



## RESEARCH ARTICLE

# Examining identity crisis in Samina Ali's *Madras on Rainy Days*

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## Abstract

The present paper deals with the novel *Madras on rainy days* by Samina Ali, which determines the identity of a contemporary Muslim woman protagonist, Layla, who is torn between her liberated life in the USA versus her controlling life in India. She faces several difficulties as she cannot be her independent self. She's forcefully married to Sameer, whose real identity is revealed later by the end of the story. In search of her own home and identity, Layla chooses to stay in India as a brave and enlightened single woman rather than move out to free America with her gay husband. This paper tends to discover in the text how a character breaks free from the shackles of the dominating society and eventually establishes its identity.

**Keywords:** Identity crisis, Women, Samina Ali, *Madras on Rainy Days*, Isolation.

## Introduction

The term identity has been originated from the Latin word 'idem', which means 'same'. Erikson (1970) described identity as "...a sense of personal continuity and sameness, but it is also a quality of unself-conscious living..." (p.732) corresponding with some belief in the same shared world image. It refers to the fact of who or what a person is. Identity can also be defined as the distinctive set of characteristics that help others to recognize a particular individual and these features differentiate the one from the others. It often denotes to a person's sense of self, implying how they view themselves as compared to other people. In a society, a person has several identities that are defined not only by his/her name, class, or gender but also by the roles that he/she plays in various phases of life. It is a wider notion built on different aspects like social, political, economic and cultural realities that combine to form one individual identity.

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## Theoretical Framework

Theorist Erik Erikson, who devised the term identity crisis, thought it was one of humanity's most significant struggles during development and progress. As said by Erikson, an identity crisis is a period of rigorous examination and analysis of diverse ways of observing oneself. Erikson propounded a *psychosocial development theory*, describing as "Eight Stages of Man" (pp.219 -234) in which he advises that our identity and character matures through eight phases, beginning from infancy till old age, as "it reaches both into the past and toward the future: It is grounded in the stages of childhood and will depend for its preservation and renewal on each subsequent stage of life" (Erikson, 1970, p.732). Thus, each stage describes a particular conflict that arises in a particular age range and it is necessary to confront those conflicts to move to further stages. Eight stages are: (1) trust vs mistrust, which takes place from 0 to 18 months - states that an individual is completely reliant on their caregivers for warmth, love, and permanency, providing a sense of security. "Parents must...also be able to represent to the child a deep, an almost somatic conviction that there is a meaning to what they are doing" (p.222). Failure results in the development of fear, distrust, and anxiety towards oneself as well as the elders. (2) Autonomy vs shame and doubt, which takes place from 18 to 36 months - states that parents should encourage their child to explore boundaries while avoiding condemnation when they fail, which will result in feeling of security and confidence as "...if denied the gradual and well-guided experience of the autonomy of free choice, the child will turn against himself all his urge to

discriminate and to manipulate..." (p.222) and may lead to dearth of his self-esteem. (3) Initiative vs guilt, which takes place from 3 to 5 years, focuses on exploring social skills and making an individual feel secure and capable.

...here the child becomes forever divided in himself. The instinct fragments that had enhanced the growth of his infantile body and mind now become divided into an infantile set that perpetuates the exuberance of growth potentials and a parental set that supports and increases self-observation, self-guidance, and self-punishment. (p.225)

Failure, here may lead to guilt and self-doubt. (4) Industry vs inferiority, which takes place from 5 to 12 years - states that teachers, peer groups, and social interactions are significant for the development of self-esteem. "...danger, at this stage, lies in a sense of inadequacy and inferiority..." (p.227), where they feel they are unable to perform particular skills because they lack the specific skills or qualities to perform those. (5) Identity vs role diffusion, which takes place from 12 to 18 years, focuses on exploring principles, goals, and values while probing for own identity and, therefore a sense of self. "The growing and developing youths, faced with this physiological revolution within them, are now primarily concerned with what they appear to be in the eyes of others as compared with what they feel they are..." (pp.227-228). Failure creates a question of one's identity, "...to the point of apparent complete loss of identity..." (p.228). This is the most important stage for a creation or, eventually, a recreation of one's identity. (6) Intimacy vs isolation, which takes place from 18 to 40 years - focuses on exploration and the desire to form intimate relationships. Failure to form appropriate bonds "...may lead to a deep sense of isolation and consequent self-absorption" (p.229), eventually deepening the sense of loss of identity. (7) Generativity vs stagnation, which takes place from 40 to 65 years - aims to make a mark on the world. "Generativity is primarily the interest in establishing and guiding the next generation..." (p.231). The failure to enrich and guide the generation may give "...a pervading sense of individual stagnation and interpersonal impoverishment" (p.231) and thus detachment from the world in which they live. (8) Integrity vs despair, which takes place post 65 years of age - is about reflection. "Only he who in some way has taken care of things and people and has adapted himself to the triumphs and disappointments adherent to being, by necessity, the originator of others and the generator of things and ideas—only he may gradually grow the fruit of these seven stages" (p.231). Thus, an individual has a feeling of integrity if they have achieved a lot, otherwise they have a feeling of despair and remorse over the things not achieved or fulfilled. Erikson believed that the identity or identity crisis occurs mostly in the adolescent phase, where an individual faces a continuous battle within, as to whether to submit to the old identity or embrace the new one.

