



AMORPHOUS IDENTITY IN THE POSTMODERN NOVELS OF SUSAN HOWATCH

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Abstract

Susan Howatch in her St.Benet's Trilogy viz. *The Wonder Worker*, *The High Flyer* and *The Heartbreaker* foregrounds the performative and amorphous nature of identity. People affect different faces to suit different situations. This fluid nature of identity is quite prevalent in the three novels and Howatch highlights an individual's propensity to put on a facade to deal with the stresses and strains of the dystopic world of the postmodern era.

Keywords: Amorphous identity, performative nature, social and cultural construct.

In Postmodernism identity is a social and cultural construct and it is performative in nature. It is not homogeneous but several contradicting selves. We show different faces to different people. Our identity is determined by the way we interact with people. We put on a facade depending on the situation. In this context it is relevant to remember Madan Sarup's words, in *Identity, Culture and the Postmodern World* "... our identities are not entirely determined. There are counter-identifications at work as well." (xvi)

In the exposition of *The Heartbreaker* Richard Slaney said "We pick the roles we need to play." This observation may be interpreted as illustrating a different existential dimension of the notion of the unreal. Richard "lived out his own truth" by remaining a closet gay only to be put on rack by the guilt and worry of being one. This resulted in the coronary attack and his sudden demise. (HB 39)

Role-playing is what the leading characters do to exist and face the contingencies of the postmodern world. Alice read Francie correctly in *The Wonder Worker* and surmised that Francie's warm, outgoing manner cultivated for her work at St.Benet's was no more than a mask. Behind that mask Francie was isolated, needy and simmering with convoluted emotions which were all focussing on Nicholas.



The identity of an individual depends on various factors like chosen allegiances, social position, personal and professional roles. Val, the resident doctor in the St. Benet's Healing Centre had this explanation to offer for Kim's multiple personalities on play in *The High Flyer* at the time of his high-stress confrontation in Oakshott.

"... (w)hen a personality fragments under extreme pressure, all kinds of subpersonalities, normally suppressed by the ego, can erupt out of the unconscious and grab control of the mind..." (HF 439) Kim's various personalities were vying to make their presence felt.

Robin the in-house psychologist of the Healing Centre called attention to Kim's sexual enigma. Kim indulged in homosexual activities and in group sex. He was not a closet homosexual nor was he a bisexual. Robin surmised that Kim could be a "maladjusted heterosexual". (HF 441) Carter is devastated by his janus-faced lies and deception. Kim Betz in his final scene with Carter was 'slipping in and out of different personalities,...' (HF 402) Betz's split personalities were vying with each other to come out. Elizabeth was a "rather a dowdy middle-aged frump." In *The High Flyer* but "femme fatale" in *The Heartbreaker*.

Carter spoke in a fake American way and put on a masculine persona to survive in the corporate world in *The High Flyer*. She established contact with reality only through her telescope from her 35th floor apartment. Carter voluntarily confined herself to acquire order, power and position, suppressing her own nature. This status left her no time and she became a prisoner by choice. To break free from these shackles she had to embrace disorder. She liberated herself from this imprisonment and considered an alternative lifestyle only when she met the St. Benet's team.

In *The Heartbreaker* Gavin lived in a euphoric, unreal world of gay prostitute. To enter into this artificial realm he meditated and listened to opera and comforted himself that he was earning megabucks. Gavin hid behind Armani suits. Susanne wore junk jewellery, outlandish clothes and heavy makeup as a mask so that she could have the confidence to face the world.

Susanne's succinct description of The Savoy as something out of *Hello* magazine is typical of Baudrillard's postmodern image representing reality. Drawing upon Baudrillard's world of hyperreality, we find the characters in the trilogy living in a personal world of unreality (425).

Gavin cultivated an image of a sophisticated 'leisure worker'. He deluded himself into the belief that he was in control of his life as he was young, fit, and drove a luxury car. (HB 60) He was a mere tool in Elizabeth's money-making machinations. Gavin instigated his rebellion from Asherton and Elizabeth, his sources of corrupt behaviour. They were the contaminating influence on him and they polluted whoever came in contact with them. During his first encounter with Nicholas and Carta, Gavin's behaviour was insufferable and abominable. He called everyone with a cheap nickname to



distance himself from them emotionally. His life was completely at odds with his real nature. The presence of his dead brother as a malignant presence in his mind was all too real for him. The internal monologues with Hugo's spirit were a torment to his soul.

