

QUEST FOR IDENTITY IN ALICE WALKER'S "BEAUTY: WHEN THE OTHER DANCER IS THE SELF", FAULKNER'S "BARN BURNING" DIDION'S "ON SELF-RESPECT" AND HAWTHORNE'S "THE YOUNG GOODMAN BROWN"

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ABSTRACT

This paper intends to explore the quest for identity that deals with not only a new identity but also an individual's personal and psychological growth and development. The quest for identity remains a focal point of American and African American literature. They have gone through many critical phases and successfully achieved their psychological development through searching for identity. This paper will investigate the quest for identity concerning Walker's "Beauty: When the Other Dancer Is the Self", Didion's "On Self-Respect", Faulkner's "Barn Burning" and Hawthorne's "The Young Goodman Brown". Each writer talks about the vision that they have for their identity. They have different perspectives and experiences but all raise their voices for identity and self-discovery. Identity shows belonging to the self. It is a "state or fact of remaining the same one or ones, as under varying aspects or conditions" (Merriam-Webster). Identity is not just about self-perception but it is related to one's place in the world and society. This paper will also analyze the importance of self-confidence and freedom of thought in the way of self-exploration. American and African American writers have practiced this notion and highlighted their quest through poetry, prose, novels, or short stories. While delving deep into African and African American literature the strife for identity seems to be the recurring theme whether there are literary works of Walker, Dunbar, Angelou, Didion, Faulkner, and Wharton.

Keywords: self-exploration, quest, identity, strife, psychological development, self-perception.

INTRODUCTION

Research Question

- How do the protagonists in these texts navigate the quest for identity formation in the face of societal expectations, personal experiences, and internal conflict?

Research Objectives

This research interprets the following objectives:

- To analyze how an individual struggles to know his identity.
- To explore how self-exploration helps the protagonist to grow psychologically.

- To explain how the sense of self-respect plays a crucial role in shaping one's identity.

This paper intends to explore the quest for identity and how African American and American writers deal with it in their literary works. There is ample research that has been made on the exploration of identity. One's identity is not only based upon social, cultural, or religious philosophies but it is also based on individual and psychological ideas. "Know thy self" (Benton 149). Knowing oneself is, of course, the answer to the question "Who am I" (Abidi 1). Identity provides a shape to one's personality. Its exploration is illustrated in American and African American writers and they are facing real challenges in developing their individual and psychological identities (Mark 56). To know oneself is the idea that

has been emphasized by 20th-century writers to highlight the importance of 'self'. Many writers artistically explore this journey such as Maya Angelou, Alice Walker, Dunbar, Dewey, and Hughes whose works present a glimpse of American or African American Identity. They emphasize the importance of an individual's identity formation in the face of societal issues, personal experiences, and internal conflict. They beautifully present the feeling of respect, resilience, and one's integrity while using different writing techniques.

However, Didion used a very beautiful technique of diary writing to explore the quest for identity in her essay "On Self-Respect". The title itself is quite symbolic because self-respect plays an important part in the journey of self-exploration. She has made different references to strengthen her view and makes the readers realize the glory of the quest for identity. Didion gives her example at the beginning of the essay when she was rejected at school for "Phi Beta Kappa", but psychologically, that event has helped her to strengthen her quest for identity. "Innocence ends when one is stripped of the delusion that one likes oneself" (Didion 1). It is a big truth of life if one starts realizing oneself, then one can start building up one's character. It also helps to cultivate a deeper understanding of the importance of self-respect in the face of the complexities of life. Didion implies the idea of a quest for identity in her life when the reality of life is revealed to her which is no doubt bitter but provides her the opportunity to her self-discovery.

It reminds the readers of Alice Walker's essay "Beauty: When the Other Dancer Is the Self", which sheds light on the struggle for identity. Walker's essay reveals the personal and psychological growth of the individual who tries to know about herself. Walker has used an autobiographical technique to emphasize her struggle for identity which further leads to psychological growth. The autobiographical element makes the writing more realistic and makes the readers realize that African Americans are also a part of the American nation and they have the right "to a better life, liberty, and pursuit of happiness" (Adam 1). Like Didion, Walker deploys her past experience as an innocent beautiful girl who has apprehensions about her injured eye. "Eyes are sympathetic, if one is blind the other will likely become blind too" (Walker 5). Walker allegorically uses the incident of the BB gun and her eye to portray the journey of her self-exploration. The BB gun incident has changed her entire life. During her self-

development from a little girl to "a glob of whitish tissue", and one eye bitch", she forgets everything and has never raised her head for the next six years. But then she starts searching for her identity. Her inner conflict and pain are shown when she says, "That night, as I do almost every night, I abuse my eye. I rant and rave at it, in front of the mirror. I plead with it to clear up before morning. I tell it I hate and despise it. I do not pray for sight. I pray for beauty" (7). The author tells how the oppressive soul develops and manages to flourish in that oppressed land. Her inner struggle is revealed through her changed behaviour in school which further leads her to self-exploration. In the course of the essay, readers come to know that she has been sent away from home due to her changed behaviour but that is the time when her self-respect is crushed and the process of self-discovery begins. "It is you your inner self that can work" (Didion 5). The great idea has been illustrated by Didion that one is the only individual who can struggle for oneself because if one takes other people's perceptions it always shatters one's identity as Didion at the beginning of her essay quotes her example of "Phi Beta Kappa", she says that she deserves more than but if one takes other's perception then there is only "alienation from self" (12) and from the society and one cannot raise one's head as it happens with Walker.

