

Identity Fragmentation and Emotional Negotiation in Ravinder Singh's Novel, *Like It Happened Yesterday*: A Lacanian Study of Adolescent Masculinity

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Abstract

This paper deals with the construction of the identity of an adolescent in Like It Happened Yesterday by Ravinder Singh, using the psychoanalytical framework suggested by Jacques Lacan. The work goes beyond the traditional format of the direct development of childhood and examines the protagonist's confused sense of self and psychological tension that continues through adolescence. This analysis focuses on these experiences as described by the psychoanalytic theories of Lacan: lack, desire, Mirror Stage and the Symbolic Order. All of his frequent searches for parental honesty, peer validation, emotional security and social acceptance are a constant negotiation between personal helplessness and socially imposed masculine expectations. The paper also explores the role of external structures and social contexts in the formation of identity. Childhood fantasies are gradually undermined by social reality in public-institutional spaces like the village temple, public transportation, the school classroom and the biology class, where emotional anxiety, embarrassment and symbolic regulation take place. The subject's need to rely on others' reflections, such as those from parents or peers, cultural stories, or public opinions, illustrates the unawareness of the adolescent's subjectivity and the delicateness of establishing masculinity.

The study employs qualitative textual analysis and psychoanalytical literary criticism to claim that the construction of adolescent identity in the novel is not done by the process of psychological consistency or emotional stability but by the process of ongoing compromise with trauma, desire, social pressure and emotional suppression. The paper provides a psychological analysis rather than the usual nostalgic and romantic interpretations of Ravinder Singh's novels, thereby contributing to the current address on Indian young adult literature, the concept of masculinity and Lacanian psychoanalysis.

Keywords: Young Adult literature, Lacanian Psychoanalysis, Masculinity, Identity Disturbance, Adolescence

Introduction

The emotional fragility, psychological instability, identity crisis, social anxiety, emotional rupture are some of the characteristics of the image of adolescence in young adult literature in India today. In modern stories, adolescence is portrayed as a transitional process toward adulthood, yet many others feature adolescent as a time of intense emotional and social pressures

– pressures that stem from expectations set by others, pressures that come from family and pressures that are felt internally – pressures that often create emotional conflicts. In this literary framework, *Like It Happened Yesterday* is a significant text that raises some questions about the subjectivity of the adolescent in middle class Indian society, presenting the instability and fragmentation of identity as a central theme through a self-reflection and an awareness of the narrative mode.

In this paper, the novel is analysed in the light of the psychoanalytic framework of Jacques Lacan, especially the Mirror Stage, desire, lack and the Symbolic Order. The Lacanian concepts of fragmentation, relationship and continuous production provide the basis for a reading of identity as an ongoing construction and process which is continually enacted through outside systems of recognition and social control. Peer pressure, institutional discipline, the expectations of family and the memory of past experience thus influence the protagonist's psychological instability. In this context, identity is not a fixed or natural but a dynamic negotiation with symbolic structures, outside looks and uncertainties of emotions.

The study also examines the nature of memory as a space of psychic disturbance and reconstruction of self. The retrospective nature of the narrative creates a space for memory where the fear, embarrassment, body anxiety and trauma are re-experienced in the pursuit of self-definition. In this context, the novel questions the traditional definition of masculinity as emotional restraint, rationality and psychological stability. The concept of 'narrative identity' developed by Paul Ricoeur is especially suited to the present context: identity is a constantly re-constructing process in memory and through interpretive narration. The feeling of fragility, emotional contradiction, suppression and fragmentation are highlighted as some of the central characteristics of adolescent masculine identity.

This paper uses a qualitative textual analysis approach in combination with a psychoanalytic literary criticism approach. It claims that *Like It Happened Yesterday* is a work of psychological complexity that explores adolescence as a lack, a regulation and a performance. The study is also a contribution towards the current debates in the field of Indian young adult literature, studies on masculinity and Lacanian psychoanalysis because the study's psychological analysis of Ravinder Singh's fiction moves beyond notions of nostalgia and romance.

Literature Review

In recent years, much scholarship has emerged on adolescent identity that conceptualizes the adolescent male subject as psychologically fragmented, emotionally unstable and socially constructed through external recognition and symbolic negotiation. Based on psychoanalytical, cultural and literary perspectives, scholars contend that the adolescent male should not be seen as a stable and natural identity but as a constantly changing process that is influenced by emotions of lack, social constructions and symbolic frameworks. In this context, identity is developed by the use of relational networks, memory and relying on outside validation.