Different people represent different things to others. Nicholas who was perceived by Rosalind as a 'fixer' was found to be "a sign, a marker, a friend of the spirit, a representative of reality" by Venitia. Alice's and Stacy's devotion to Nicholas is absolute.

Most women find Lewis incorrigible but to Venitia he was a beacon who guided her to a new way of life from being an alcoholic. Nicholas was Mr.Charisma to many women and they found him irresistible but Carter was irritated by his suavity. She was always questioning his motives and his treatment of Alice.

In spite of their fluid identity, there is a powerful desire among the characters to become whole rather than fractured, isolated individuals. The desire to "become" is stronger than just "be".

For all her explicit feminism in her ideological interrogations, Carter was trapped in a masculine corporate system. She had to affect a masculine persona so that she was not stepped on by the "dinosaurs" and breast-brushed by the "whippets." She was always under the specular and defining gaze of the male. She lived in a schizophrenic rush of time central to postmodern living. She existed in a dominant social power of the high flyer. Both Gavin and Carta were mere pawns in the race to survive in the world they chose to live in. Carter's enslavement to her career and Gavin's captivity to that of Elizabeth's "boy" is one more dimension to their personalities. They are created and morphed by the society in which they live. When they attempt to shift from the schizoid world to the symbolic world they transfer from imprisonment to liberation.

Howatch illustrates that the postmodernist woman cannot escape easily the cultural, social and traditional framework allotted to the feminine gender. She deconstructs the prevailing socio cultural binaries and hierarchical discourses on gender and sex and presents a plurality of identities of the speaking subjects. Howatch is categorical that sexuality is a complex spectrum and categorizing people according to sex and gender could only be generalizations.

The different characters echo Judith Butler in Gender Trouble, "Identity is not something one is born with, but fluid, ever-changing and complex ideological process, determined by individual's relationship with other individuals." () Alice found Rosalind a "mass of churning emotions, all of them unhappy", beneath her immaculate exterior. Her regal physical appearance and rich, spotless house in Butterfold was symptomatic of Rosalind's inner deprivation and austerity. (WW 480) Alice also understood that Nicholas and Rosalind had sex not to express their love for each



other but to anaesthetize themselves from their problems. But Stacy regarded Rosalind with rose-tinted spectacles and called her 'so elegant' and 'so regal.'

The speaking subjects' facade of personalities changes according to the situation they are in and to the people they come in contact with. Gavin was under the oppression of Elizabeth and Asherton. His repression of his angst against his parents and his brother Hugo had to be brought out and voiced. His expression of these feelings and transferring them from the unconscious to the conscious was the trigger to his healing process.

All human beings have a mixture of the female and the male in them with varying degrees. "Perhaps a mind that is purely masculine cannot create any more than a mind that is purely feminine." (Woolf) Robin saw Kim as someone who never came to terms with his "feminine side." (HF 442) The fault line in Kim's personality ruptured often and he felt compelled to give vent to his rage through his "hobby." (HF 441) Carter could visualize the "metaphorical cancer" of Kim's mind, a "spiritual cancer" which proved terminal in his case.

Carter did have this "masculine persona". The big bonus to Kim was this masculine persona of Carter had the power to call forth the "female side" of his personality he had repressed. (HF 442) The conjugation of his feminine persona and Carter's masculine persona removed the dislocation he felt. He was more fully himself and well integrated. But Carter's masculine persona is a "hyped up distortion" aimed at helping her survive in a man's world.

Howatch's novels pose the necessity of the ontological constructions of sexuality, identity. There cannot be a single and abiding ground on which these complexities can be based. Exclusionary practices with regard to sexuality, class sex/gender is critiqued in the trilogy justifying Steven Pinker in his *The Blank Slate* that "... virtually all psychological tracts may be found in varying degrees among the members of each sex." (Pinker 340)

The author interrogates the categorizing of gender and sexuality as a coherent and stable entity and thus questions the reification of gender relations. She advocates variable construction of gender and orientation as a prerequisite for further understanding of these complex studies.

In her novels women assume the status of a universal subject. She confirms rather than contests the normative promise of humanist ideals. The performative nature of gender and sexuality is reiterated and the nebulous status of identity is proved in these novels. That identity is a free-floating attribute is confirmed emphasizing Judith Butler's theory of the fluid state of identity in *Gender Trouble*. Identity is performatively constituted is emphasized in the various identities



displayed by the characters according to the situation they are in and to their interactions with the people. (Judith Butler Gender Trouble)

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