

An Analysis of the Concept of Identity Crisis in Ali Bader's *The Tobacco Keeper*

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ABSTRACT

The current study investigates the concept of Identity crisis manifested or reflected in *The Tobacco Keeper*, a novel by Ali Bader. The analysis of the novel is built on the concept of identity and identity crisis as suggested by Erik Erikson. Moreover, the study examines the main reasons that lead the protagonist, as an Iraqi individual, to experience what Erikson calls "Identity Crisis" that results from the failure of this character to achieve what is called the "Ego identity". His failure, eventually, is related to the conflicts that govern the life of Iraqi people. This novel presents a panoramic view of the history of Iraq as it traces the life of Kemal Medhat for more than eighty years. The identity crisis that the protagonist undergoes is related to the political and ethnic conflict of the different groups that shape up the structure of the Iraqi society. The novel can be considered as a political criticism of the various regimes in Iraq. The paper is divided into three sections. The first section introduces the writer and a short summary of the story. As for the second section, it presents the concept of identity. The last section contains the analysis of the main character's experience that causes his identity diffusion.

Keywords: Identity Crisis, Erikson, Ali Bader.

Section One: An Introduction

1.1 Ali Bader

Ali Bader (1964) is an Iraqi novelist, essayist, poet, scriptwriter and journalist. He has written ten novels, winning 5 Arabic literary awards, several works of non-fiction and two poetry collections. His first novel *Papa Sartre* (English 2009) is a representation on the way Ali Bader adopts Sartre's concept of existentialism. He worked as a correspondent for foreign newspapers covering the Middle East as a war correspondent. Ali Bader lives in Belgium. He was born in Baghdad where he also studied the French literature at the University of Baghdad.

Through his novels, Ali Bader documents and chronicles the history of Baghdad along with the succession of the different powers that ruled Iraq. His novel *The Winter of the Family* (2002) is a portrayal of the fall of the aristocratic class in Baghdad during the 1950s. In *The Naked Banquet* (2004), he pictures Baghdad during the First World War: the fall of the Ottoman forces and the conquest of Baghdad by the British troops. *The Tobacco Keeper* (2008) was included in the long list of the International Prize for Arabic Fiction in 2009 the same year when he published *The Kings of the Desert*. His latest published works include *The Musician of the Cloud* (2016), *Liars get Everything* (2017), and *The killers' Party* - (collection of short Stories) (Arab World Books 2020)

1.2 Summery of the Story

The novel opens with the unnamed narrator telling the reader about the three personalities the poem that has the same title presents connecting that with the story of the novel. The story is about Kemal Medhat, an Iraqi violinist recently murdered. The unnamed narrator who is an Iraqi journalist is asked by an American journal (US Today) to make some investigations about his murder and write his story as a ghostwriter.

He discovers that this musician, Kemal Medhat, had three personalities; Yousef Sami Saleh, a young Jew born in Iraq in 1926, Haidar Salman, the Shia musician, and Kamal Medhat, the famous violinist who played in the Iraqi national orchestra during Saddam's time in Baghdad. Accordingly, the parallel between the personas of Pessoa in his poem and those of Kamal Medhat in Ali Bader's Novel becomes clear to the reader.

Section Two

Identity and Identity Crisis

Primarily, in the *Merriam Webster Dictionary*, Identity is defined as the term that tells us who someone is. The free dictionary defines it as “the condition of being a certain person or thing”. In a more broaden sense it is explained as the “set of characteristics by which a person or thing is definitively recognized or known”. In addition, and as stated by the *Cambridge learner’s Dictionary*, it refers to the things that make one person or group of people different from others. Eventually, it becomes clear that the mentioned definitions agree on one fact that humans are distinguished by identity. In the two novels, the subject of this study, it is obvious that there is uncertainty or crisis of identity as a result of the uncertainty created by the war experience in Iraq.

E. Erikson, unlike Freud, stated that human personality continues to develop according to the influence of the society, culture and history. He shifts from a sexual nature of humans into a theory of psychosocial development. The basic argument in Erikson’s theory is the ego-identity and the issues related to identity formation which is the remarkable feature of adolescence. The life experiences of the individual that starts with childhood and shapes their entire life help or rather contribute in forming their ego identity. According to Erikson, the development of humans is similar to the epigenetic principles of development. **“That anything that grows has a ground plan, and that out of this ground plan, the parts arise, each part having its time of special ascendancy. Until all parts have risen to form a functional whole.”** (Erikson, 1968: P.92). As epigenesis indicates, each part must grow or arise in an appropriate time. If any part fails in ascending, that will endanger the development of that part and eventually the succession of the potentials depending on its growth. Hence, the strong identity comes from a healthy life experience. In this case, the individual that struggles to form a strong ego- identity helps in turn in forming someone else’s identity. In other words, the influence is mutual. The whole process of development is interrelated with other people’s experiences that form the social background for the individual.

