Research Article

The Dynamics of Sexuality in Joyce Carol Oates' "Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been?": A Social Identity Perspective

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Abstract

Joyce Carol Oates (b.1938) sets her story, "Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been?" (1966), in the post-war American social context. Americans raised their voices for fundamental rights during the 1960s. Identity and sexuality became the primary concerns for many teenagers in the United States. Connie, the teenage protagonist, felt alienated from her family, and her fractured relationships with family members shaped her identity. Similarly, her willingness to ride with Arnold Friend jeopardized her sexuality. Thus, this paper examined the complications faced by teenagers in Oates's story through the lens of social identity theory, drawing primarily on ideas from Henry Tajfel and John C. Turner. For Tajfel and Turner, socio-cultural movements, social context, and environment formed the basis for identity formation. Connie experienced the reverberations of 1960s American society and realized that her identity and sexuality were in deep crisis. The lack of an organized social environment gave rise to a communication gap, low self-esteem, and loneliness in Oates' story. The relevance of this paper lies in offering ideas to address the tension between teenagers and parents in modern families. This is how the process of resolving begins in the unsung family narratives by Oates.

Keywords: Identity, reverberations, self, sexuality

Introduction

Joyce Carol Oates' "Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been?" first appeared in the 1966 edition of *Epoch* magazine. The story reflects the complex experiences of the teenage protagonist, Connie, during the 1960s in America. She worries about her identity and sexuality in post-war American society, a time marked by conflict management in the United States. Timothy J. Owens et al. believe that "the concept of identity is nested within the more inclusive concepts of the self and the self-concept" (478). Identity parallels the concept of self, and its reverberations are culture-specific. Oates' story begins with a typical family conflict between the mother and the daughter. Connie's mother argues with her about why she is looking in the mirror, highlighting the fractured relationship between them. Similarly, Connie's relationships with her father and

sister are also strained. As a result, she alienates herself from her family in search of her identity, needing to remove obstacles to her self-discovery. Additionally, the growing popularity of pop culture distances her from her family. She enjoys listening to music in the warmth of the sun and prefers the company of her friends in the evening over that of her family members. The credit for developing popular culture is often attributed to Bob Dylan, an influential American singer-songwriter. With the rise of pop culture, clubs and discotheques have become integral parts of American life. Meanwhile, teenagers challenge America's moral and social conventions as they become increasingly aware of their freedom and rights. In this way, American society moved toward social and cultural change during the 1960s, and this evolution is reflected in teenagers like Connie. Conversely, her family hesitates to embrace the new culture that Connie has chosen. Arnold Friend's arrival at her home is shrouded in mystery, and her decision to go driving with him further complicates her sexual life.

Oates' teenage protagonist in "Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been?" grows up in post-war American society. Pop music rises to its peak as teenagers explore new experiences in America. Connie, the protagonist, embarks on her journey of self-discovery. Thus, this article aims to answer the following research questions: Why is Connie alienated from her family? Why does Connie listen to pop music? Why does Connie accept Arnold's proposal?

By the way, Oates' story has drawn the attention of scholars ever since its first appearance in the 1966 edition of Epoch magazine. James Knudsen reviews Oates's short stories. In a review of the story, Knudsen writes that Oates' story "…explores the hearts and minds of a diverse group of women…" (370). Knudsen finds Oates discovering the minds and hearts of women in her stories. Similarly, G. J. Weinberger notices "…anti-woman attitude of the adult world" in the story (212). Weinberger's observation signals grown-ups' negative attitudes toward women during the 1960s. But, James Cruise states, "… Oates's story is first and foremost a product of its age…" (95). Cruise characterizes Oates's story as a product of the age. Teenagers' experiments with a new culture in American society. In this way, Oates's story keeps drawing scholars' attention.