One of the most significant contributions to this discourse is that of Jacques Lacan, as found in *Écrits: A Selection* (1977) which explores the concept of the Mirror Stage, desires, lacking and symbolic mediation, to account for the fractured nature of subjectivity. For Lacan, the self is formed in the act of "misrecognition" in which the subject produces identity with reference to something that is not in the interior of the subject's mind but rather in external images and symbolic structures. This framework is further developed in the work of Sean Homer, who in his *Jacques Lacan* (2005) stresses the fact that Lacanian subjectivity is not an autonomous psychology but is rather linguistically and socially produced. As a whole, they offer a valuable theoretical basis for understanding adolescent identity as unstable, relational and reliant on the gaze of the Other.

In literature and culture, writers like Meenakshi Mukherjee and Priyamvada Gopal have studied the middle-class consciousness, identity and social transition in Indian English fiction. *The Perishable Empire: Essays on Indian Writing in English* (2000), written by Mukherjee, addresses issues of identity and cultural change in Indian literature in English. In *The Indian English Novel: Nation, History and Narration* (2009), Priyamvada Gopal examines the representation of historical awareness, social hope and cultural fears in the middle-class fiction of India. The studies provide significant cultural context to the study of adolescent experience and adolescent identity construction in the Indian young adult narrative.

The study of masculinity reinforces this discussion by even questioning the essentialist conception of masculinity. According to *Masculinities* (1995) by R. W. Connell, masculinity is not something that is biological but something that is socially constructed as a result of hegemonic gender relations. In their study *Hegemonic Masculinity: Rethinking the Concept* (2005), Connell and James W. Messerschmidt elaborate on this by stating that the concept of masculinities can be considered as dynamic, relational and historical. *Manhood in America: A Cultural History* (2012) by Michael S. Kimmel shows how the identity of the adolescent male is being produced through social expectations that impel them to be emotionally controlled, competitive and tough. This is especially relevant in the context of literary portrayals of adolescent boys' encounters with vulnerability and social pressures.

There has been a great deal of research done on the connection between memory and identity. According to Paul Ricoeur, in his work *Memory, History, Forgetting* (2004), identity is constantly re-constituted by the memory of the narrative and by the retrospective interpretation. Memory thus is no longer just the act of recalling what has happened before; it is also the act of remaking the self as one reinterprets one's emotional experiences. This perspective is of special relevance in adolescent narratives, where identities are fluid and negotiated as they are remembered, nostalgized and narrated retrospectively.

The psychological and institutional dimension of adolescence is also stressed by literature scholars. *Disturbing the Universe: Power and Repression in Adolescent Literature* (2000) is a book by Roberta Seelinger Trites, which argues that adolescent literature is more focused on systems of power, repression and social regulation than it is on plain growth stories. In a similar vein, Kenneth B. Kidd's *Freud in Oz: At the Intersections of Psychoanalysis and Children's Literature* (2011) conveys the significance of repression, fantasy, emotional anxiety and identity confusion in adolescent stories. Together, these research works provide a picture of adolescence as a psychologically and socially complex phase of identity development, which is regulated by social factors.

Even with these significant contributions, the current scholarship in the field of Indian young adult fiction and its relationship to the concept of masculinity in adolescent literature is still constrained in a number of ways. Comprehensively, a lot of the criticism of Ravinder Singh's fiction has been about the nostalgic, romantic and emotional attributes, whereas considerably less has been devoted to the psychoanalytical aspect of identity disintegration and the vulnerability of the man. In addition to this, Lacanian theory has often been used to analyse the subjectivity and desire but has not had a significant impact on Indian adolescent fiction as compared to other areas of the discipline. Another limitation of the existing literature is the lack of in-depth analysis of the symbolic regulation, social performance and the construction of masculinity in middle class Indian contexts, while retaining a focus on the emotional interpretation.