Erikson divides the human life into eight stages that start from infancy and end with adolescence. Each stage is characterized by a conflict which has either syntonic (positive) or dystonic (negative) outcomes. If the conflict or the experiences of the individual lead to improvement, the syntonic or positive manner dominates the ego since such conflict helps to acquire healthy and constructive development. In Erikson’s views this creates a “positive self- concept” which is an essential mark of

self- confidence and necessary in the formation of an ego identity. On the other hand, if the conflict leads to unsatisfactorily outcomes the dystonic, negative, manner will dominate the ego and hence result in negative symptoms that contrast any attempt for development. For Erikson, it is very important to experience both the negative and positive sides of each stage because they are essential for the development of a healthy individual. The first stage of the human life cycle in Erikson theory is **Trust versus Mistrust** which indicates a state of becoming a trusting or mistrusting individual. This stage covers between birth and walking (0-1.5 years). The infants are connected to the mother and learn to trust her through the regular feeding they receive. The care and love the mother shows create a world in which the child feels safe, a world that provides for them their basic needs. This helps later to develop the infant's motor skills later. Eventually and based on this safety the mother represents, the children develop a sense of trust that later helps them to trust others, their own environment and their body. In other words, childhood trust comes from regular feeding. In this case the child predicts the events that satisfy his or her needs. This is the syntonic part of the experience. If there is no regularity in feeding the infant, mistrust emerges. Being acknowledged and appreciated are the basic matters that help to grow identity. Identity is not considered as a personal achievement rather it is the outcome to mutual recognition. The dystonic outcome of this experience is identity confusion in adolescence which is the result of the diffusion that comes from isolation. This receptive stage is described as "I am what I am given". (Erikson,1996: p.48)

The second stage of the human life cycle, **Autonomy versus Shame and Doubt**, falls between the age of 1.5 and 3.5 years. The children in this stage develop a sense of autonomy; they come to recognize themselves different from their parents. They start to make their own choices and decisions even if it is, sometimes, done aggressively. The main skill they begin to acquire is self- control, especially body waste products. So, the struggle to gain autonomy could be hard as accompanied by stubbornness, refusal to answer, and bad temper. A child may release the body products even when the parents ask him or her to hold them. Training the child appropriately helps to develop a sense of mastery and right to choose. Generally, the child learns to make his/her own decisions. The absence of a well training experience will result in shame, dependency, and self -doubt. Autonomy is the main element in the formation of identity in adolescence.

The third stage of the human life is between 3.5- and 6-years **Initiative versus Guilt**. According to Erikson, the child in this stage is active and talkative. The children as strong and powerful view the parents; therefore, they start to identify with the parents

(the same sex). This, in fact, is a pre-school stage during which the children attempt to show a sort of independence in their actions. In other words, they become initiative. If parents tend to punish their child, insisting on him to behave well, the result will be inhibition that is a weakness. A sense of guilt will control their behavior and they become unable to make their own decisions even in future when they become adults. (Erikson, 1996: p.50)

In the fourth stage, **Industry versus Inferiority**, children become curious to know or see the small components of things. They destroy certain toys only to see how it works. So, they become ready to complete tasks on their own. At school, they are able to compete and accomplish certain achievements. If they are ill prepared for school, they are unable to learn from their own experiences and they tend to be passive or inactive. This will affect the formation of the identity in the adulthood stage. The fifth stage is the most critical one as adolescents (age 12 -18) in this stage have the task of developing a strong sense of self or what is called Ego Identity. Individuals have conflict in trying to find answers for questions as “who am I”, “what do I want to do with my life”. Those who are successful in this stage have a strong sense of self. They are usually true to their beliefs and are also aware of their strengths and weaknesses otherwise, they remain insecure about their beliefs, their future, and environment. If the young people fail in reaching the balance of their values, they may suffer what is known as identity crisis. Eventually, such individuals fail in reaching or developing their ego identity. In countries that witness radical political changes, individuals find “convincing and satisfactory identities in the simple totalitarian doctrines of race, class and nation” (Erikson, 1996: P.98)

