

## LOSS OF THE SELF IN POSTMODERN DISCOURSE. DECONSTRUCTING AND RECONSTRUCTING IDENTITY

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*Everyone is the other and no one is himself.*

*Heidegger*

The topic of the present article concerns the problem of deconstructing and reconstructing identity. In modernism we come across two contrary desires: the desire for a fixed identity and the desire to go beyond it. Under the concepts ‘the self’, ‘space’, ‘time’, ‘rationality’, ‘causality’, ‘society’, ‘history’ we not only mean the world, but also ourselves.

The aim of the research is to study the alienated, absurd, existentialist anti-heroes which are all in the same position, failing to find the clear meaning of a personal, identifiable form of existence. In the postmodern age, the notion of a unique identity that used to command an aura has been lost due to the human ability to create exact reproductions. No one exactly knows what is meant by the term ‘postmodernism’. All that one knows is that it is some kind of a reaction against or an extension of modernism which ultimately turns on itself.

**Keywords:** *postmodernism, loss, reconstruction, deconstruction, modernism, anti-hero, existentialism, transformation, absurd, outsider, identity, isolation.*

### Introduction

Of all the crises postmodernity continues or itself generates, the identity crisis tends to be considered symptomatic. The search for identity was an imperative in modernism, culminating in the literature of existentialist influence. In postmodernism, the individual’s cutting off from transcendence, the loss of essence and meaning of existence itself are no longer considered a tragedy. The person turns towards the past in an ontological need for spiritual regeneration.

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The phrase identity crisis, recurrent in discussions about postmodernity, can be used in different ways. We might, for example, talk about the self-identity of the text from a deconstructive perspective in terms of Derrida's so much debated on "il n'y a pas dehors" texte. Quite understandably, we limit ourselves to the beginnings of postmodernist literature, where the influence of existentialist philosophy is mostly seen.

The post-war American novel, as well as the European one, presented in detail the show of the imminent loss of the self (understood as interior being, essential and assumed, that which Jung called "the personal core", and William James, "the real nucleus of our personal identity") and described the battles and confusions that it triggered; hence, Manfred Putz's coinage "identity fable", which reveals the relationship between the allegorical projection specific by definition to a fable and the self-identity of an individual faced with a disconcerting universe in which he can no longer find the certainty anchors he used to know.

In the contemporary world of rapid transformation, the problem of belonging remains imperative. We are all a part of nation, community, society, but one day we cut off ourselves from our history, roots and become exiled. What happens to our identity, personality or psychological self-image? Can the words *otherness* and *exile* describe the process of deconstructing and reconstructing identity? Here we have several options – to re-create the elements of our former self, to create a new identity, to feel like a stranger, or to live simultaneously inside and outside.

Deconstructing or reconstructing identity tells about losses, changes, conflicts, powerlessness and infinite sadness that severely test our emotional resolve and re-establishing our new identity becomes a kind of consolation. Sometimes the change of identity is symbolized in the change of name. Sometimes we do not want to be noticed. Sometimes we even want to change our religious and ethnic identity and for that we must undergo some transformations.

Both cultural and social adaptation can be a long process during which you lose your hope and start to go back to the memories of past and the reason we suffer is memory. Here we have two solutions: either to delete the memories or to live with them during the whole life.

Changing identity means a different thing to different people. It means to change your country, father's house, mother tongue, family, friends, national and personal habits, familiar things, gestures, ways of walking and talking – briefly your life. It is not easy to re-evaluate what you had before.

The term *identity*, carrying the meaning of uniqueness or unity of something with its own self, is a key-concept in the thinking and creation of all times.

In postmodernism, though, the loss of essence and meaning of existence are no longer considered a tragedy.

### **Loss of the self in postmodern discourse**

In the study “Loss of the self in Modern Literature and Art” Wylie Sypler demonstrates that western literature and art have been forced to change the notion of identity and search for a new identity in hope of discovering the minute details that were hidden for a long time.

