

Identity Development and Familial Relations
(Particularly with respect to Adolescence in India)

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ABSTRACT

The paper is focused on analyzing the representations of family and familial relations in fictional narratives depicting vignettes of adolescences in India. The focus is on the role that family plays in being a critical counter player in building up an individual's reciprocity with his/her social environment. Examining literary works enables an in-depth engagement with different facets of adolescence identity development and localizing it in the Indian cultural context. For the same, the works of contemporary Indian writers in English which complemented the context have been chosen.²

Keywords: adolescence, literature, identity, development

1. INTRODUCTION

When a reference is made to education, it cannot be limited to the ambit of schooling. Besides academics, education, viewed from a holistic perspective, involves the overall development of the individual: within which development of identity and the forging of self is an integral aspect. Of pertinent concern is the role of the familial milieu, a concern which cannot be overlooked. Taking into consideration these aspects this paper intends to focus upon the role of family in development of identity, particularly during adolescence. The major focus is on the ramifications that a family has as a contributory factor, in the process of forging of a distinct sense of self which adolescents are in the process of developing at this life stage. The attempt is to understand and bring to fore how family, amidst the gamut of other significant factors, offers a fundamental and vital context for adolescent identity development. Thus the focus is on what role does a family play in being a critical counter player in building up an individual's

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reciprocity with his/her social environment. Also the focus is on how families aid in building emotional affiliations and can help nurture communities of excellence where everyone can contribute to the development of the child and make education a mass movement, with a right blend of tradition and modernity.

For the same the paper has been divided into three sections. The first section offers an insight into the methodological framework of the study. The second section offers an analysis of the role of family from the standpoint of insights drawn from the novels chosen. An attempt has also been made to focus on the thoughts, emotions and behaviour patterns of the key protagonists, particularly with reference to their familial contexts and issues of identity. Emphasis has been given to the inclusion of their personal experiences to enable better understanding of the characters' worlds. In the third section or the conclusion the attempt is to reiterate the focus of the paper by revisiting the thematic thrust - understand the process of identity development as it unfolds during adolescence within the institution of family and its dynamics.

2. METHODOLOGY

Two works of fiction, which unravel the different strokes and of the effects of family environment on adolescent development, have been selected. The choice of fictional narratives was a potent means to steer away from the aridity of uni-dimensionality in the examination of issues pertaining to adolescents. Capturing the veiled psychological realities in an uninhibited fashion, a work of fiction brings to fore a gamut of emotions and feelings, unobserved and habituated realities. Moreover, for an in-depth engagement with different facets of adolescence and to localise it in the Indian cultural context, the works of contemporary Indian writers in English have been selected. It specifically involved identifying novels written by contemporary Indian novelists where the main protagonists were adolescents and family was a dominant context in which they lived and experienced the world. Identification of significant psychosocial issues, concerns, dilemmas, relationship matrices, patterns of family life, etc. were part of the preliminary exercise, aimed at ultimately to a more in-depth and holistic examination.

Of immense significance is the fact that adolescence cannot be looked at as an isolated phenomenon. It has to be understood in a continuum perspective, as located in the evolutionary framework marking the transition from childhood to youth. Stemming from the seminal work

of Saraswati (1999; 2002) that the notion of several adolescences co-existing as a function of contextual variations in socio-demographic factors has arisen and is now being extensively researched. Although this approach has painted many parallel portraits of the adolescent world, the concern is still largely with how the societal factors unfold to produce varied adolescent experiences. Thus moving on from universalistic to pluralistic understanding of adolescence, the research on Indian adolescents' highlights presence of variations on the basis of caste, class, gender, religion and ethnicity. In the essay, *Kaleidoscope of Adolescence; Experiences of World's Youth at the Beginning of the 21st Century*, Brown and Larson (2002) highlight its salience by using the metaphor of a kinescope to demonstrate the inadequacy that characterises churning together related but distinctive features of life for youth around the world and discerning a common image of their movement from childhood into adulthood. Thus, in the traditional Indian social matrix, adolescence rather than as a phase, manifests itself as a pattern of 'situations' characterising or guiding the passage from childhood to the adult stage.