The purpose of this research is to fill in this gap by providing a Lacanian interpretation of adolescent masculinity in *Like It Happened Yesterday*. The paper investigates how adolescent identity is created in a process of social pressure, emotional instability, memory and symbolic negotiation through analysing the protagonist's emotional conflicts as lack, desire, the Mirror

Stage and the Symbolic Order. The study has implications for the ongoing debates on Indian young adult literature, psychoanalytic criticism and Masculinity studies.

Research Gap

While the literary study of young adult fiction in India has been a subject of scholarly research, the majority have concentrated on romance, nostalgia and emotional sentimentality. Ravinder Singh has been studied in his own right but for a variety of reasons, the focus of scholarship has been on his work and his status as an Indian writer. The psychoanalytical aspects of adolescent identity and the emotional fragility of the male in *Like It Happened Yesterday* has been explored relatively little. The concept of Mirror Stage, desire, lack and Symbolic Order from Jacques Lacan has not been investigated enough when it comes to the protagonist's psychological development, specifically. In the light of this, the present study attempts a Lacanian interpretation of the novel to explore the fragmented and socially constructed identity of the adolescent male, in the context of emotional conflict, symbolization and memory.

Methodology

The method used in this study is a qualitative research method that uses a textual analysis and psychoanalytical literary criticism approach. *Like It Happened Yesterday* is the main text used for analysis by Ravinder Singh. The method of close reading is used to explore notions of fragmentation of identity, emotional instability, desire, memory and vulnerability of the man in the works of the two artists and the theoretical approach of Jacques Lacan. The following concepts from Lacan are discussed with special emphasis: Mirror stage, lack, desire and Symbolic Order, to analyse the protagonist's psychological growth and emotional conflicts. The research suggests that the story is a reflection of the adolescent's process of identity construction, influenced by social norms, symbolic systems and emotional negotiations in the middle-class Indian context.

Although *Like It Happened Yesterday* draws extensively on Ravinder Singh's own childhood experiences and contains strong autobiographical elements. Analysis thus focusses on the ways the protagonist's identity and emotions are textually constructed in the narrative. At the same time, the overlap between author, narrator and protagonist remains important, since the point of view of the young child is also the point of view with which the author is exploring the nature of his own subjectivity in the wake of the past. The proximity of the characters' voices to the narrator's voice is also important, however, because the reflection of personal memory becomes a literary investigation of adolescent subjectivity and identity formation.

Research Objectives

- To analyse how the adolescent identity is represented in "*Like It Happened Yesterday*".
- To examine the split sense of self of the main character as described in Jacques Lacan's psychoanalytical theory.
- To examine how the character's emotional experiences are influenced by desire and lack.
- To explore the importance of the Mirror Stage and Symbolic Order in the formation of identity.
- To explore emotional unrest and mental conflict in adolescence in the novel.

Discussion and Findings

Like It Happened Yesterday by Ravinder Singh describes adolescence as a state of psychological instability, characterized by emotional fragility, social anxiety and the development of an

unstable sense of identity. The adult narrator draws on his childhood experiences to make sense of the fears, humiliations, emotional conflicts that affected his developing self. The novel can be seen to reveal the fact that adolescent identity is not coherent internally but is formed through external recognition and symbolic interaction, using the Lacanian psychoanalysis. The dependence of the protagonist in early childhood on reassurance from parents is an indication of a weak child's ego and need for emotional support from the outside world.

This fragility is made explicit when the narrator remembers his father holding his left hand in the warm safe grip of his right hand before departing "among strangers," at school (Singh 1). The child's removal from parental protection leads to an environment that has its own set of rules and expectations, which are not the same as those used at home and creates anxiety and insecurity for the child. The question of the protagonist, "How the hell was I born?" (41) starts his quest for identity and truth psychologically. The child interprets himself in an unstable mirror, the contradictory expression on his mother's face, which has a "smile on her lips" and "confusion in between the lines of her forehead" (44). Lacanian understanding proposes that the sense of self that the protagonist experiences result from disillusioning and disjointed reflections from parents, which leads to emotional confusion and instability.

Such reliance on parental responses and external recognition helps to prove Homer's point that Lacanian subjectivity is not the product of a self as a cohesive and independent whole but is rather socially and linguistically constructed.

Throughout the novel, the idea of desire and lack is repeatedly emphasized by the protagonists' obsession with biological fact and emotional certainty. Ravinder has an enduring sense of emptiness on his mind that drives him to seek out honesty, clarity and emotional stability. By trying to comprehend his birth, he is searching for a more stable identity in a world of symbolism and clandestinity.