A similar inner struggle is observed in Sarty who is ten years old boy who is inflicted with stress, pain, and agony while living with his family and particularly with his father because every time his self-respect is crushed. Through the character portrayal of Sarty, Faulkner deploys the exploration of identity particularly American identity in his story "Barn Burning". The story reflects the struggle of every individual American for a better and more peaceful life. Throughout the story, Sarty goes through inner conflict. The readers feel that many times he is entangled in inner conflict when he is asked to tell lies for his father's safety and help him to flame the barns but every time he experiences some inner quest for identity. "You got to learn to stick to your blood... You were fixing to tell them. You would have told them" (Faulkner 133-138). Throughout the story, the readers observe that Sarty has been reminded to be loyal to his father and family many times. He feels confined like a "sealed can" under the guardianship of his father. His hunger is also used allegorically by Faulkner to show his desire to seek escape from societal restraints and gets his

own identity. Through his inner conflict, the author shows the psychological development of a boy who has a dire urge to reveal the reality of his life. His struggle also symbolizes a life that is free from slavery and poverty. "To assign unanswered letters their proper weight, to free us from the expectations of others to give us back to ourselves, there lies the great, the singular power of self-respect" (Didion 12). Didion precisely explains why one needs to explore one's identity in this world because this is the only psychological development that saves man from despair and helps to get out of the problems. No doubt, Didion significantly points out the struggle of every individual American who needs to develop his personal and psychological identity to have a prosperous life.

However, another similar quest for identity can also be observed in the story "The Young Goodman Brown" by Nathaniel Hawthorne. Goodman's journey to the forest reveals his inner struggle for identity. Hawthorn has used multiple techniques in this story to portray the inner struggle of Goodman Brown. Brown's inner struggle is shown artistically first through his visit to the forest and then through changing weather. He selects his journey to the forest to reveal "his conscious of the guilty purpose" (Hawthorne 328). Allegorically, Hawthorne uses the journey of the dark forest and points out the hindrances that every individual American finds in the suppressed land on his way to the pursuit of happiness. It is Goodman Brown's own will to enter into the forest in darkness while he knows that he can be tempted but Hawthorn wants to explore human nature and one's own psychology. Hawthorn also wants to make the readers believe that he is an individual who can change his identity if he has the power of resistance.

The ability "to accept responsibility for one's own self" (Didion 6) is no doubt an ability and a fact if one takes then one can achieve one's identity. According to Didion, identity is not an attitude or habit rather it's a gradual psychological development that one can bring in oneself. So it is deeply connected with the one's psychology that constantly supports him to evoke. Didion's ideas are persuasive and important for understanding the psychological growth of individuals. As Walker after going through many crises developed psychological growth and at the age of 27 her anguish and despair vanished and she started living with her own identity, "There's a world in your eyes" (Walker 48). Walker offers an

exploration of self and cultivation of self-respect while going through the complexities of life, societal issues and internal conflict.

Furthermore, Faulkner's Sarty breaks all the restraints and sets him free from his father's rules. "He began to run...without ceasing to run, looking backward over his shoulder at the glare (Faulkner 450-51). When he runs the author deliberately depicts the changing weather from darkness to spring which is also a symbol of psychological development. At the end of the story, Sarty appears as a changed person who is free from all restraints of society and particularly of his father. Consequently, when Goodman Brown returns from his visit to the forest, he appears as a changed person and a new identity has been formed. He comes to know the reality of life and regains his faith. "the dark cloud swept away, leaving the clear and silent sky above Goodman Brown" (Hawthorne 199). Hawthorne believes that there is a strength in man to resist and after resistance one can come up as a changed person. As Brown states, "look up to heaven and resist the evil one" (329). At times due to the other people's perception, Brown is about to shake his identity but he is determined to return and "heard the tramp of horses along the road" (146) and sees the bright morning that is the sign of hope and regaining. As Thomas Connolly states, "Not only did he retain his faith, but during his horrible experience he discovered the full and frightening significance of his faith" (24-27). Goodman Brown cried, "With heaven above, and Faith below, I will yet stand firm against the devil! ... The blue sky was still visible," (Hawthorne 176-179). Even after a great struggle, he remains firm and finally regains and shapes his new identity. "Without it, one eventually discovers the final turn of the screw: one runs away to find oneself and finds no one at home" (Didion 12). There lies a great idea that it is only the individual who can struggle for identity. The struggle of Walker, Didion, Sarty, and Goodman Brown reveals a secret to the readers if one is not confident and does not put effort then how one can move towards the journey of identity and self-exploration.

Conclusion

It is deeply analyzed that these writers deliberately talk about the quest for identity through their literary works. Most writers use the autobiographical technique to portray their struggle for self-discovery or quest for identity. In all these stories and essays,

the authors emphasize the words “I” and “my” purposefully to show strife for identity. They shed light on the problems that prove to be a hindrance in the exploration of identity. In critical times, they proved to be the emblem and have played a key role in influencing societal norms and values and have tried to shape their identities. No doubt, Walker, Didion, Hawthorne, Faulkner, and many more, through their different experiences, make the readers realize the struggle and hard journey of their life that they have gone through to achieve identity. The artistic portrayal of the characters throws light on the question of identity. A close analysis of all these stories, essays, and autobiographical notes illustrates that they have not only discussed African American or American identity but also an individual’s identity and they truly reveal their self-exploration. Throughout the journey of achieving identity, each character comes across different situations and faces challenges staunchly. So to get one’s identity, one has to go through a hard journey. As Butler notes, “Crisis of identity, while painful at the time, is necessary to forge a stronger, more commanding self” (87). This refers to the profound struggle of each individual who goes through uncertainty and disorientation concerning one’s self and place in the world. This profound struggle is painful but simultaneously provides an opportunity to develop a sense of identity, resilience, and mental growth.

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