The post-war American novel presented in detail the show of the imminent loss of the self which Yung called *the personal core* and William James - *the real nucleus* of our personal identity.

All exiled, absurd, alienated, existentialist anti-heroes were trying to find the clear meaning of existence. All heroes suffer from an interior conflict, a sharp feeling of failure, lack of orientation, even loss of identity and when they accept the role society gives to them this is made at the cost of losing their dream of freedom. For the hero of post-war fiction dream and the fear of isolation are counter-balanced.

We must admit that entering postmodernity is a long and painful process for an intellectual writer or any other person because the new society is no longer certain, your freedom is limited, all theories seem to disappear, all fundamental bases are destroyed. Existentialists like Camus or Sartre also imprinted postmodern literature, though their focus was on the individual’s freedom.

In post-modern discourse we are all outsiders who are wearing masks. We must understand that we are what we are and we do not need to change ourselves. Of course, sometimes self-isolation helps us but we must undergo all metamorphosis to find out our cultural space.

Awakening and knowing one’s self are the first steps to self-development. When we interact with other cultures and value systems, we become more objective. Anyone who wants to find true identity must stand between tradition, culture and even the paradox of identification (Hatfield, 1986, p. 8).

### **Migration and exile**

Sometimes we must migrate to find our identity. Migration can be both inner and outer.

Migration and exile have been seen as metahistorical dangers for years, but the twentieth century has become one (if not the most) defining feature of literary history due to the rise of migration. The issue that is most spoken about in the context of migrant literature is related to personal, national, cultural and religious identity.

The individual, appearing in a foreign culture, faces the problem of redefining the identity and acquires a hybrid identity. People who live next to migrants also face the problem of identity. In their own homeland, they look at their country through the eyes of a foreign and unfamiliar migrant writer. The explanation of the latter is very simple - we all live in an age of migration where we are all potential migrants.

The British writer, figure of the Jewish movement, author of the well-known definition of “national crucible” Israel Zangvil tells about a Russian-Jewish refugee who migrates to the USA to escape ethnic cleansing in his homeland. Here he finds love and becomes a full member of the society - as ethnic differences disappear as a result of cultural exchange. The idea of a “national melting pot” was embraced and became a central part of the US cultural identity. Today, immigration to the US has become significantly more complicated, but the philosophy is still the same.

America welcomes people from all over the world and helps them to become a part of American society. Migrants come to this country thinking that they can become Americans, regardless of their background.

This is an important part of the American national identity and the reason why the US has become the most attractive country in the world for migrants and refugees. At the heart of the “national crucible” is the idea that in the United States all cultural differences are mixed together like metals and melted to become a stronger alloy.

In Canada, as well as in many other countries, multiculturalism is accepted, while the United States encourages the assimilation of different cultures. Migrants from all over the world come to the United States, bringing with them their own culture, which over the years becomes part of American culture. Before the First World War, the slogan addressed to the migrant who wanted to enter the American society can be formulated as follows: “Although you may call yourself an American and try to act and think like an American, you have been and will remain a foreigner.”

We can call this formulation Anglo-exceptionalism, although Anglo-Americans did not have any ethnic identification until recently. They were

Americans. Attitudes toward migrants changed dramatically in 1914, when the threat of war caused many Americans to question the loyalty of the Europeans taking refuge in their country. The four years of war had a profound effect on public opinion and led to a new response. "If you want to stay here, you have to forget who you were and become like us."

The first answer is a challenge to the migrant's dream, the second a threat to the migrant's identity.

It should also be noted that Americanization often has extreme manifestations. Migrants do not come to the US with the conscious intention of preserving their national or ethnic identity, but rather the need to create distinctive boundaries over time. Carl Frederick Wittke states that America was born out of the painstaking efforts of our forefathers to create a society based on freedom, equality, opportunity and tolerance for individual differences. One of the paradoxes of migration is that people often end up in the US whose identity is threatened in their own country. They come to a safe country, where, however, their identity and ethnic memory are again threatened. The latter is the totality of experience, beliefs and common memories passed from one generation of humanity or nation to another, it is also called the memory of generations. Migrants first of all create religious, educational and cultural centers in the foreign land to preserve their identity. However, it should also be noted that the difficulties of emigration are experienced more by the first generation of immigrants.

