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Spiritual Crises of Identity: A Study of Tolstoy's Select Works

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Abstract:

Leo Tolstoy is one of the great Russian writers of the 19th century; he is considered a master of realistic fiction for his realistic presentation. In most of his works, like *Anna Karenina*, *Resurrection*, *War and Peace*, and *Death of Ivan Ilyich*, Tolstoy has presented his characters' inner struggles, which helps them to understand their real self and the meaning of their existence. A sudden event disrupts their easy-going flow, leading them to re-evaluate their purposes, beliefs, attitude, and conceptions of life. Which earlier seemed to be the only truth and correct way of living, all of a sudden, after the disruption seemed to be just a lie. And an urgent need to search for a real identity emerges within their conscience, and this spiritual crisis changes their whole identity. In Tolstoy's works, the spiritual awakening happens after the anagnorises where the central character knows about the disillusioned life that greatly harmed him and others. And it is this revelation that works as a stimulus to awaken them from their misery. In this paper, I have tried to present this spiritual identity crisis of Tolstoy's character.

Keywords: Identity Crises, Russian literature, Leo Tolstoy.

The concept of identity crisis talks about the stage of confusion a person starts to feel in life. A phase of uncertainty in which a person begins to question his identity, existence, and beliefs that he was experiencing and living with till now. The person starts to question who he is and his life's purpose. This situation happens when the person is hit by certain things that shake his belief system, in which he used to believe till now, or when a significant change occurs in their life due to stress or mental trauma. This sudden occurrence of the spiritual crises happens after some events, like a near-death experience, that Evan, Andrey, and Pierre experience that changes their way of looking at things. Existential crises, some spiritual experiences, the realisation of their

mistakes, and self-doubt are other reasons that create an urgent need to search for a meaningful path emerges within them.

Some experience this identity crisis very early, whereas others experience it in adolescence and some in adulthood. It all depends on the circumstances and changes that occur in a person's life. Identity is not just about external factors like place, position, or designation. It is also about their experiences, faiths, values, memories and relations, and other factors as well that contribute to their identity and sense of self. The term identity crisis was first coined by Erik Erikson, a famous German-American developmental psychologist known for his famous theory on the psychological development of human beings. In his theory of Stages of Development, he introduces the term Identity Crises and discusses eight stages of identity. About the concept, he writes, "The identity crisis; occurs in that period of the life cycle when each youth must forge for himself some central perspective and direction, some working unity, out of the effective remnants of his childhood and the hopes of his anticipated adulthood" (*Young Man Luther* 15).

The theme of identity crisis is in most of Tolstoy's works. Tolstoy who himself had abandoned his aristocratic life and other comforts to lead a spiritual life after experiencing identity crises in his own life. Shares this same experience and demonstrates it in most of his works. He has sacrificed himself and his wealth for social welfare. His characters are shown to follow the same path the writer had followed in his life. His world classics like *War and Peace*, *Anna Karenina*, and other works like *Resurrection* and *Death of Ivan Ilyich* display the struggle of a person to get a meaningful existence and perfection. Not the material perfection they long for at the beginning of their journey but the spiritual perfection that liberates them from their guilts and inner chaos.

The central characters of his works are shown to go through a phase of self-analysis that brings them out from their fictitious life and changes their perception of life, their beliefs, and themselves. This thirst for knowing the self in an hour of misery proves how important it is for a person to know about himself. Many writers have emphasised this fact of self-search; one among them, Alexander Pope, in his poem, puts his weightage on self-acknowledgement and writes, "Know then thyself, presume not God to scan; The proper study of mankind is man." (*An Essay on Man: Epistle II*, 1-2 line). Knowing oneself is the best way to understand one's life and other humankind. This process of self-analysis is an essential part of Tolstoy's life and his works. No

matter what type of person his characters are, spiritual or material, they all necessarily go through this phase of identity crises. The central characters like Levin, Anna, Nekhlyudov, Pierre, Andrey, and Evan go through this phase where they start to question their existence and identity when they start to feel suffocated or disillusioned with their current life and perception.