James Marcia, another developmental psychologist, extended and refined Erikson's theory, chiefly concentrating on adolescent growth, in his work, *Ego Identity: A Handbook for Psychosocial Research* (1993). According to Marcia, "...identity begins to be constructed when the individual begins to make decisions about who to be, with which group to affiliate, what beliefs to adopt, what interpersonal values to espouse, and what occupational direction to pursue" (p.7). Thus, it defines that one's sense of identity is established mainly by the preferences and obligations made concerning certain personal and communal qualities. Marcia proposed four stages of *Identity Statuses* (pp.7-8) of psychological and spiritual identity development: (1) Identity diffusion- it is the status where the individual has no sense of making choices, "...lacking a coherent identity...have little future sense" (p.8) and therefore have no commitments. (2) Identity foreclosure- is the status where an individual wishes to commit some roles "...they see themselves trying to live up to a pre-arranged set of ideals, occupational plans, and interpersonal forms..." (p.8) but has not explored many options. (3) Identity moratorium- is the status where an individual goes through a crisis, he/she is ready to make choices, but so far not committed to them. Here, individuals are in the "...process of constructing their identity...holding ...to...the past while swinging toward that of the future" (p.8). It is similar to Erikson's 5<sup>th</sup> stage. (4) Identity achievement- is the status wherein an individual "...see the future as something to be shaped, a period of identity creation or realization..." (p.8). This is, thus the stage where individual has faced and even overcome the phase of identity crisis and finally made an obligation towards a particular sense of identity. He believed commitment and crisis are vital elements in individuals' pursuit of meaning through identity. The intensity of crisis and commitment that people undergo at any certain time explain which of the four phases of identity one is going through.

## Discussion

Literature has always been a tool to express oneself. The most important phases of the world and society are thoroughly depicted through it. Question of identity is one of the significant concepts that Indian English writers, specifically women, have aptly captured. The Indian women writers, post-independence, have a varied sense of their self. They have shaped their own literature by depicting contemporary complications and issues particularly associated with women. Rashmi Bajaj (1993) articulates about the current Indian women texts in English in her book that, "We have here increased social consciousness, a strong awareness of identity as woman, championing of women's cause, problems of alienation and identity crisis, daring portrayal of sex and emphasis on the study of personal relationships" (p.28). Many Indian women novelists, like Kiran Desai, Nayantara Sahgal, Samina Ali, Anita Desai,

Manju Kapur, Kamla Markandaya, Shashi Deshpande etc. who have dealt with feminine subjectivity so as to build and shape identity, have discovered different psychological sides of problems related to women that have been repressed since long (Kt, 193). These writers have fashioned their particular literature in which they defied the structure of male-controlled instructions and regulations, and clichéd representation, and constrained part of women in literature texts. Their women protagonists also learn to take control of their own lives eventually, with or without familial support.