Some scholars see the influence of popular culture in this story. For example, Weinberger postulates, "There is popular music everywhere in the story" (206). Weinberger's claim sounds logical because Connie is seen listening to music in the story. At the same time, Bob Dylan was very popular in America. Walter Sullivan praises Oates's skill by noting that "horror resides in the transformation of what we know best, the intimate and comfortable details of our lives made suddenly threatening (2). Sullivan believes that Oates' story depicts the dreadfulness prevailing in American society. On the other hand, Oates, in an interview with Leif Sjoberg declares, "The most reliable introduction to any writer is simply the books" (284). Oates considers her text as her real identity. Anyway, identity matters to all human beings. This research study, therefore, examines the complications of teenagers in Oates' narrative through the concept of social identity theory to fill the gap in the study.

This study is based on a descriptive textual interpretation of Oates' story through the concept of social identity theory. The paper primarily draws on ideas from Henry Tajfel and John C. Turner regarding the role of the social environment in identity formation. Additionally, the ideas and opinions of other scholars about identity formation are used to substantiate the paper's argument. The purpose of this paper is to study the teenagers' psychology after the devastating war in America. By doing so, this paper aims to address the concerns of the teenagers' and resolve the conflict

between teenagers and parents in modern American societies.

Social Identity Theory as an Approach

The concept of identity emerges as a dominant discourse in the humanities and social sciences. Multiple disciplines deal with the issue of identity. Sociologists regard social structure as the foundation of identity. Cultural values are of greater significance for anthropologists regarding identity formation. Some psychologists prefer sociological social psychology to integrate with social identity theory. Tajfel developed the social identity theory during the 1950s and 1960s. His main focus lies on the factors that affect our social identity. Social identity theory views social actors as having multiple identities stimulated by different social contexts. The actors compare with others to get meaning in their lives. Similarly, the social environment determines their self-perception. In this context, Tajfel claims, "Any society which contains power, status, prestige, and social group differentials (and they all do), places each of us in a number of social categories which become an important part of our self-definition" (14). The definition of self, according to Tajfel, depends upon numerous factors like power, status, prestige, and group differences. Power determines an individual's desire for a constructive social identity. Similarly, Bernard C. Rosen states, "Tajfel cannot accept the view that prejudice and discrimination are expressions of individual malaise; he feels, rather, that they are shaped by large, extra individual social processes" (210). Tajfel focuses on the contribution of social processes to an individual's feelings of prejudice and discrimination. After all, social identity theory examines an individual's position in society.

Turner contributed to the development of social identity theory in the 1970s and 1980s. Turner elaborates on Tajfel's idea of social context in identity formation. He posits, "A person's social identity comprised those social categories which defined his or her place in society and which had been internalized to define the self, together with their emotional and value significance (Turner 16). Turner emphasizes the sense of place in a society to define the self. An individual's place in society defines who they are, but placelessness develops the feeling of resistance in an individual. In addition, Michael A. Hogg and Cecilia L. Ridgeway claim that social identity theory "… broadens social scientific knowledge about the connections between groups, identities, and social behavior" (97). Social identity theory expands the horizon of knowledge because it helps us understand the threads of human relationships. Overall, these ideas serve as a tool to study the identity and sexuality of an individual in modern society.

Tajfel and Turner's social identity theory posits that an individual's sense of self is influenced by many factors, particularly during adolescence. The theory emphasizes that identity formation is greatly affected by culture, religion, and ethnicity. An individual's self-esteem, social status, and behaviour shape their identity within a society. The process of socialization during the teenage years remains a widespread and unavoidable discourse in modern societies. This is why social issues must be addressed through the lens of social identity theory.

Critical Analysis of Oates' "Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been?"

Oates' story captures the true essence of 1960s American society. The critical analysis of the story begins with a close reading of the text. With keen sensitivity and observation, Tajfel and Turner's ideas are applied while analysing the narrative. The following pages outline the story under various thematic headings to enhance the reader's understanding.

Connie and the Post-War American Societies during the 1960s

Identity and sexuality were urgent concerns for teenagers in modern American society during the 1960s. Identity matters to all human beings, but it is especially significant for teenagers like Connie in post-war American society. Connie, a fifteen-year-old girl, identifies herself with beauty. According to Nelson N. Foote, "One has no identity apart from society, one has no individuality apart from identity" (21). Foote emphasizes the importance of individual identity within society. Connie worries about her identity in post-war American culture. She values beauty as her identity and feels worthless without it. "She knew she was pretty and that was everything" (Oates 374). Connie regards her beauty as an essential part of her identity. In reality, she reaffirms her beauty and identity by looking in the mirror.

