RELIGIOUS IDENTITY AND VALUES IN MUHAMMED ABDUL WALI'S *THEY DIE STRANGERS*: INSIGHTS FROM IDENTITY PROCESS THEORY

Muhammed Salim[∗]
Abdul Aziz Khan^{∗∗}

Abstract

*Identity in literature has received much theoretical attention recently. But to the best of our knowledge, no studies have applied Identity Process Theory (IPT) to literary text with a view to identifying the relationships between identity processes and the characters in the literary text. IPT is a socio-psychological model that embodies identity as a dynamic product of both social and psychological processes.In this paper, it is argued that the theory provides predictive value and resourceful insights into the structure of religious identity in **They Die Strangers**. Specifically, it explores the religious identity with a special focus on the values and how these values are processed. IPT proposes that identity is conceptualized in three processes: identity assimilation, identity accommodation, and identity evaluation. These processes will be examined to determine the principles that a given character adopts and uses in identity reconstruction. The motivation for this paper is that it is thought that IPT concepts could be usefully applied in the study of identity in literary texts especially diasporic literature where identity is a recurring theme.*

Keywords: Identity Process Theory, They Die Strangers, Muhammed Abdul-Wali, Social Psychology

The Plot of the Novella

The diasporic protagonist in the novella is Abdou Said, who has a wife and a son and land in Yemen. Due to financial problems, he migrates to Ethiopia and settles in Addis Ababa, Sodset Kilo. He works as a shopkeeper with the hope to return to his homeland as a wealthy man. He is successful and is very keen to save every penny. As he suffered from poverty in Yemen, he was not willing to go back until he would have sawed enough money. He lives in solitude and isolates himself even from the other expatriated members of the Yemeni community there. He commits adultery with plenty of indigenous women resulting in

∗ Aligarh Muslim University, Aligarh, India.
∗∗ Aligarh Muslim University, Aligarh, India.

fathering many illegitimate children. Abdou Said is told to acknowledge one of these children as his own but he refuses to do so. Ultimately, the secretary takes the child as a brother, and Abdou Said dies due to suffocation as his shop is engulfed in fire. He dies as a stranger in a foreign country. The following section presents the theoretical background.

Theoretical Background

This study hinges on the Identity Process Theory. Identity process Theory (Breakwell, 1986, 1988, 1992, 199, 1998, 2001; Jaspal and Breakwell, 2014; Jaspal and Cinnirella, 2010) provides a framework for the theory. IPT assumes that the structure of identity, which consists of content and value, is regulated or filled by two types of universal processes: assimilation-accommodation, and evaluation. Assimilation accommodation are the two components of one storage system. The information of the content dimension can be personal such as values, beliefs, and attitudes. It can be social such as group memberships, individual traits, physical aspects, or interpersonal networks. The value dimension is concerned with the evaluation of the identity content whether it is the already existing one or a new one. In this connection, assimilation absorbs new information in the identity structure. However, accommodation adjusts the existing components of identity to locate the new information. These two components interact to change the content of the existing identity over time. The second process is evaluation. It allocates value to the newly absorbed identity element, that is, how well or bad an identity or identity element is. Individual goals, values, and beliefs on the one hand, and social norms and roles on the other, play a significant role in evaluation. Identity is understood to be formed and revised through ongoing processes of *assimilation-accommodation,* and *evaluation*. In situations where these processes are unable to satisfy the demands of the identity principles, identity is considered to be *threatene*d, leading to the deployment of *coping strategies* (Jaspal and Breakwell, 2014, p. 71). Processes and principles work in tandem to construct and maintain identity. The two processes are guided by the following identity principles: the first four of them are originally identified by Breakwell (1986, 1992, and 2001). The first one is the continuity principle. It refers to the human motivation to maintain a sense of temporal subjective continuity across time and situations (Breakwell, 1986, p. 24). This is termed "persistent sameness with oneself" (Erikson, 1980). Continuity here requires a change that marks the inconstancies/ connections between the past, the

present and the future's conception of self. The second one is the distinctiveness principle. It refers to the drive to establish and maintain a sense of optimal differentiation/distinctiveness from others. It is about having individualistic unique characteristics. It works at the level of interpersonal or intergroup comparisons. The third one is the self-efficacy principle. It refers to the drive to maintain feelings of competence in, confidence in, and control of one's life (Breakwell,1988, p. 194).The lack of efficacy is associated with feelings of futility, alienation, and depression.The fourth one is the self-esteem principle. It refers to the desire to seek and maintain a positive self-conception. It is the drive for self-esteem