This rejection and confusion over one's identity and perception visibly replicate writer's own inner chaos and confusion, which he experienced throughout his life. The novel *War and Peace* handle the theme of the irrationality of human deeds, the quest for meaning, and inner disturbance amid the outer disorder caused by war. And how among all these things, a sense of identity crisis emerges in the characters like Pierre, Andrey, Natasha, and Marya when the war started between Russia and France. Apart from the crises of identity, the novel moves ahead to the stages of their lives where these characters attain the desired elevation in their conscience and find the meaning of what the true self meant for them individually, according to their differences. Pierre, one of the central characters in *War and Peace*, after becoming the sole heir of his father, count Bezukhov, gets the attention of many people who ignored him earlier for his innocence and intellect. He was entrapped by Helen, the antagonist with her charm and beauty into marriage. It is after this marriage that Pierre feels disillusioned and brings himself out from his lavish and fictitious life that corrupts his true self. When he learns about Helen's adultery, he recalls how stupidly he falls into her charm despite knowing the rumours about her incestuous relationships.

This realisation of his stupidity, lust and fictitious way of living shattered him and compelled him to search for something meaningful and authentic in his life. At this point, all his wealth, high position, and intellect failed to comfort him. His quest to know his identity and true self works as a catalyst for his transformation. However, he goes through a lot on this journey. From changing his religion to forgiving his wife, who still was cheating on him. Then helping his friend marry the girl Pierre loved a lot, and eventually, his decision to take part in a war where he hardly escaped from death. All this great hustle changed him a lot; his experiences when he was caught and imprisoned and left in a miserable condition, during all this physical and mental suffering, he continues to get those answers for which he started his journey. Knowing his priorities, beliefs, and, most importantly, knowing himself far away from other external factors that were influencing his perception earlier ended after getting his answers.

The way Pierre came out of his identity crises, Andrey, another protagonist in *War and Peace*, also resolved his inner suffering and search, but he could not survive and died. The same scenario happens with the main protagonist of the short story *Death of Ivan Ilyich*, who spends his whole life fulfilling his material needs by discarding everything else. His duties, relationships, and a search for his true self. He spends half of his life pleasing others and matching the social standard of his society. But the time came when he realised the value of inner emotions and true relations that could heal him in the hour of misery. He realises how he had ignored his family duties and other responsibilities to safeguard his comfort zone and liberty. And now his family treats him the same way when he is wounded and needs their sympathy and care. This ignorance he faced from his family made his situation worse. His physical suffering worsens day by day so does his mental agony. This is the phase where he realised that he just lived a lie and nothing else all his life. Andrey realises the same truth; he states, "Can the truth of life revealed to me only to show I've been living a lie?" (*War and Peace* 1092). And this acceptance helps him to move ahead.

For Evan also, "At the point where he, today's Ivan Ilyich, began to emerge, all the pleasures that had seemed so real melted away now all before his eyes and turned into something trivial and often disgusting... And the further he was from childhood, the nearer he got to the present day, the more trivial and dubious his pleasures appeared." (*Death of Ivan Ilyich* 209) The only thing running through his mind is, what is the meaning of his life when all he was living was a lie and illusion. His perception, beliefs, and identity all seemed like an illusion that misled him. This disillusionment awakens a sense of correcting everything he ruined all his life. He accepts that, "There's something wrong maybe I didn't live as I should have done?" came the sudden thought. But how can that be when I did everything properly?" (*Death of Ivan Ilyich* 210).

He longs for a true identity with which he can connect himself or which could show him the right way to correct his mistakes. However, this crisis of identity occurred in him very late like Andrey. With this new sense of identity, Evan and Andrey could only correct the mistakes that they made in their self-centeredness and ignorance. And this much they had the time left to perform any duty. Keeping the ego side, they show their true emotions and ask for forgiveness for their cruel behaviour. This forgiveness releases their guilt and suffering. It helps them establish a sense of belonging to something meaningful for the first time. At this sense of finding something meaningful that Andrey had avoided all his life, he utters, "Happiness beyond materialism, beyond

all external, material influences, happiness known only to the soul, the happiness of loving! It is within the conception of all men, but it can be fully determined and ordained by God alone.” (*War and Peace* 1020). This is the only thing that is needed to go behind. This spiritual awakening of Andrey and Evan occurred late, just a few moments before their last breath, with which they hardly could do anything. However, it is only this realisation that lightened their soul that was agonising them more in the pathless world, where they could not acknowledge what was weighing their soul. And this spiritual seeking help them to heal their mental and physical agony and liberate them from their sufferings.

