

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background of the Study

A person often interprets the word 'identity' as a person's name, facts about who they are, or certain traits that a person presents. However, the true meaning of the word is not that simple. Identity has been characterized as an internalized mental system that unifies a person's inner self and their external social environment. An identity is unique to each human being, how they act, their habits, etc. In the world of psychology, the term identity consists of the memories, relationships, background, and core values that shape a person's sense of self. Contrary to popular belief, a person's identity does not automatically appear once one is born, nor is it something that a parent can actively give to their child. In fact, a person's identity is always evolving throughout their lifetime, developing in accordance to the people around them and their environment. Even as new characteristics are produced and assimilated into one's identity, this amalgamation generates a continuous sense of who one would be through time. As stated, Identity is "by its very nature, what bears such a definitive name remains subject to changing historical connotations" (Erikson, 1968: 15). Regardless, a person's identity can be similar or drastically different depending on how that person undergoes their life. Identity is what defines people, it is what makes a person them. Erikson (1968: 130) states, "in the social jungle of human existence there is no feeling of being alive without a sense of identity" meaning that a person's identity plays a significant role in how one lives, how to navigate their life, and their decision making capabilities.

The concept of identity will hardly ever be separated from the concept of identity crisis. The definition of identity crisis according to Cherry (2022), is a stage during a person's growth where they are starting to rethink who they are or where they belong in this vast universe. When hearing the word *crisis*, people often connotate it with a negative meaning, fearing the worst as if it is some sort of disease with no cure. However, Erik Erikson associates it with a positive thought, stating that crisis "is now being accepted as designating a necessary turning point, a crucial moment, when development must move one way or another, marshaling resources of growth, recovery, and further differentiation" (Erikson, 1968: 16). Though, the term identity crisis seems to affect one age group more than the others. Adolescents are known to not be able to answer seemingly simple questions such as, "who are you?" or "what is your purpose in life?" or simply "what do you want to be in the future?". This shows that they are undergoing an identity crisis, not being able to figure out who they exactly are during that point in time. Though identity crisis does not happen only once, it is very prominent during a human being's teenage years as it shapes who they are going to be during their adult years.

Identity crisis happens due to the internal conflict that a person undergoes. They struggle and are in doubt with the thoughts of who they are, who they want to be and what other people want them to be. It may also occur due to stressors in life that overwhelms said person.

Erikson's psychosocial development theory, established in 1968, according to Cherry (2020), offers a comprehensive framework for the investigation of human development over the course of an individual's lifetime. The main concept of Erikson's theory is the concept of identity. For Erikson, identity was

multidimensional, to be viewed through a wide-angle lens (Zhang, 2015). Erikson states that there are eight stages that every human being goes through in their lifetime. Every stage contains a crisis which has to be solved in order to gain the central need for development. Each crisis itself is a product of the body, the ego, and the societal environment that each human being surrounds themselves with. Erikson's eight stages include Trust vs. Mistrust, Autonomy vs. Shame and Doubt, Initiative vs. Guilt, Industry vs. Inferiority, Identity vs. Confusion, Intimacy vs. Isolation, Generativity vs. Stagnation, and Integrity vs. Despair. These eight stages occur starting from which a human being is born up to their deaths. Differentiating from Freud's psychosexual theory, Erikson's theory elaborates the effects of social interaction and circumstances throughout a lifetime instead of focusing solely on childhood experiences. However, same as any other theories, Erikson's eight stages of psychosocial development has limitations. In this case, Erikson does not state in detail how each conflict is resolved and how one person moves from one stage to another.