 "It has been shown to induce selective perception of information, channel value formation, and modify attribution processes" (Breakwell, 1993, p. 8). In case self-esteem is threatened, copying reactions are used.Besides, two more principles are proposed by Vignoles et al. (2002). They are belonging and meaning. The belonging principle refers to the need to obtain feelings of closeness to, and acceptance by, other people. The other one is the meaning principle which urges the individual to find purpose and significance in one's existence and life.The psychological coherence principle is recently proposed by Jaspal and Cinnirella (2010). It is about establishing coherence and compatibility between inter-connected identity elements. These principles can be applied to individuals or groups. A related notion is identity threat. Threats may occur due to distinctiveness, continuity, self-esteem, self-efficacy, belonging, meaning, or psychological coherence.

IPT predicts that identity is threatened and an individual has to cope with that threat if the universal processes cannot comply with the motivational principles. A coping strategy is defined as "any activity, in thought or deed, which has as its goal the removal or modification of a threat to identity" (Breakwell, 1986, qtd. in Jaspal & Breakwell, 2014, p. 5). Identity Process Theory provides a holistic and integrative model of (1) the structure of identity, namely it's content and value dimensions and the centrality and salience of identity components (2) the interaction of social and psychological factors in the production of identity content, and (3) the interrelations between identity and action. A key assumption of the theory is that, in order to understand the processes that drive identity construction, it is necessary to examine how individuals react when identity is threatened (Breakwell, 2010, qtd. in Jaspal & Breakwell, 2014, p.5).The characters that are vulnerable to identity

accommodation are theorized to be vulnerable to external influences and easily succumb to their whims and temptations. Another prediction is that when identity assimilation fails, identity accommodation takes place.

To the best of our knowledge, no study has applied the theory to a literary text with a view to identifying the relationships between the characters and identity processes on the one hand and the characters and identity processes on the other. This study will focus on identity principles and how they are manifested at interpersonal and intergroup levels.

Analysis

This section highlights the assimilation-accommodation process and how they contribute to the ongoing identity construction. That is, it explores the impact of the new social context on the reconstruction of religious identity. First of all, we will lay the background for religious identity and its values. The already existing values will be highlighted before examining identity processes. Abdou Said, who is the main character in the novella, spends 40 years in the host country which makes the novella suitable for the application of the theory at hand as "IPT researchers have been especially interested in naturally occurring changes in identity, which often span longer periods of time" (Jaspal & Breakwell, 2014, p. 72). He migrated from Yemen to Ethiopia in search of a better living. Ethiopia is famous for its cultural diversity. This means that Abdou Said is exposed to cultural identities that are completely different from his own. Jaspal and Breakwell (2014) notice that "changes in social context can call forth changes in identity, depending on personal relevance, personal involvement, amount of change demanded and how negative the change is considered to be" (pp. 317-318).

Here we will focus on the nature of religious identity and its construction. People often align themselves with one religion or another. Religion has different components such as beliefs, norms, and values. We will explore the identity processes that have been used by the characters in the next section.

Identity Processes

The existing identity in the novella is ethnic as it encompasses Islamic and nation-oriented components. Abdou Said is a Muslim and he practices some religious traditions. Religious traditions are there, but not limited to spirituals, beliefs, morals, norms, and practices. The Islamic religious identity elements that exist in Abdou Said are not limited to offering prayers, bathing,