Samina Ali is one such Indian-American writer who tries to explore the identity of her characters in a Muslim community. She remarks that, "I see my work as part of the global movement by Muslim women — a gender jihad — to undo patriarchal and, at times, misogynist readings of Islam in order to reclaim women's God-given rights". She creates characters who define their own identities, shattering patriarchal notions and stereotypes in the process. Samina Ali is an award-winning writer, curator, and famous speaker. Her first novel, *Madras on Rainy Days* (2004), was the recipient of France's notable Prix Premier Roman Étranger Award, a front-runner for the PEN/Hemingway Award in Fiction and also selected as the best debut novel by Poets and Writers Magazine. The novel is semi-autobiographical in nature as, Samina Ali once said in an interview that *Madras on Rainy days* is completely set in Hyderabad because she wanted to start her work from recognizing her roots and then broaden to be able to acknowledge and give a voice to her own experiences. It is a representation of a contemporary Muslim woman who has to shape and lead her life in the world. The novel explores the identity of her women protagonist, Layla who is torn between her liberated life in the US *versus* her controlling life in India. She faces several difficulties as she cannot live her life as her independent self. Imprisoned between cultural clashes, Layla is left to separate out misconception from culture and male-controlled duties from the independent message of Islam, even if then it means that she must go away from her husband, her mother, and everything else that she has ever known. Ultimately, Layla chooses to stay in India as a solo and independent woman instead of moving out to free America with her gay husband. She has been seen evolving into a brave and enlightened woman who chooses to live without her husband or family. The present paper explores how Layla undergoes her identity crisis and eventually develops into a mature and satisfied self through the theories of Erikson and Marcia.

The novel's protagonist, Layla is a 19-year-old girl, who is controlled by social, familial, and religious forces, throughout the novel. From the beginning of the novel only, she is depicted as someone who is divided between the cultures of India and the US, and thus influencing her identity as well. She constantly believes that she fits in nowhere as

she exclaims, "...I wore the shirt of one, the trousers of the other, and both sides were shooting at me" (p.26). W.E. B Du Bois in his *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903) has labeled this feeling as "two-ness" (p.9) or double consciousness, "it is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at oneself through the eyes of others..." (p.9). It gives a feeling as though our identity is divided into several parts. Layla laments, "Different worlds, and in each I was a different woman, unrecognizable even to myself. I was like the two faces of the moon, new and full, one always veiled behind the other" (p.63). Owing to two different cultures- the liberated life in the US versus the restrictive and conservative life in India, and constantly trying to choose one over the other, she thought, "...which life of mine, which choice was is error" (p.65).

Erik Erikson's theory proposed the development of character and identity formation. It takes time and may take an entire life. It consists of eight stages. The completion of these stages successfully results in a healthy and vigorous personality, while failure leads to a feeling of inadequacy on our sense of self and personality. Layla also goes through certain stages, though not all of them. Layla could not ever trust her parents, her father used to beat her and abandoned her mother, while her mother never really tried to understand what Layla wanted. Her mother usually called her "shameless whore! Just like your father" (p.7). It is also seen how the roles described in stage 1 are reversed. Where a mother should care for and give her child stability, Layla was playing her mother's duties after her parent's divorce. It made her feel that she cannot rely on her adults:

I had spent my life helping her, it seemed, once dad had left. Making the phone calls she needed even for the most minor of tasks, paying bills, getting an appliance fixed or the heater running again...Rearranging my schedule, setting aside my work, making her my priority. She the mother who had become my child. (p.106)

According to stage 2, Layla was never given a chance to explore herself, as her mother says, "Her father is very strict with her. No phone calls from American friends, boys or girls. No going out of the house unless it is to attend classes. She's been very ... isolated." All the abusive behavior towards Layla, made her feel "unwanted" (p.127). But, soon after her marriage, Layla felt as "a daughter, seen and touched, being urged to stay" (p.127). She felt that she belonged to this house, something which was missing in her own home.

All throughout the novel, Layla feels guilty and self-doubt, only because of her parent's actions and reactions towards her. Stage 3 shows how she was in constant fear of her decisions and their aftermaths, thinking about his father, "The man who had begun beating me at two, how far would he be driven to punish me now?" (p.44) She was always guilty of her relationship with Nate. Later on, it is observed that not only her parents, but her husband and her in-laws, also

influenced her decisions as she always thought that maybe she's choosing the wrong path. Not once, we see someone encouraging or supporting her.

According to stage 4, teachers, peer groups and social interactions influence a lot of our identity. It is observed in the text that Layla, felt no one, Indian or American, healer or doctor, family or friend, could help me. All their responses seemed predictable. Amme would surely become desperate and unreasonable, locking herself inside a room again and, this time, not come out. My cousin and closest friend, Henna, would retreat even further, making me into a stranger. And Nate would say that now of all times I should be given the space to make my own decisions—as though I hadn't done so already. And alims would use their sorcery...How could I have faith in any of them? (p.20)

Thus, because of having a sense of inferiority, she was not able to perform her skills.