Singh builds 'which is it' explanations for birth by mimicking the mythological stories taught in the *Mahabharat* that he sees on television. This mirrors Lacan's idea of the Imaginary Order, in which the child is looking for coherence by means of idealized images and fantasies. This consolation however fails him when his mother, in an indirect way, reveals the emptiness of his beliefs. While Ravinder admits to hating her and wishing he could tell her that she had lied to him, he cannot do anything but stare into her eyes (Singh 56). This moment is a destabilization of the fantasy world in which the protagonist constructs himself in a way that he sees as his own; he is forced into the Symbolic Order, where the truth is controlled by social language, authority and institutional discipline.

The symbolic regulation is also more apparent in the protagonist's social interactions, as friendships are "made and broken based on people's mark sheets" (Singh 58). Academic performance serves as a symbolic mechanism that works to socially distribute value, acceptance and identity. As a result, Singh characterizes adolescence as a constant process of negotiation between the individual's emotional needs and the social demands.

As the character enters high school, he becomes aware of his bodily difference and social judgments. Adolescence in the novel is characterized by self-consciousness, especially in the eyes of others. It is in these moments that Lacan's theory on the Mirror Stage is particularly useful, as the protagonist forms his image of self by how others respond and react to him.

This psychological anxiety is at its height when Ravinder discovers that he is the "only one person who was in half-pants" when all the other kids are wearing full trousers (Singh 80). His embarrassment comes from the fear of being looked down upon for being different or inadequate than because of other people's eyes, revealing the social construction of masculinity through social recognition and evaluation. Throughout the "giggling female faces" (81), the protagonist realizes his social and physical inferiority, as he tries to conceal his bare legs with

his “schoolbag on his lap” (81).

This episode shows how the construction of adolescent masculinity is formed in the public sphere, through the eyes of others and through comparison with their bodies. The tale of Ravinder, who leaves school until a “tailor in Burla” has finished making his new uniform (Singh 82) shows how he wants to create a socially acceptable masculine image. Singh thus suggests that identity is very much shaped by exterior sources of validation and by symbolic conformities. The protagonist’s anxiety concerning physical appearance also reflects Connells’s argument that masculinity is socially constructed and continually evaluated through social expectations and peer recognition.

In the novel, the rooms of the biology teaching room and the temple in the village also symbolize adolescent confusion, the bodies’ awareness and morality as mediated by institutional power. In the course of the biology class on the topic of “R-E-P-R-O-D-U-C-T-I-O-N,” (Singh 90) the boys’ romantic fantasies about sexuality are suddenly replaced by words such as “cells” and “zygotes” (90). This is a change from fantasy to clinical explanation which undermines their previous imaginative understanding of sexuality.

Sushil’s disgruntled query: “Bio ki class hai ki algebra ki?” [Is this a biology class or an algebra class?]]” (Singh 92) represents the emotional distance between adolescent curiosity and institutional approaches to teaching. The teacher’s definition of reproduction as “having sex” (96–97) results in Sushil’s mind going “blank” (97) and his childhood dreams of birth and sexuality being shattered. The moment represents the protagonist’s forced confrontation with social reality and the fall of Imaginary innocence.

The inappropriateness of adolescent impulsiveness and institutional discipline is thrown up in the Krishna Mandir in the case of the boys. Children feel embarrassed and humiliated, as Panditji tells all the children to come to the front row “furiously” (Singh 99). The episodes show how adolescent identity is continuously managed using regimes of surveillance, punishment and symbolic power. The regulation of teen-age behaviour through educational and religious foundations reflects Trites’s view that adolescent literature is deeply concerned with systems of power and social control.

Singh also points out the lack of clear communication about changes in adolescent bodies and sexual health. The main character’s first nocturnal emission becomes a distressing psychological breakdown because neither family nor school help him with his emotions or provide him with a biological explanation. Ravinder regards the “unknown liquid” as a sign of sickness or abnormality (Singh 105-116), showing how silence from authorities leads to fear, shame and alienation from one’s body. The silence surrounding adolescent sexuality further supports the observation of Kimmel that traditional masculine culture often discourages open emotional and bodily discussions among young males.