temperance, continence, chastity, keeping secrets, hard work, and kindness. These elements are part of the pre-existing religious identity content of Abdou Said that are predicted to undergo change and re-structuring. In what follows, we will point out how such elements are affected and what elements of identity are assimilated or accommodated. To begin with prayers; prayers constitute the most important component of the Islamic religious identity of the immigrant Yemenis in Addis Ababa. Three Yemenis are shown to perform prayers. The first one is Sayyed. He secluded himself in his room and spent the first half of the month praying and the other half is devoted to solving the problems of others to the extent that "there was a black mark on his forehead for prostrating in prayer" (Abdul Wali, pp. 39-40). People portrayed him as the most pious person among Yemenis with extraordinary capabilities. He keeps telling people that he is "preoccupied with prayers" (Abdul Wali, p. 43). The second one is Hajji Abdul Latif. Hajji has preached and "given emotional speech mixed with prayers, religious rhetoric (Abdul Wali, p. 45). When he decided to meet Abdou Said, "he tried to recollect Quranic verses and sayings of the prophet, prayers for the man" (Abdul Wali, p.49). In such a religious mindset possessing society, the evaluation of individuals stems from pure religious aspects. Talking to Saleh Saif, Hajji Abdul Latif enquires about the character of Abdou Said, "Is he [Abdou Said] a pious man? Does he pray? fast?" (Abdul Wali, p.47). The third person is Abdou Said, he is the main protagonist of the novella. His religious identity seems to undergo a change. This is evident in the way he used to bathe and pray. Before he decided to migrate, "he prayed from sunset to evening in the mosque" (Abdul Wali, p. 26). In his village, he asked his father for blessings. His father says "if you insist, I will pray for you. May God take care of you, help you, and bring you success" (Abdul Wali, p.27). Upon arriving in Ethiopia, he take a shower, and "each morning at six he finished his dawn prayers (...) reciting verses from the Quran and some prayers he had memorized as a child" (Abdul Wali, p.18). He opens a store there. His customers hear him murmuring "a prayer on his lips as he worked" (Abdul Wali, p. 24) telling them that "things will happen as God wills" (Abdul Wali, p.19). With the passage of time "Abdou Said did not take a shower, but he performed ablutions and prayed over a rectangular stone in the yard" (Abdul Wali, p.23). His dream is "to pray every morning on the roof of his new house so that the village people could see him" (Abdul Wali, p.34).These excerpts show that Abdou Said has

replaced bathing with ablutions. He never quits prayers though they might have been performed hastily. Hence, it is evident that performing prayers is one of the most important aspects of religious identity that undergoes change. Besides, he does many things that are deemed to be against religion. He keeps staring at and flirting with women "he flirted with them all, sometimes lasciviously, and teased them with eyes filled with confidence" (Abdul Wali, p. 21). Besides, he verbally harasses his female customers. Being involved in harassment, people started fabricating and spreading stories about him. They said, "he was the father of many of them [children], especially those who were born white" (Abdul Wali, p.21). Moreover, he replaced bathing with ablutions. He takes shower only at the end of the month. However, he denies all the accusations made against him. In this regard, Sneed, and Whitbourne (2003) comment:

> People who predominantly use identity assimilation find it painful to acknowledge their own personal weaknesses or deficiencies, whatever the source. They may appear to have high self-regard and perceive themselves as healthy, but underneath this facade, they are theorized to have feelings of insecurity (p. 313).

The third important content of identity that is reflected in the novella is drinking alcohol. Abdou Said refuses to drink whisky attributing that to being forbidden in his religion. The dialogue between him and the woman is very interesting:

> "God forbid. God forbid. God protects us from its evil"
>
> "What's wrong? Why won't you pick up your glass?"
>
> "You know it's forbidden."
>
> "Forbidden?" she asked, surprised.
>
> "Of course it's forbidden. That's what our religion says. You know we don't drink."
>
> He got up from her bed and began putting on his clothes, saying "I won't drink, even I were to be chopped to pieces. Do you want me to go against my religion?"
>
> She saw that he was serious, "But ... but you sleep with women. Is not that forbidden?"
>
> (...)
>
> "What were you doing just now, is not it forbidden, too?" She repeated.