Drawing from the diverse theoretical formulations, an eclectic framework has been adopted for analysing issues pertaining to identity and the role of the family in its construction. The conceptualisation of the transformation of self during adolescence as provided by Erik Erikson (1968) and the process of adolescent individuation as elaborated by Peter Blos (1962) are the two theories, amongst others, which constitute the framework of this analysis. Both theorists emphasise on the process of selection and internalisation from the environment to build up an integrated psychic structure. It is important that identity development is seen as a 'process,' connoting a constant interaction with one's environment that contributes to establishment of subtle differentiations of the self from the other.

The two novels chosen for the analysis are:

- Home by Manju Kapur: The novel unfolds against the backdrop of a joint family residing in Delhi. It is centred on the life trajectory of its twin adolescent central protagonists, Nisha and Vicky, striving for autonomy and confronting conflicts within a traditional joint family.
- S'Secret by Shobha De: The protagonist of the novel is Sandhya whose well-guarded secret is central thrust of the novel. Dynamics of a nuclear family, sibling relations and diverse vignettes of the life of an adolescent unfold in the narrative.

The analysis has been done broadly on the basis of the following two sub-themes.

- Unfolding of familial relationships

- Unravelling of the process of construction of identity vis a vis familial relations

3. ANALYSIS

The analysis of the two novels selected highlights the subtle diversity operative in the overarching divisions of the organisation of the family. It illustrates how identifiable structural divisions, namely joint family and nuclear family can be further differentiated within themselves to reveal the variations in their structures. This variation can be observed to be a dominant trend, indicative of the socio-cultural changes taking place. It also debunks the idyllic images of the Indian family. Also, the novels demonstrate and substantiate how the differentiations in the familial contexts become the primary sources in generating a wide array of adolescences in the Indian socio-cultural scenario. Socialization practices, guided by various external and intrinsic factors such as class, gender, value orientations, religion etc, account for a range of dynamic behavioural patterns and personality traits among adolescents.

The psychological impact of different kinds of familial structures and the networks of interaction and communication within the family such as parent-parent, parent-child and sibling engagements are significant to consider. Types of different family set-ups as identified in the novels are particularly noticeable. It is illustrated how significant socialization experiences lead to the internalization of values, attitudes and norms in society.

The dynamics of a joint family are characteristically highlighted in the novel *Home*. Visibly evident is the predominance of familial identity to that of the individual in the novel. It circumscribes and subsumes the individual to that of the collective identity. The relationships of economic interdependence are much more prominent rather than there being an emotional bonding between the subunits in the family. Also pertinent is the factor that there is constant strain of dis-ease and discomfort in collective living. Jealousy and intrigue dispel the idyllic frames of a joint family lifestyle. A contrast can be drawn with that of Rupa, the aunt's family – a nuclear family consisting only of husband and wife. The family functions more as independent subunits.

The role of the mother and the father in case of the protagonist in the novel *Home*, Nisha's upbringing is illustrative of how the norms of patriarchy that are upheld in the family are functional in this sphere too. The attempt in case of Nisha is that of over-socialization which backfires because she spends a considerable time span at her aunt's place where the experiences

are different. Her aunt and uncle willfully agree to take care of her and are not only indulgent but seek to focus upon the wholesome development of the child. Therefore she trusts and is more emotionally attached to her aunt than her mother. While there is an active interest in her academics on part of her uncle, in contrast, there is minimal evidence of a constructive role being played by her father with the exception of assistance and encouragement in starting a new business venture.

The character of Nisha in the novel, *Home*, demonstrates the development of gendered identity in a traditional family. Having spent most of her childhood at her aunt's place, she finds it extremely difficult to adjust to the ethos of her own home where her mother compels her to conform to a stereotypical feminine role. Her resistance accounts for generation of intra-psychic conflict and a fragmented sense of self. Attempts to emerge out of the miserable condition and carve a niche for herself are therapeutic for her and revitalize her. Reflecting on the same from an Eriksonian perspective, the negotiation of the crisis of the stage of identity formation is thwarted and there remains a gap in the achievement of an inner sameness and uniqueness.