The boy’s mental turmoil ends when he talks about it to his friend Sushil, who associates it to menstruation, so making it seem normal (Singh 117). In this way, the support and understanding that come from the peer group form a new source of emotional help against the silence of adult bodies. Singh points to the emotional fragility of teenage boys and calls into question those social structures that deny open and healthy dialogue about sexuality and bodily changes.

The novel delves deep into the psychological puzzle of the tension between being loyal to friends while following one’s own conscience. The means the protagonist develops feelings for the teacher whose loyalty to friends seems to come at the expense of one’s conscience. At first, the protagonist’s romantic feelings work as an excuse for him to neglect his studies (Singh 122-23). Still, matters become more serious when his classmates start making lewd comments about the teacher (124-27). Ravinder, who cannot stand seeing her being made fun of, resorts to a physical fight with one of his mates to protect her honour (128-29).

This is a sort of internal resistance which signifies a complete overhaul of a person's ethics and values. While the protagonist makes a decision guided by his personal conscience, he is both institutionally punished and socially excluded. His classmates accuse him of favouring the teacher over friends, pointing at Sushil's line: "*Ma'am ke chakkar mein apne dost pe haath uthaaya*" [You hit your own friend over a teacher] (Singh 132). Ravinder's subsequent alienation portrays how one can suffer the loss of a social network when going against majority of the peer group.

Really, he gives his old, uneaten lunch to a cow (Singh 132) symbolically means that he voluntarily reduced his warm emotional ties to his peers and his sense of belonging in the group. Given this, Singh argues that developing a moral conscience is one of the main reasons why teenagers distance themselves from their peer groups and form independent identities.

Singh's novel highlights the importance of the psychological effects of childhood trauma and abuse on the development of subjectivity. The characters' weaknesses are highlighted when the protagonist is targeted on a public bus by someone he does not know, who pretends to know him and uses material rewards to access his trust (Singh 144–47). In the instance of an attack, the victim enters a dissociative catatonic state known in trauma psychology as a "freeze response," where there is a temporary loss of agency when attacked by someone or something that is overwhelmingly threatening (148–49). This moment challenges the sense of body autonomy and the vulnerability of the emerging self in front of predatory power systems. Narrative resistance is shown in the brief scene of the protagonist's eventual attempt to defend himself with a pen (150–51) but doesn't result in a psychological closure. Instead, it begins a lasting, lingering trauma that remains in the subject's psyche. Traumatic flashbacks are reported, as well as nightmares and emotional withdrawal, implying failure to symbolically process the event, which is also suggested by the partial mutism (152–55). In a patriarchy that does not tolerate the expression of emotion, trauma is unspoken but still working and amplifies the subject's feeling of isolation.

The episode, from a psychoanalytical point of view, is an attempt to bridge the gap between lived reality and symbolic representation, one which trauma cannot overcome and which is instead experienced as an intrusive memory. The novel thus attempts to characterize child abuse as a chronic state of the psyche, influencing the view of the world, actions and self-definition of the child. The episode also challenges the norms of masculinity that, in many cases, will not allow men to express emotions, express their own voices, to be vulnerable and so on, thereby making the vulnerability a constitutive and not exceptional facet of male adolescence.

The novel demonstrates that traumatic experiences don't just happen in flashbacks of violence but they pervade the everyday mental life. Singh depicts teens as helpless creatures whose fears, repressive acts, embarrassment, failure to love and struggle for psychological survival are all affecting them without their knowledge.

Conclusion

Like It Happened Yesterday shows that adolescence is not a fixed developmental phase but rather a fragmented psychic process, a process that is facilitated by elements of lack, desire symbolic misrecognition. In the recollection of childhood memories, institutional experiences and bodily crises, the subjectivity of the protagonist is constantly formed and formed again by external gazes that create and fracture identity.

Instead of developing into a coherent whole, the adolescent ego becomes a space in which there is a constant dialogue of symbols, a place where recognition is illusive and frequently paradoxical. The novel thus challenges the normative developmental narratives by exposing adolescence to be a state of psychic disintegration and not maturation.

In the end, Singh's novel is one in keeping with the Lacanian theory that to achieve subject formation, one must never have the finalization of the whole but the continuous deferral of it in a system of language, power and social judgment, especially in the gendered expectations of middle-class Indian masculinity.

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