"Is alcohol more forbidden than that?" (Abdul Wali, p. 32)

The dialogue above reveals that when the lady offers Abdou Said a drink, he refuses to have it. Abdou Said considers drinking alcohol a threat to his identity. So, rejection of her request is a strategy used to cope with the threat. His religious identity is further illuminated as he keeps remembering God "God forgive us, and protect us. Oh, God, You know what is hidden inside the hearts of men" (Abdul Wali, p.33). In this regard, Jaspal & Breakwell (2014) assume that religious identity is reflected in the usual "use of a language(s) specifically associated with religious liturgy" (p. 325). On the other side, the secretary accuses Hajji Abdou Latif of drinking alcohol. Hajji Abdou Latif "forgets to cover his breath with mint when he reviews the account each night" (Abdul Wali, p. 47). Therefore, it is noticed that the value of temperance is affected by Hajji Abdou Latif. Abdou Said remains sober in spite of all the temptations. A related notion is blasphemy. Abdou Said blasphemed. He says "Then let God rear him" (Abdul Wali, p.50), and Hajji Abdul Latif also blasphemed as he says "hadn't God created this child? Shouldn't He take care of him?" (Abdul Wali, p. 55). On the other hand, there are values that are persistent and never undergo change. These are working hard and earning honorably. People believe that "he must have earned his money honorably, with hard work" (Abdul Wali, p.24). Moreover, Yemenis keep secrets "he [Abdou Said] never disclosed anything about himself or his dreams" (Abdul Wali, p. 28), and if " you want to pry a secret out of Yemeni? It would be easier to pry the truth out of the devil!" (Abdul Wali, p. 19).

Having discussed the content of identity that has or has not undergone change, the remaining part of this section will focus on the evaluative dimension. The process of evaluation is closely related to an individual's self-esteem. The evaluation here takes place to achieve identity balance. Identity balance is employed in two settings: The first one happens when Abdou Said refuses to acknowledge the child as his own son. In our opinion, Abdou Said feels that psychological coherence is threatened. It is very difficult and incompatible to accept being a Muslim and being adulterous. Therefore, he denies being the father of any child. This may explain why Abdou Said refuses to admit to committing fornication. The value of having legitimate boys is one of the identity aspects that are prioritized in Abdou Said's cultural group.That is why he is worried about what people

would say about him if he acknowledged the boy as his own. He was thinking about his reputation and how will he face his family in Yemen and the community members around him:

> What would people say when they knew that the child was his son, no, that he was his bastard son? What would his wife say? She who prayed and waited patiently for his return? What would he say to his son, who had grown into an important man?(Abdul Wali, p.36)

In this connection, Jaspal and Breakwell (2014) comment:

> In small religious‑cultural enclaves, reputation is important, and known psychological difficulties are stigmatizing, damaging self-esteem and harming the sense of belonging, being accepted as a full "valid" member by the group. (p. 328)

The second instance of identity balance is reflected when Abdou Said regrets doing the wrong things and informs others that he wants to make a pilgrimage. Abdou Said might have thought about his ill-doings. This is a turning point in his life. He refuses to adopt the child and tells others that he works hard to earn an honorable living. He is questioning himself and acknowledges that he is a sinner who is in need of redemption. He says:

> I would like to die after I've done good things for my son and wife. (...). First, I'll go to Mekkah and perform the Hajj. All my sins will be forgiven. Then I'll return to my village. There, I'll stay in the mosque, worshipping God day and night. (AbdulWali, p. 37).

This balance is the main motive that made Abdou Said evaluate himself realistically. He committed sins and the only way to get everything right is to perform a pilgrimage. In this regard, Sneed and Whitbourne (2003) point out that "when individuals are in a state of balance, they are able to make changes when their identity is challenged but at the same time maintain a consistent sense of self"(p. 314). Having highlighted the identity processes, the next section will determine which principles are relevant and become salient in identity (re) construction.