Nowadays, mental health has been a major topic that has been discussed, especially for newer generations. A person's mental health can affect how they view themselves, disrupting their sense of self and therefore are more vulnerable towards an identity crisis, as certain mental health issues give an individual a distorted view of their identity. Adolescence is a period of vulnerability for the development of depression and young people with mental health problems are at higher risk of poor mental health throughout their lives (Kelly, et al., 2018). With over 10% of the world population suffering from mental health disorders, it is a basic necessity for others to realize the effects that it has on society. According to a study done by

Cheung, et al. in 2017, having supportive parents and family, supportive friends and siblings, and a positive community and positive school experiences were also significantly associated with good mental health. Vice versa, having unsupportive parents, friends and family, and having a terrible community who is unable to provide better care will also affect the mental health in a negative way.

The pain someone has mentally is just as important as the pain someone has physically, however study shows that the devastation caused by mental health has gotten much worse. Adolescence is a distinct and formative period. Adolescents are more susceptible to mental health issues due to physical, emotional, and social changes, such as experiencing poverty, abuse, or violence. Adolescents' health and wellbeing during adolescence and into adulthood depend on sheltering them from harm, fostering socio-emotional learning and psychological well-being, and enabling access to mental health care. The occurrence of mental health issues among 10 to 19-year-olds is estimated to be 1 in 7 (14%) worldwide, although these conditions are usually undiagnosed and untreated. A 2019 study of high school students shows data that emphasizes the huge burden that mental health illnesses place on children and adolescents in the United States. 16.5% of Americans under the age of 18 have at least one mental health disorder, with emotional disorders (such as sadness and anxiety) and behavioral issues being among the most common. Teenagers facing mental health conditions are especially susceptible to experiencing social isolation, discrimination, and stigma, which can hinder their willingness to seek support. This may also lead to challenges in their education, engagement in risky behaviors, physical health problems, and potential human rights infringements. Another study done by Rahmayanthi, et al. (2021) also

displayed that in terms of social dysfunction and psychological suffering, 59.5% of teenagers reported having psychological issues.

A person's identity develops internally with influences from external factors – thus contributing to a person's psyche. Identity forms not just in real life human beings, but in characters of literature as well. Literature shares a close bond with psychology. Both subjects show the development of a certain character. However, psychology focuses more on real life human beings and natural brain and mental development, and literature focuses more on fictional characters who have certain issues or the development of a fictional character and their world. Often enough, fictional characters stem from reality, thus bringing the bond of literature and psychology closer. Psychoanalysis has been seen as a form of therapy which aims to cure mental disorders 'by investigating the interaction of conscious and unconscious elements in the minds' (Hossain, 2017).

Developmental psychology notices a change in the way humans think and behave throughout the life cycle. There are various theories depicting this subject, including Sigmund Freud's psychosexual theory and Erik Erikson's psychosocial theory as the most well-known. However, while Erikson was influenced by Freud's theory and they share similar views in certain areas, Erikson's psychosocial theory of development emphasized that society and the environment plays a big role in the development of one's character. This novel reveals the issues of mental health which is an important subject nowadays. Literature shares a close bond with psychology. Both subjects study the development, whether good or bad, of a certain character. However, psychology focuses more on real life human beings and natural brain and mental development, and literature focuses more on fictional characters

who have certain issues or the development of a fictional character and their world. Often enough, fictional characters stem from reality, thus bringing the bond of literature and psychology closer.

Literature, like other arts, is essentially an imaginative act, that is, an act of the writer's imagination in selecting, ordering and interpreting life-experience (Taylor, 1981). From literature itself, readers can gain knowledge through the experiences shared by authors and creators of literature. However, Taylor (1981) also stated that a work of literature does not necessarily give us accurate information about the way life is actually lived, rather it causes us to recognize truths about human existence through the direct presentation of selected experiences. Literature doesn't always provide readers with accurate information or accurate chronological ordeals, yet it shows how life was during the time of writing through words and selected experiences.

One of the subgenres of prose is called a novel. It is typically a long narrative and usually deals with narrating the experiences of characters that occurs in a certain setting. The rise of the novel derives from the same preoccupation with social commentary and interest in the actual lives of middle-class people, their aspirations and values in relation to ideal human behavior and absolute morality (Taylor, 1981). The characters in novels are typically the subject discussed in psychology, as they are built through psychological principles.