Ego Identity, then, in its subjective aspect, is the awareness of the fact that there is a selfsameness and continuity to the ego’s synthesizing methods and that these methods are effective in safeguarding the sameness and continuity of one’s meaning to others. (Erikson, 1996: P.22)

In the sixth stage, Intimacy vs Isolation (20s to 40s), people start to explore personal relationships and tend to find settlement after developing the sense of self. If the development of the other stages is successful, people tend to be involved in committed relationships to get a sense of security. Adults, as a result feel independent and have control on their personal relations. Those who have doubts or are unsure of their beliefs suffer from depression; they isolate themselves. Eventually this reflects a sense of insecurity. (Erikson, 1968: p.136)

People in the seventh stage, Generativity vs Stagnation, (age 40s) feel they are positively contributing to the world through the family and career. They focus on

establishing a family and a good career so as to feel they are productive. If they fail in developing this skill will remain unproductive and rather feel that they don't have an impact in the society in a positive way. They also lose the interest in improving themselves as far as their career and personal relations are concerned. (Erikson, 1996: P. 103)

The last stage, Integrity vs Despair, is the outcome of the previous stages. This the stage of late adulthood (60s) during which people either feel proud of their accomplishments; hence they have the sense of integrity, or they have the sense of failure that leads to despair and depression. (Erikson, 1996: P. 104)

Section Three

3.1 Identity Crisis in *The Tobacco Keeper*

Ali Bader, in his novel, presents the protagonist, Kemal Medhat, a famous violinist, with three shifting and overlapping identities that are gradually unfolded to the reader with the development of the plot. The same person spends his life time with three names, Yousif Sami Saleh, Haidar Salman, and Kemal Medhat. The book is divided into two parts; Part One presents a general introduction to the life of the protagonist by the journalist who is the narrator. The second part is subdivided into three chapters each is devoted to a stage of the life of the main character during which he adopts an identity and establishes his relations with the Iraqi society accordingly.

***The Tobacco Keeper* makes problematic essentialist articulations of identity by demonstrating the ways in which the concept of identity is enmeshed in a network of asymmetrical power relations, which outweigh the concerns of individual Iraqis. The novel makes evident that identity is an ideological construction imposed and manipulated by political powers to the detrimental of human integrity. (Al Janabi: P.118)**

3.2 The Keeper of the Flocks

The first persona in Fernando Pessoa's poem, **The Tobacco Keeper**, tackles the original identity of the main character Yousif Sami Saleh from 1926 to 1955. In this period, the young Jew, Yousif, lives in Al-Tora, a district that had the Jewish community in Baghdad. Living within his neighborhood, Yousif practices his normal life doing the things he is interested in like music, playing the violin, for instance.

Added to that, his community provided him with a sort of positive environment that made him feel secure and confident. According to Erikson's interpretation, during his youth, Kemal Medhat, would have supposedly developed his ego identity as long as there is trust in the society with which he shares similar cultural traditions.

He would always walk with his head held high, contemplating passers-by from above, his narrow eyes examining them as though they were little worms in bright yellow field. (Ali Bader,2012: P. 101)

In this part of the book, Yousif Sami, encounters certain events that sign the beginning of his identity confusion or crisis. To live as a Jew in a society like the Iraqi society known for its diversity is very hard for Yousif. His choices are possible only within the limits of his family first, then his Jewish community. In other words, it is **“the Muslim community around the Jewish community” (Ali Bader,2012: P. 112)**

The identity of the people in a country is shaped up by its history and the experiences of its people. The first thing that changes the course of the life of Yousif is the movement of his family from Al Tora (his Jewish community) to Al- Rashid Street in 1945. Once this happens, Yousif Saleh loses the sense of security he used to have before within his community. This is a turning point for him since he has come to realize that his previous neighborhood has made him feel safe and secure. On the other hand, he starts to believe that it has also implanted inside him a sense of fear; the fear of **“the outside”**. One of the sources of conflict is the ethnic tensions that implants deep rooted distrust between the varied religious groups that form the Iraqi society, Muslims and Jews in this stage. Primarily, this plays a crucial role in precluding the formation of the Iraqi identity. (Armstrong, 2016: P.16)