Connie regards her beauty as her identity during her teenage years. Her mother scolds her instead of counselling her during this stage of puberty. Connie asks questions about herself. As Kate Evans puts it, "Who I am and how I feel is not just about me in a vacuum. It is about me in relationship to others, and them in relation to me" (3). The binary relationships in a social environment determine who you are. An individual's recognition plays a key role in identity formation. Connie's mother fails to recognize her daughter's identity. Her mother proclaims, "Stop gawking at yourself, who are you? You think you are so pretty?"(Oates 373). Connie's mother challenges her daughter's identity through her rhetorical questions, prompting Connie to begin ignoring her beauty. Connie views her conflict with her mother as a threat in the process of personal discovery. This reflects her broken relationship with her mother during puberty.

The comparison among siblings in a family disturbs human relationships. Connie suffers from an identity crisis when she is compared to her sister June. June appears as a perfect daughter for her mother in that social environment. This kind of comparison only increases Connie's low self-esteem. Low self-esteem is a "belief that we are less worthy than other people" (Tyson 16). Tyson believes that thinking one is less valuable than another is a way of losing self-confidence. In the words of Connie's mother, "Why don't you keep your room clean like your sister? How've you got your hair fixed—what the hell stinks? Hair spray? You don't see your sister using that junk" (Oates 374). Connie loses her confidence when she is compared with her sister June. The mother's rhetorical questions appear as a psychological threat to Connie. June's perfection in her mother's eyes characterizes how Connie is treated by her mother. Connie longs for a space in a family but feels an identity threat from her mother's actions and behaviour.

Connie finds her identity in crisis when she has to hear the continuous praise of June from her mother and aunt. She never shares things with her sister. Connie looks impatient about her identity. She fears what to do and what not to do. Kay Deaux and Peter Burke opine that self-verification gives rise to feelings of "…self-worth, efficacy, esteem, and authenticity" (317). The emergence of such feelings signals the process of self-discovery. It is relevant even in the case of Connie as well. Sometimes, it gets disturbed by minor events in the family. In the case of Connie, her mother complains, June was "plain and chunky," "June did this, June did that," and "she saved money and helped clean the house and cooked" (Oates 374). A mother's treatment of her daughters in a family must be justifiable. Otherwise, one can feel injustice and be alienated from the family. In reality, Connie loses her dignity without love and care.

In addition, Connie's communication gap with her father increases her anxiety. She sees her father only at supper time, but never talks to him. He does not ask questions

or even talk with his teenage daughter. He never initiates addressing Connie's sentiment, who is transforming from a teen to an adolescent. Human beings, according to Holland et al, "…always exist in a state of being addressed and in the process of answering (169). Everybody wants to be addressed by others in society. Connie is neither addressed nor answered by her father. "He didn't bother talking much to them…" (Oates 374). Connie's father never enjoys talking to his daughter. Nor did he ask his daughter where she was going. As a result, she misses interaction with her family members. The lack of communication in a family calls for complexity.

Connie's New Experiments as Her Discovery of Sexuality

Connie's ruptured relationship with her father, mother, and sister indicates the horrible environment in the family. It looks like a broken glass. In other words, her relationship with no one inside the family is healthy. No one can imagine harmony in such a family environment. Morton Deutsch and Robert M. Krauss argue, "… human relationships always occur in an organized social environment—in a family, in a group, in a nation—that has developed techniques, categories, rules, and values that are relevant to human interaction" (2). Deutsch and Krauss prefer an organized social environment for healthy human relationships in a family. An organized social environment creates an atmosphere of communication. In contrast, the absence of an organized social environment generates the feeling of an identity crisis. The conducive social environment plays a key role in understanding human psychology. Teenagers' psychology is difficult to comprehend at a time of cultural transformation. Connie's anger reaches its climax in her contemptuous reaction when she "wished her mother was dead" (374). Connie's cruel remark about her mother reflects the imprint of the split social environment of her family. Her expression signals an extreme lack of interaction in a family, and it is the root cause of her depression. She experiments with strange things in the absence of an organized social environment.