The problem of future generations is slightly different. They must preserve what their parents have created and pass it to the next generation. There are different ways to combat alienation, one of which is to present your own story. Writers turn to ethno-biography, while others continuously tell the history of their family, lineage, so that the consciousness of preserving identity is not erased from the ethnic memory of the next generations. Next to the preservation of identity always appears the theme of eternal return, which, according to Nietzsche, is identical with love - we always come back if we love.

### **Conclusion**

In migrant literature, the clash of identity and cultural tradition becomes the imperative of the time and forces all migrants to make an existential choice between preserving their own identity and alienating it. Anti-entropic battle of many contemporary heroes against total chaos denying distinction, differentiation and form, proves their desire and need for order. This engenders

the danger of boring uniqueness and homogeneity imposed by a rigid society in all domains of existence. The pattern, or better said, the logical patterns that the human being seeks – through myth, religion, history, imagination – are considered arbitrary constructs of the human mind. Neither the absurd, nor the existential incoherence, are accepted as final formulas. There are many versions of Sisyphus in the American prose, maybe of Camusian origin, victim-characters, but also rebels in search for solutions presupposing failure but also initiation, sufferance but also illumination, negation but also affirmation. Alienation, this cliché of cultural criticism, a result of personal identity issues and simultaneous search for a principle to reconcile the self with the world and individual existence with society, starts to make room for acceptance and adaptation, that state of the spirit emerging when the revolt is exhausted, when, all of a sudden, the manner in which the individual – intellectual, writer, or any other person – confronted society is no longer certain, when there are no conventionalisms meant to limit freedom, when all theories seem to disappear.

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«ԵՍ»-Ի ԿՈՐՈՒՄՏԸ ՊՈՍՏՄՈՂԵՌՆ ԽՈՍՈՒՅԹՈՒՄ.  
ԻՆՔՆՈՒԹՅԱՆ ԱՊԱԿԱՌՈՒՑՈՒՄ ԵՎ ՎԵՐԱԿԱՌՈՒՑՈՒՄ

Ամայա Սողոմոնյան

Սույն հոդվածում քննության է առնվում ինքնության ապակառուցման և վերակառուցման թեման: Մոդեռնիզմում մենք բախվում ենք երկու իրարամերժ ցանկությունների՝ ֆիքսված ինքնության ձգտման և այն գերազանցելու ցանկության: Սահմանելով այնպիսի հասկացություններ ինչպիսիք են «ես»-ը, «տարածությունը», «ժամանակը», «ոացիոնալություն»

նը», «պատճառականությունը», «հասարակությունը», «պատմությունը», մենք ոչ միայն ճանաչում ենք աշխարհը, այլև ինքներս մեզ:

Հոդվածի նպատակն է ուսումնասիրել օտարված, կյանքի իմաստը կորցրած էկզիստենցիալիստական հակահերոսներին, որոնք բոլորն էլ նման են իրար: Նրանք չեն կարողանում գտնել սեփական գոյությունն ու սահմանել իրենց գոյության իմաստը: Պոստմոդերն դարաշրջանում ինքնության գաղափարը եզակի է: Ոչ ոք հստակ չգիտի, թե ինչ է նշանակում «պոստմոդերնիզմ» տերմինը: Միայն գիտենք, որ այն մոդերնիզմի ինչ-որ արձագանք է, կամ դրա ընդլայնումը:

***Բանալի բառեր՝** պոստմոդերնիզմ, կորուստ, վերակառուցում, ապակառուցում, մոդերնիզմ, հակահերոս, էկզիստենցիալիզմ, փոխակերպում, արտուրդ, օտարական, ինքնություն, մեկուսացում:*