One of the most remarkable events that has a big impact on Yousif is the famous incident of Farhud in 1941. This incident is remembered by the history of Iraq. Many people from the Jewish community were killed at that time. This historical event becomes a mirror that reflects the tragedy of the Jewish community. This is the only program against the Jews that represented a small minority in Iraq. During the time of Rashid Ali Al Gaylani, the hatred of Muslims grew towards the Jews. As the tension of Arab-Jewish increased in Palestine, Iraq has become part of this conflict. The Jews were then attached to Zionism. On June 1-2, 1941, thousands of the Muslims attacked the Jews and killed many men and women something that ended the existence of the Jews in Iraq. (Cohen, 1966, P:2)

During the 1930s, Fascist and Nazi ideologies began to gain ground, actively supported by the German embassy which disseminated anti-Jewish propaganda. As the first independent Arab state, Iraq soon became the center of Pan-Arabism, with the emergence of extremist Arab nationalist organizations that fostered anti-Jewish sentiment heavily influenced by Nazi propaganda. (Tsimhoni, 2001, P: 570)

This historical event characterizes the novel with realism, a feature that dominates the course of the events which shape up the character of Yousif. Being a witness of such a terror, Yousif has become a different person.

The Jewish community were victims of assaults, looting and murder. Massouda Dalal-Yousif Sami Saleh's aunt and Gladys's mother- was burnt alive before his very eyes and her property looted. (Ali Bader, 2012: P. 116)

The sense of insecurity increases inside Yousif. Such feelings make him lose his trust in the environment around. Hence, this can affect the formation of his ego identity. He has to leave Iraq like all the Jews because death has become everywhere. After leaving Iraq to Israel, the feeling of fear and insecurity never leave Yousif; he comes to realize the fact that his Iraqi roots are calling him and only there he can achieve peace and his sense of self as Erikson names it. Accordingly, he decides to pursue his goal, returning to Iraq where his real identity lies. He goes to Moscow and manages to travel to Iran where he gets a passport under the name of Haidar Salman, his new identity.

3.2 The Protected Man in the Tobacconist's

Haidar Salman is the persona or identity that Yousif takes as he goes from Moscow to Iran aspiring that it will bring him back to Iraq. His insistence to return to Baghdad manifests his search of security or safety, this is at least what he believed. In the winter of 1953, Yousif Sami Saleh arrives Iran as Haidar Salman. Actually, the period he spends as Haidar is a period of dramatic changes in the history of both Iraq and Iran. He settles in Tehran during the Shah reign, a period when Tehran was a flourished city. He returns back to Iraq after the 1958 coup when Abdul Kareem Qasim came to role Iraq. During this period Haidar Salman, the Iraqi Shia adopts communist attitudes something that puts his life in danger. Despite the fact that Abdul Kareem Qasim supported the communists as he had come to power because he wanted create a balance between the communists and the pan- Arabists, therefore he established relations with both the UK and USSR in terms of economic and military agreements. The ICP (The Iraqi Communist Party) gained power in the army. Later,

in 1959 a violent action led by the communists disrupted a celebration of the revolution in Kirkok. This incident made Qasim to turn against the communists arresting their leaders. In 1961 their organizations were closed and their press was banned. (Taylor, 2018, P: 34). After the revolution, the Iraqi minority groups witnessed no improvement, there rose a distrust between them and the leader of the country.

As result, living in Iraq for him becomes unbearable. He returns to Iran in search of a new name, a new identity that might bring him back to Iraq again. The reason behind his departure goes back most clearly to the loss of his trust in the environment or the loss of feeling secure again as the idea of death spreads everywhere. The revolution had brought changes on different levels. Yousif keeps writing letters to his wife, Farida, giving her the details of his experiences. These letters explain his attitude about the changes he is going through.

A whole new culture emerged, generating a new vocabulary that had not existed before. This was what he wrote to Farida: ‘There are new slogans such as “Death to mercenaries” and “Death to imperialist collaborators”. Everybody here speaks of death and calls for it. Can you imagine that the masses are cheering their leader, Qasim, asking him to “Execute, don’t say it’s too late”? Post revolution Baghdad has become a totally different place. The revolution has strengthened populist and vulgar tendencies and the mob’s hold on the streets’ (Ali Bader,2012: P.174)