New experiments have become a part of Connie's life because everything about her has two sides. Her lifestyle characterizes duality. According to Weinberger, "She is vain and messy, and bears herself differently at home and abroad" (206). Weinberger observes dichotomy in Connie's life. Like the title of the story, Connie's life is no different. "She wore a pull over jersey blouse that looked one way when she was at home and another way when she was away from home. Everything about her had two sides to it, one for home and one for anywhere that was not home" (Oates 374-45). Connie's duality looks mysterious and indicates her uncertainty. This kind of duality appears even in her emotions. Oates describes her laugh as "…cynical and drawling at home—"Ha, ha, very funny" —but high-pitched and nervous anywhere else like the jingling of the charms on her bracelet" (375). Connie's attitudes, clothing, and lifestyle show the impact of transition in America. Amid duality, she often goes shopping, to movies, to restaurants, and to music.

Connie grew up at a time when pop music reached its peak in America. Bob Dylan's "Baby Blue" became popular nationwide among adolescents. They consider popular music a way of living. For Weinberger, "Music is the medium through which adolescents attempt to derive the meaning of life…" (206). Weinberger regards music as a means of searching for the meaning of life among teenagers. It possesses the inherent power to guide human beings even in times of sorrows. Similarly, it becomes even more powerful when connected with religion. Connie enjoys the company of friends in a restaurant "… and listened to the music that made everything so good: the

music was always in the background like music at a church service, it was something to depend upon" (Oates 375). In this setting, Connie celebrates friendship while music with religious notes uplifts her during difficult times. In short, Connie represents the teens influenced by pop culture during the 1960s.

At the same time, Connie displays her adulthood in a family discourse. She refuses to attend the barbecue at her aunt's house, indicating her growing sense of power and independence. Connie becomes empowered by her mother's insults. Neither her father nor her sister acknowledges her identity. This incident separates them from each other within the family. Brian Edmiston believes that "…identities are determined by the narratives and practices that particular groups share and that people with when they regard themselves as group members" (200). Sharing and caring among individuals and groups play a key role in identity formation. Connie recalls her story from the previous night while lying on a lounge chair. "Connie sat with her eyes closed in the sun, dreaming and dazed with the warmth about her as if this were a kind of love, the caresses of love, and her mind slipped over onto thoughts of the boy she had been with the night before" (Oates 377). Connie's recollection of last night reflects her identity and sexuality. She enjoys the freedom and independence provided by the warmth of the sun. Her desire for a repeat of last night intensifies her sexuality. In this way, Connie prefers the company of outsiders over her family members when identity matters to her.

Connie experiences wonderful sexual feelings in the warmth of the sun. She listens to music for hours, and pop music energizes her senses. robert b. gremore argues, "…Dylan often borrowed melodies from traditional folk songs and wrote lyrics combining his narrative imagination with his understanding of the tensions the young people felt between America's official ideals and its compromised social arrangements." (96). gremore explains the nature of Dylan's pop music, which represents the voice of adolescents during the 1960s. As a result, Connie listens to music for a long time to release her family tension. Music provides her relaxation during times of disappointment. "And Connie paid close attention herself, bathed in a glow of slow-pulsed joy that seemed to rise mysteriously out of the music itself and languidly about the airless little room, breathed in and breathed out with each gentle rise and fall of her chest" (Oates 377). Connie integrates herself with music in the warmth of the sun. The rising and falling movement of her chest reflects her sexuality. Like her identity, her sexuality is not safe.

Discovery of Sexuality to the Formation of Connie's Identity

The arrival of a car disturbs the peaceful environment of Connie's house. Her heart pounds, and her fingers snatch at her hair. She whispers the name of Christ. All this happens just before she faces a terrible day in her life. Arnold arrives at her house like a tempest. James Cruise states, "Once the mushroom clouds began ascending into the heavens, all would be victims" (96). Cruise borrows the metaphor of the dark cloud to signal Connie's identity crisis. Arnold represents dark clouds and disrupts the heavenly joy Connie feels in the sun's warmth. She immediately asks Arnold, "Who the hell do you think you are?" (Oates 378). Connie raises a question to Arnold, and her questioning serves as a means of personal discovery. Arnold's unexpected arrival threatens her identity and sexuality. She questions Arnold to secure her future.