Another facet of the familial relations that unfolds in the novel is that of a dysfunctional family. Nisha's cousin, Vicky, whose father is a drunkard and has the tendency of being violent, verbally and physically, are briefly hinted upon in the novel. Also the death of his mother, deeply distressful and anguishing, is etched deeply in his mind. This void finds expression in his behaviour in a few situations. With no means to communicate his agony, resorting to crying becomes a means to communicate and draw attention. The lack, transposed in the display of the affectionate bond, is extended towards Nisha. In case of Vicky, the inability to perform academically can be perceived to be symptomatic of the agony that he undergoes. Further, he perceives his initiation into the business as an opportunity to 'show everybody' what he was. It is an indicator of the will to enhance self-worth and self-esteem. This psychological need testifies to a tendency to define a separate identity for oneself, though realized in myriad forms, during adolescence. Presence of a substitute family is only a façade.

In the novel, *S's Secret* by Shobha De, the family on the surface is apparently well integrated, liberal and tolerant. What comes to fore as the novel unfolds is that the under the veneer of doting and indulgent parents, there are chasms which indicate the necessity of

engaging in an unconditional fruitful dialogue and reassuring the children of a support, an emotional anchor with whom they can express and share without hesitation.

Interactions between the mother, father and children are manifest in different forms in the novel. Both remain preoccupied in their professional engagements, but there are different ways in which they spend time with their children. The father remains involved in Sandhya's passion for cooking, the mother attempts to have conversations and is not detached from life. In the case of Sandhya, one of her fundamental concerns is dealing with her younger sibling whose attitude she finds intrusive. Invariably it results in conflicts and fights between the two. The distress that Sandhya experiences are not addressed by the moralizing stances adopted by her mother. In case of Sandhya being the elder sibling, the degree of parental expectation registers an increase. Instance of sibling care, affection and solidarity is demonstrated when Sandhya writes a letter to her elder brother expressing her anguish over his smoking habit. It is important that he makes a confession to her before revealing the same to his parents.

The preference and leverage that is given to her brother is evident of his privileged status within the family. Academic excellence becomes the license to be casual and do anything that he wishes to do. The fact that both Sandhya and her brother, Siddharth hesitate to divulge to their parents their secrets, highlights that it is pertinent that the family functions as a supportive institution that oversees the development of the adolescent and not restrain it by overbearing expectations.

The novels thus highlight how parenting styles differ according to variation in the patterns of organization of the family. The context is an important determinant in the nature of experiences that are instrumental in shaping the identity of the adolescent. The norms and beliefs that are ascribed within the familial space, assume a significant role in decision making and exercising choices. Equally important is the negotiation of this ascribed identity when that which is secondary in the listing of agents of socialization, especially peers, assume greater prominence.

From the analysis it can be inferred that it is critical that the degree of emotional engagement of the mother and father, with the growing child and their contribution to his/her psychosocial wellbeing, have to be looked at separately. The novels showed a number of variations in this regard. The gender specific parenting vis-a-vis neutral upbringing of Nisha

in the novel *Home*, the indulgent and caring attitude that Sandhya's parents have, though failing to create a congenial space for interaction because of its superficial nature, are some of the facets of the parent child relationship that have emerged from the novels. Of considerable significance was the fact that nature of the parent-parent relationship cast an important influence on the development of the child.

From the standpoint of the role of the family, the intra-familial relationships that include the parent-child and the parent-parent interactions and sibling relationships are significant in the development of identity. The pattern of socialization that is predominant in the family guides the behavior, decision making and acceptance of roles. This may manifest itself in conformation or contravention to the ascribed position. Also, friendship dynamics are important concerns in this context that gain significance gradually. However this tendency cannot be generalized as it is contingent upon myriad interacting factors such as gender, class and family milieu.

Friendship functions as an important denominator in the development of a distinct sense of self. The emotional mooring that adolescents find in spaces beyond the contours of their families, is extremely significant, because they find a space for expression that cannot be realized within the family space. The process of individuation as described by Blos (1962) is illustrated characteristically in the delineation of the characters such as Nisha. These characters exemplify this phase as the novels depict their movement from childhood to adolescence and finally stepping into young adulthood. The progression is gradual and neither sudden nor linear in nature. The family plays an integral role in facilitating, or delimiting this transition.