3.3 The Tobacco Keeper

As soon as he gets his new passport in Iran under the name of the Sunni Kamal Medhat, the persona of Haidar Salman vanishes. With the hope of achieving his inner peace and self -sense, Kamal Medhat starts a new journey with a new identity. From Iran he goes to Damascus in Syria to enter Iraq. His journey as Kamal Medhat is a survey of the history of Iraq up till 2006. Yousif spends the rest of his life in Iraq as Kamal Medhat. As a violinist he becomes a famous musician in the national orchestra during Saddam Hussein’s time. His life changes again after he thought that he has reached the peacefulness he has been looking for. After the agony he has been going through, now it is time for settlement. The course of the events takes a new direction changing with it Yousif Sami Saleh’s life too. The Gulf war starts in 1990-1991, the invasion of Kuwait by Iraq and the American invasion of Baghdad. This change brings with it the idea of death and destruction back to the protagonist’s existence.

In a matter of hours, the shops were emptied of goods and closed. The cats began to eat grass when they couldn't find the remains of food in rubbish dumps or homes. The carcasses of starves animals filled the streets. (Ali Bader,2012: P. 287)

Eventually, depression is the outcome of the circumstances that Yousif has been through in his entire life. Fear controls him. After all, violence and death become his companions. Positivity is missing and this is the painful fact that he comes to realize. According to Erikson an individual in such a case will lose trust in the present and in the future. Identity confusion becomes the consequence. This is clearly portrayed in the novel.

Kamal Medhat no longer had faith in the existence of rational judgement. The middle East was a simmering pot of anger, cruelty, and hate. Its politics were based on chauvinism and prejudice. Society was dominated by dangerous values that did not differentiate between political and gangster ethics. The citizens of the country had finally become the mob. (Ali Bader,2012: P. 285)

This feeling of despair, gradually, develops with negative influences of the war and the increased terroristic actions that started to take place in Baghdad like explosions, murder, and kidnapping.

The Country was suffering from psychological disorder after all the revolutions, wars, cruelty, and violence. A deadly despair had taken hold of people. (Ali Bader, 2012: P.285)

Kamal Medhat is killed, shot to death, in the streets of Baghdad. His tragic death is the conclusion or the end of his journey living three lives with three identities trying to find a shelter or a home that can protect him. He kept looking for security that could not be achieved. As a Jew (Yousif), he could not continue his life in Iraq therefore the first identity he adopts is to be a Shia (Haidar), one of the basic ethnic groups. After that he chooses to be a Sunni (Kamal). Eventually he fails. Most likely Yousif Sami Saleh, pushed by the oppression of ethnic distinction, becomes alienated from his ethnic identity something that may lead to “a complete denial of personal identity”. (Identity, Youth, and Crisis: P. 173) He thinks by belonging to dominant or totalitarian groups, he might reach what Erikson calls sameness and continuity, sameness with the society he is part of. With each identity he adopts, he makes a family. As a Jew, he marries Farida and has a son named Meir who lives in America and joins the army there. Haidar Salman is married to Tahera and has a Shia son, his name is Hussein. Omar is the name of Kamal Medhat's son after marrying Nadia. The

three sons symbolize the concept of identity crisis and ambiguity; Meir comes to Iraq with American army as an American officer; Hussein joins the Shia in the south while Omar is the Sunni with ideas of enlightenment.

Thus, the critique of identity in *The Tobacco Keeper* addresses contemporary concerns as they unfold, particularly in relation to sectarian clashes, such as the Sunni/Shi'i divide. The power of the novel's critique hinges on depictions of the suffering of individual Iraqis due to the identitarian conflicts within the multiethnic context of the nation. (Al Janabi: P. 125)

Conclusion

The novel examined in this study shows the identity crisis as experienced by Ali Bader's protagonist. The three overlapping and conflicting identities of Kemal Medhat exemplify and support Erikson's concept of identity and identity crisis. *The Tobacco Keeper* examines the failure of Kemal Medhat in developing his sense of belonging or his ego identity as a result of the instability that features his existence represented by ethnic conflicts, military coups, end of monarchy in Iraq, the Iraqi-Iran war in 1981-1988, as well as the Gulf War in 1991 that led to the American invasion in 2003. This, in fact, explains the torn identity of the protagonist. Throughout his life Yousif remains, desperately, in search of an identity that may provide him with settlement, peace, and confidence. All his gains are eventually are insecurity and agony which in turn are the main causes of what is known as identity crisis. The novel shows, through the different identities of the Kemal Medhat, an overview of the history of Iraq from 1926 to 2006.

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