Arnold compels Connie to go on a ride that transcends her imagination. The mysterious figure addresses her as a lover and honey. Then, he proposes that she experience a sexual pleasure that will remain a secret. This unsettling proposal shakes her identity and sexuality, leaving

her afraid and impatient at home. Arnold represents "… a cluster of insights into the violence and sexuality of adulthood" (Weinberger 205). Arnold's ferocity and forcefulness work in tandem. Connie's maternal home does not align with the forces of maturity. In the words of Arnold, "I mean, anybody can break through a screen door and glass and wood and iron or anything else if he needs to, anybody at all and specially Arnold Friend" (Oates 384). Arnold displays his strength while speaking with Connie. He challenges her to break through the door and the glass of the home. In reality, Arnold creates extreme terror for Connie and confronts her sexuality against the backdrop of his physical strength.

In addition, Arnold threatens Connie by telling her that she does not want her people in trouble. She becomes helpless, and her crying, screaming, and roaring do not affect Arnold at all. His threat reflects "…adolescent hostility and symbolizes her unconscious knowledge that in her passage to adulthood the old ties must become as dead for her" (Weinberger 211). According to Arnold, Connie must break her family ties. Oates states, "She cried out, she cried for her mother, she felt her breath start jerking back and forth in her lungs as if it were something Arnold Friend were stabbing her with again and again with no tenderness" (Oates 387). Connie finds herself helpless in the face of Arnold's aggression and wishes her mother were there. She notices a lack of tenderness in his actions and behaviour. As a result, she develops a negative understanding of adulthood.

At last, Arnold allures Connie through sensual appeal, creating a beautiful romantic atmosphere. His pleading signals that he is taking her away from hell, but the opposite is true. Connie decides to go on a ride with the mysterious Arnold. Joyce M. Wegs' characterization of Arnold Friend as "Satan" is enough to claim that Connie's sexuality is in crisis (69). The complexity of Connie's sexuality becomes clear from Wegs' portrayal of Arnold as Satan. Connie leaves the kitchen to settle her sexual anxiety and move towards "…the vast sunlit reaches of the land …Connie had never seen before" (Oates 388). Connie's journey toward the unknown land appears controversial. Anyone can raise questions about her sexuality in the uncaring world with Arnold. In conclusion, Connie surrenders to the ugly world of adulthood and accepts Arnold's proposal.

Conclusion

America underwent a series of transformations during the 1960s, with immediate reflections seen in the lives of teenagers. Oates initiates a new discourse on identity and sexuality in contemporary American society through her protagonist, Connie. She experiences a profound crisis regarding her identity and sexuality, feeling threatened both inside and outside the home. Consequently, she embarks on her journey of self-discovery, despite her family environment being unsupportive. The communication gap among family members, constant comparisons with June, and ongoing insults from her mother contribute to her low self-esteem. She distances herself from her family. In the absence of proper counselling during puberty, she identifies with beauty. When mutual understanding fades within the family, she becomes a victim of an identity crisis and begins to assimilate into pop music.

Connie listens to pop music to find meaning in her life. She enjoys personal freedom by distancing herself from her family members, which highlights the importance of listening to teenagers and addressing their concerns. Meanwhile, Arnold's unexpected arrival at the house poses a threat to her sexuality and endangers the lives of her family members. Against a backdrop of violence, Arnold offers Connie a ride with him. Connie yields to this violent force and readily

agrees to venture into unexplored territory. Her journey in search of identity begins with a complicated relationship with her mother and concludes with the enigmatic Arnold. Therefore, parents need to address their teenagers' identity and sexuality with kindness to prevent potential misfortune in modern society. They must be supportive, understanding, and approachable with their teens, as their involvement can help resolve the tension between parents and children. Young researchers should investigate the story from a liminal space.

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