Here, through stage 5, we see Layla searching for her personal identity, "who are you, what you could amount to?" (p.53) Resulting in confusion and a poor sense of self. She didn't know where she belonged to. Her husband also commented, "You, the American, you, the Indian. Same face, two people. So where is your home?" (p.104) After realizing her husband's reality, she could not comprehend what has happened to her. She didn't want to return to her father's cage while not willing to live with her gay husband also. The society her family expected her to conform to her marriage and her husband without any apprehensions.

Stage 6 highlights the phase of Layla's life wherein she tries to have a relationship with Nate, the American, "Secretly exposing forbidden skin. Being with an American man. Deliberately giving him what I'd always been warned didn't belong to me, but to my future husband" (p.15). She wanted to explore and cross the limitations around her. Ultimately, she could neither have a proper intimate relationship with Nate nor with Sameer. She exclaims, "I suddenly became uncomfortable with my body, not knowing what to do with it" (p.189).

These stages help in identity formation. It tells us why a person reacts in a particular situation. Till the end of the story, we only see Layla as someone who is stuck between 'this' or 'that'. She is not able to take any proper decision, because of lack of selfhood.

James Marcia defined the formation of identity during the period of adolescence together with both commitment and exploration with regard to certain careers and philosophies. He has provided 4 identity statuses, which can be observed throughout Layla's life. In the beginning of the novel, she is being seen in identity diffusion state, where she is neither exploring her choices nor committing to anything. She tries to adjust in India, leaving the culture of the USA, but she is neither happy about this change of life nor willing to do anything. As the story progresses, we see her

in identity foreclosure state, she has been asked to conform to others' expectations. During her marriage rituals, Layla feels that "my mother-in-law's touch remained confident throughout... I began to believe in this process of renewal. A girl transforming into a woman, a daughter into a wife, it was magical" (p.62). She begins accepting this marriage. After her marriage, for few days she feels that she belongs there, she starts to become the ideal daughter-in-law, she helps Sameer's mother in the kitchen, and convinces Sameer to involve in daily prayers. Slowly, she starts accepting her roles as a wife, a daughter-in-law. In the latter half of the story, we observe Layla in identity moratorium status, where she wants to explore decisions and choices of her life. She faces a crisis here, as she is stuck between who she is and wants to be. As soon as she gets to know the reality of her husband, she leaves alone from Madras, and also confronts Sameer and Sameer's mother. She does not agree to her mother-in-law, when she tells her to, "Take his son to America" (p.130). She does not want to just flee away from here. She is exploring her life decisions, but she is sure she is unwilling to live like a prisoner. This moves her to identity achievement status, wherein, Layla finally finds her freedom. She walks away from Sameer and her family and says, "My body hidden and safe under the chador, belonging only to me" (p.270). Even if the Muslim veil, the chador is a repressive device, it offers Layla the liberty she has long anticipated. "The veil makes her be in public space yet remain absent from public eye by its covers; it is an alternate moment of liberation for Layla" (Ahmed, 2021, p. 94). Truly, Nafiza's song about "a girl who would one day find her way home" (p.68) is symbolic of Layla's life, who would lead a "different life" (p.270) on leaving her boundaries.

## Conclusion

The increased and rapid developments in different fields of market, trade, technology, entertainment, literature and such other arenas has led people to face paradigmatic change in their understanding of identity and selfhood. People are now asking more existential questions than ever, such as who am I? what is my life's purpose? and what do I want to become in the future? Thus, some discrepancy is being created between who one is and wants to be. Between finding answers to these existential crises, they are becoming alone and thus alienating themselves from society, knowingly or unknowingly. Their alienated souls struggle to find meaning and value in their life, thus trying to restore their identity as well. Layla, in the novel, also moves in her journey towards finding her own self as Mandira Sen (2004) remarks, "There are no villains in the novel but perhaps there is a heroine, Layla, who finds the strength to face reality and to make the decision that is right for her" (p.18). She begins her journey which is full of doubt and apprehensions about her selfhood and personality, but

towards the end, she is seen evolving into a liberated young woman who has achieved her sense of self and identity. The end of the narrative, wherein Layla finally achieves her womanhood and independence after such devastation in her life provides the confidence of hope and courage to all the struggled and victimized population out there, as asserted by Mandira Sen, "...that tragedy is what we make of it, that destiny need not be relentless, and that we can and indeed must recover from betrayals" (p.18).

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