Also a glance at the conflicts that emerge during adolescence are correlated with factors such as sexuality, differential parental opinion, peer approval/disapproval autonomous decision making, sibling relations, and stress over academics and career choices. While a few coincide with the Eurocentric formulations about adolescence, dilemmas emergent from class and gender orientations and the nature of the concern and efforts made to deal with them cannot be explained in a decontextualized manner.

The presence or absence of siblings plays a predominant role in the resolution and aggravation of the conflicts and dilemmas confronted by adolescents. Adjustments to the presence of a sibling, as illustrated in the unfolding of the narratives, are seminal. Also, a range

of factors within the family are preponderant in the shaping of relationships with siblings. Sandhya's childhood experiences in the novel *S's Secret* are a telling instance of the characteristic influence that sibling relationships have on the shaping of identity. For instance, her habit of sharing her feelings by talking to the moon, indicate how neglected she felt when all attention was focused on her baby sister and her elder brother. Such fantastic and imaginary creations are reflective of the cocooned inner world, intrinsic to the sustenance of the self because it has a cathartic effect and enables venting out emotions to maintain a sense of harmony and balance.

Her sensitive and caring attitude and kinship bonding, is the hallmark of her personality and comes to fore on several occasions. The gendered upbringing is subtly operative in the novel. In comparison to her brother, Siddharth, she is overwhelmed with guilt for her transgression. While her brother is a little nervous about his smoking habit, he is certainly not as frantic as his sister about her secret. This also functions as a significant factor in shaping identity.

It surfaces that there are strong internal private worlds inaccessible to the people around them. They struggle to keep harmony and consonance between the frictions and imbalances that arise from their environments. In the delineation of characters, one also comes across the oscillation between childhood preoccupations and emergent concerns of adolescence with respect to sexuality, peer associations, parental relations, strivings for autonomy etc.

The development of an independent sense of self is manifested in autonomous decisions, emergence out of the conventionalities of expected roles through negation of dictums, strivings for independent spaces, rebellions against imposed decisions, pursuit of passions that are antithetical to dictates of family members, etc. This is portrayed through the medium of various characters whose trajectories seem to coincide at a particular point. It portrays that there are junctures when the definition of 'who I am' is both tangential to and coinciding with the sense of 'we.' This echoes the Eriksonian framework where the stage of identity vs. role confusion involves resolution of a crisis that entails selection and internalization from the environment to build an integrated psychic structure. It is also intertwined with the notions of self-worth and self-esteem. The role of the family in enabling or disabling this pursuit is important, as illustrated through the various characters in the novels.

4. CONCLUSION

The seminal concern that emerges from the analysis is that to support the emotional well-being of the adolescent the family can provide a conducive and congenial space for development. For instance excessive or obsessive monitoring especially during the phase of transition from childhood to adolescence delimits the possibility to explore and experiment at this life stage. Within the Indian context, in order to form a unified sense of self, there are various impediments based on variables such as class and gender that tend to obstruct the process of exploration among adolescents. Also significant is the fact that parental decisions are not thrust upon the adolescent. Rather, the strivings for autonomy need to be respected and valued. Issues such as sexuality and experimentation must be addressed by developing a rapport.

It is also important to note that the school, another significant space for socialization, does not function in a vacuum or in isolation from the family. Behavior of the child, academic performance, attitudes and values are influenced by the familial environment that he/ she has been subject to. The school should not be delimited to just academics; rather it should play a constructive role by interacting with the parents regularly. It should play a productive role and adopt an interventionist stance with respect to the issues confronted by the growing child.

It brings to fore fundamental adolescent issues that need to be incorporated under the purview of adolescence education. These include making the adolescent aware of the psychological dimensions of the physiological changes taking place during this phase, adjusting to conflicting demands from the environment, being assertive, facilitating them in coping with the stressors emergent during this stage with respect to academics, parental conflicts, peer dynamics, and inculcating decision making abilities, etc. Also of fundamental importance is the fact of how these issues are addressed. Adopting a moralising stance to the same or dealing with them in an isolated manner does not facilitate the achievement of intended goals. Rather, to conclude, it needs to be dealt by generating a dialogue that augments the possibility of the interaction and expression.

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