There is a very strong correlation between literature and psychology for the fact that both of them deal with human beings and their reactions, perceptions of the world, miseries, wishes, desires, fears, conflicts and reconciliations; individual and social concerns, by means of varied concepts, methods, and approaches (Aras,

2015). Both literature and psychology typically discusses the issues that go on in the character's life, their struggles, experiences, and relationships with other characters. Aras (2015) also stated that an author represents life according to his/her objectives, perceptions, ideologies, and value judgments and opens the doors of the unknown and invisible worlds to readers not only by arousing feelings and emotions but also by helping them to discover the meaning of life and existence. Literature and psychology both studies about human or character behavior and their improvement. The difference is that literature focuses more on fictitious characters, which is often an imitation of someone real, while psychology focuses more on real human beings. Psychology is related to literature as the author uses their psyche, emotions, ideas, and thoughts into creating their works.

Not only can it be in television, news articles, or on social media, cases and examples of self-determination and mental health disorder can also be found in literary works such as movies and novels. An example of identity crisis and mental health in novels is *All the Bright Places*. *All the Bright Places* is a young adult fiction novel written by Jennifer Niven which tells a story of a young strangers-to-romantic couple who suffers from their own form of mental health. The main characters, namely Violet Markey and Theodore Finch, both suffered from different kinds of mental health issues that continuously affect their daily occurrences. The novel was published by Knopf Publishing Group in 2015. The novel itself consists of two parallel narratives, both from Violet and Finch's perspective, in first person point of view.

This study focuses on the identity crisis in the main characters in Jennifer Niven's novel *All the Bright Places*. The novel itself has become a *New York Times*

bestseller and has been adapted into a film, which premiered on *Netflix* in February 2020. The novel is chosen because it shows both a similar and contrasting implementation of identity in the main characters' high school life journey and due to the captivation that the main character and the storyline gives, yet it is unafraid of discussing serious issues that are currently happening to real people around the world. *All the Bright Places* depicts how people are influential towards other people, shaping each other's identity and changing their views towards the world. The novel follows the romantic journey of Theodore Finch and Violet Markey from school strangers to lovers. Both struggling to cope with their mental illness and personal struggles, they try to find solitude, strength, and hope in each other. Their determination in getting better peaked, but somehow their results and end point are drastically different from one another. This novel touches painful subjects such as depression, losing a family member, familial detachment, and trauma yet it still captivates readers.

1.2 Research Questions

Therefore, I propose the research questions as formulated below;

1. How is the identity crisis undergone by the main character depicted in the novel *All the Bright Places* by Jennifer Niven?
2. What developmental stage does the main character's identity crisis occur?

1.3 Objective

Based on the research questions, the objective of the study is to find out:

1. To reveal the identity crisis undergone by Finch and Violet depicted in the novel *All the Bright Places* by Jennifer Niven.
2. To locate at what stage does the identity crisis occur in the main characters of *All the Bright Places* by Jennifer Niven while determining the similarities and differences.

1.4 Scope of Study

The scope of this research is the analysis of the main characters of *All the Bright Places* novel by Jennifer Niven which refers to the process of identity based on Erikson's Psychosocial Development theory.

1.5 Significance of Study

The aim of this research is to provide valuable insights for the study of literature, particularly in the context of young adult literature. It focuses on the use of psychoanalytical literary criticism as a tool to contribute to the knowledge of identity and identity crisis. In practical terms, the results of this study will have a positive impact on society, particularly the younger generation. By delving into psychoanalysis and behavioral theories, this research will promote appropriate behavior and a thoughtful mindset. Furthermore, the study is anticipated to be beneficial for future research endeavors, especially for students in the English Literature program, who wish to analyze literature using psychoanalysis.