Identity Principles

This section will explore the most salient principles that are associated with religious identity. Not all the principles need to be present at any given time. Some of them become salient in a specific context due to the dominant social representations that

invoke and trigger them. Others are conceived as being less active in the same context. The first principle that has been rendered salient at the intergroup level is self-esteem. In the beginning, Abdou Said loses self-esteem as "everyone [children] called him "camel jockey", a term they used for all Yemeni immigrants. This didn't disturb him as it did others. He responded to the slur with a friendly smile" (Abdul Wali, p.18). However, his refusal to rear the child can be interpreted as regaining of self-esteem. He says "but I can't. I've decided to go back to Yemen. How can I bring a bastard with me?" (Abdul Wali, p.51). Unfortunately, Hajji refuses to rear the child, too. He murmurs "as if I [Hajji] migrated to Ethiopia to rear the bastard. No way" (Abdul Wali, p.55). Hence, it can be said that the principle of self-esteem fluctuates at the intergroup level. It is lost at some point of time but it comes to light in different contexts.

The second principle that works at the intergroup level is distinctiveness. All Yemenis are trying to convince Abdou Said to foster the child reminding Abdou that other people may speak badly about Yemenis. This is evident in the dialogue between Abdou Said, Hajji, and Saleh Saif "isn't forbidden to leave him for the unbelievers, to a dishonorable woman, to leave him orphaned, living a life of loss? (Abul Wali, p.49). Distinctiveness here works at the religious level. So, the other group is characterized as being unbelievers. Also, Saleh Saif adds that "as Muslims, we can't let these Muslim children go to hell, can we?" (Abdul Wali, p.51).The two principles, self-esteem and distinctiveness, are interrelated and exposed in Saleh Saif's speech. He says "Fear God, man. What are you saying? We came to advise you. We came to you so that Ethiopians won't think that we leave our sons in the streets to the unbelievers" (Abdul Wali, p.50). This shows that they are worried about the prejudice of the out-group, who is characterized as Ethiopians and unbelievers. Saleh Saif does not want anyone to speak ill about Yemenis. Theoretically, it is predicted that individuals must project a sense of distinctiveness to others, rather than simply develop and value it within themselves (Vignoleset al., 2000).

Besides, the belonging principle shows paradoxical characterization at the interpersonal and intergroup poles. Notice that Saleh Saif tells Abdou that " we are from the same country, which makes us cousins. We are all Yemenis. If something hurts one of us, it hurts us all, so we came to you. We are not here to

call each other names but to shake hands as brothers" (Abdul Wali, p. 50). This dialogue shows that the sense of brotherhood in Yemenis is attributed to being from the same country and to having the same ancestry. However, Abdou never had this sense of belonging to the in-group as " he never gave denotations or attended community meetings. He lived in complete isolation" (Abdul Wali, p.47).

In addition, self-efficacy at the individualistic level is threatened. Self-efficacy means "personal beliefs about (. . .) abilities and skills for achieving planned levels and progressive performance and handling effective events in life" (Teimouri et al., 2013, p. 691). Abdou Said is no longer in control of his life. This is revealed on occasions in the novella "Abdou is going crazy" (Abdul Wali, p.39), "he wouldn't be able to live like this if he weren't crazy" (Abdul Wali, p.39), "he is really crazy, the poor man" (Abdul Wali, p. 9), and "you see, he is crazy" (Abdul Wali, p.52). Meanwhile, self-efficacy is achieved when it comes to earning money. He has built a beautiful house in Yemen and he becomes rich. Hajji Abdul Latif, too " work hard to feed (...) people back home" (Abdul Wali, p. 57).

Conclusion

In the above discussion, it can be noticed that religious identity has undergone a change which suggests that new content of identity has been accommodated at the expense of the already existing one. Religious identity relinquishes in favor of wrong doer stereotyping. The extent to which identity accommodation is utilized varies from character to character; for example, Abdou Said seems to have been affected the most. He used to perform his prayers in the mosque every day and he never committed fornication before coming to Ethiopia. With the passage of time, he started performing prayers in the yard of his shop with ablution, although he was reported to have been sleeping with women. However, he remains sober in contrast to Hajji Abdul Latif who reeks of alcohol. It is evident that Abdou Said uses identity accommodation as he is influenced and easily shaped by new experiences he is exposed to in Ethiopia because his identity is unstable and incoherent.The study concludes by asserting that the theory can be extended to literary texts to highlight how elements of identity are accommodated, assimilated, and (re) constructed. The religious identity of Yemenis in the diaspora has been greatly affected by the socio-cultural context of the host country. Religion has been abandoned and/ or is practiced loosely.

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