gender autonomy reaction, therefore, includes the unhealthy responses. She vomits. She also very tired and feels painful. All these symptomatic responses carry out her gender autonomy state. She unfairly rated by her father. He neglects her and asks her mother to take care of her instead of him. Consequently, she loses her right

disposition as a woman who needs equality like men. In this way, the father incarnates the patriarchal archetype since he completely controls the life of his daughter. Furthermore, he does not attend to her needs as a human being. He forces her to obey his rules. The result is gender autonomy i.e., a negative response to her state.

In Rai's *Someone Else's Garden* (2010), Mamta becomes frightened when her marriage and new life gets closer. Lata Bai describes her agitated psychological state when she is frightened and feels painful: "Lata Bai looks into Mamta's eyes ringed with lashes, two bright big moons of excitement. What should I say? It was frightening ... painful it snatched my childhood from me" (p.16). These conspicuous feelings (fright and pain) are authentic indications of Mamta's gender autonomy reactions. She responds negatively to her forthcoming marital life. She, furthermore, begins to ask her mother about the position of a woman after giving birth to children. She asks her mother anxiously about her future with children.

Lata Bai meticulously describes Mamta's anxious response: "'What, Amma? Tell me ...' Mamta puts her arms around her mother's waist" (p.16). Mamta's inquiries about having children refer to her explicit response to her new life after marriage. Such response is the blatant representation of the concept of gender autonomy. Lata Bai continues describing Mamta's gender autonomy response: "'No more of this hugging baby business,' says Lata Bai in exactly the same tone her own mother had used on her, unlocking her arms and making distance between them. 'You are a woman now. Soon you will have your own children to look after, you won't be able to keep running home to me'" (p.16). Therefore, this future is the cause of her repulsion of marriage because she does not want to comply with traditional marriage regulations (Kristeva, p.89).

In Rai's *Someone Else's Garden* (2010), Mamta is very pleased when she works alone. She works hard. At this moment, she seriously obtains her freedom as a woman; the narrator recounts her happy states in the absence of her husband even she works hard: "Mamta wraps her new sari pallav across her face ... wheat fields and wet mud. She smiles into the blue fabric and starts on the walls. Three hours later she is done. The stairwell has exacted its toll: the skin feels raw on her hands. But what does she care? She is free, clothed in fitness, she would scrub a hundred such stairwells if it kept her away from her husband" (p.199). Thus, such freedom is the culmination of her gender autonomy, which is an ultimate manifestation of her identity. She projects her happiness to her independence of her husband. Such independence exemplifies her rejection of conventional marriage rules in masculine societies which is thoroughly reneged by Rai; and this experience is depicted by Rai's authorial insights in the plot when women "recall their past actions or persons" (Abu Jweid, 2021, p.31).

## 5. CONCLUSION

This essay has discussed the concept of identity in Podder's *Escape from Harem* (2013), Narayan's *The Guide* (1958) and Rai's *Someone Else's Garden* (2010). The study has highlighted the representation of identity in these works. The concept of identity has been applied in order to explore the complexities of identity in the course of the novels' plots. In fact, the concept of identity has a close affinity with different critical approaches. However, this essay has applied the concept of identity from different critical perspectives. One of the most recurrent implications of the concept of identity reveals the complex relationship between the master and the suppressed minorities.

This relationship has been identified in Podder's *Escape from Harem* (2013), whereby women are treated in a marginalized way. They are deprived of their human peculiarities. Therefore, the study has tackled their search for identity in a patriarchal society. Another factor of the concept of identity has been accentuated in the light of the character development in the course of the fictional plot. In this respect, Narayan's *The Guide* (1958) has been brought into light. The narrative aspects of the novels parade the gradual development of the main character. Therefore, the main character has been discussed for the sake of clarifying the notion of identity in the context of the novel.

The concept of identity has also been applied to discover the development of characters in Narayan's *The Guide* (1958) is followed by another representation of the concept of identity. The concept has been used to examine gender autonomy in Rai's *Someone Else's Garden* (2010). As a rule of thumb, the concept of identity has nothing to do with the narrative features of the text. However, the concept has been used together with the notions of fictional discourse. In this regard, the concept of identity has been used to unravel the author's voice that is directed towards the fictional discourses regarding the poor conditions of women portrayed in the course of the plot. Such discourse reveals the women's identity emancipation itself. Thus, the concept of identity has been applied differently in the selected novels to pursue specific literary topics.

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