In the novel *Resurrection*, the central character Nekhlyudov suffers from identity crises after realising the fictitiousness and meanness of his current living and its disastrous influence on others. His sense of identity crisis started when he started questioning everything, his identity, perception, and the philosophy of life that he had learned from his family and society. Everything started to seem senseless and disgusting after an event broke all his illusions of a perfect life. There comes a phase in his life when he, as a jury member, attended a case where a trial of a prostitute was going on who had been accused of the murder of a man. And this prostitute, Nekhlyudov recognised as the maid-servant Katyusha he met at his aunt’s house ten years before, whom he had seduced in his animal passion and left with some money. This mistake of Nekhlyudov destroyed this girl’s whole life and brought her here in the hell of prostitution. She suffered a lot after being left pregnant by Nekhlyudov; she lost her infant and was forced to work in a brothel to earn her bread and shelter. Whereas Nekhlyudov despite knowing about her pregnancy, never tried to search her in fear of his defamation and let her suffer all alone. But when he finds her after so many years, all the memories of his wicked past re-emerge before his eyes. And this is where all his meaningful living comes to a chaotic end. He only felt disgusted with himself after the destruction of his false and ugly beliefs and way of living that caused so much harm to a pure soul like Katyusha. At this point, what seemed meaningful is only his childhood beliefs and perception of life, love, and work, where he used to feel at peace with himself. But after colouring himself into the colours of his aristocratic society and family, he lost his essence of self. He behaved in a way accepted by his society no matter how dishonourable they were. He left her after seducing her despite knowing of her infant’s death and many other things she suffers alone with shame and abuse; he chose to leave her in her miserable situation. Having affairs, gambling, and a lot of other habits in which he burned his true self seemed nothing wrong to him till this moment but at this

time of identity crisis that happened with his encounter with Katyusha, in a situation that he could never expect or imagine, as a prostitute in a court trial.

This encounter with her breaks all of the illusions about his superiority. This disillusionment compelled him to recall how he is responsible for the destruction of a pure soul. A pure soul who has just asked for his companionship and love. But what he did with her can not be forgiven. This sudden anagnorisis of his degraded life and falsehood made him question the ideologies he believed in until now. His fictitious identity, false perception of life, and all the fabricated lies that ruined the life of Katyusha and killed her pure soul everything disgusted him. With this sudden realization, disillusionment, and guilt-ridden state, he vows to save Katyusha. This new purpose helped him reconstruct himself again by saving Katyusha from her imprisonment. And this new purpose shows him the different but existing side of life of poor and miserable people who suffer just because of being come from a low background. In this newly acquired awakening, he decides to help hundreds of others who asked for his support and faith. With his dedication and sacrifice, he again started to get meaning and a sense of acknowledgement within himself. That helps him to rise from his guilt and revulsion. Though the dilemma between his old and new personality shakes his affirmation many times, but he eventually wins. And his crisis of identity resolves with the spiritual awaking that happened within him. This awakening happened so many times in his life but did not last forever. S. K. Sharma writes on this note:

In fact, this is an awakening or cleansing of the soul which is not foreign to him. In his life he has had several times such awakening but each time the temptations of the world entraps him and without noticing it he falls again often lower than before... This time also the voice of the tempter whispers, 'What is the use of trying any more? Are you the only one?' But the free spiritual being which alone is true, alone powerful, alone eternal, has already awakened in Nekhlyudov and he cannot but believe in it. (*Quest for Spiritual* 210)

In this spiritual elevation, "...his general mood now was determined by that same warmth and sympathy, not only towards Maslova but towards all people. This feeling seemed to have opened up a wellspring of love in Nekhlyudov's heart... Throughout the journey, Nekhlyudov enjoyed a spirit of exaltation which made him feel instinctively sympathetic and considerate to everybody" (*Resurrection* 426). This new acceptance of his newly discovered self gives him spiritual salvation, internal bliss and stability within himself. The sudden changes in the

characters of Tolstoy's perception, attitude, and identity bring them toward a meaningful change that enhances their ability to comprehend their actions. The spiritual crises save them by causing a significant disturbance. That releases them from the inner suffering that they experience after recognising their wrong deeds. Although in some character's life, these crises do occur very late. This presentation of disillusionment and spiritual awakening realistically and factually makes Tolstoy's works more noteworthy and appealing to the majority of people who can find their replica in the characters' crises, sins, and spiritual awakenings. This quest for identity replicates the urge of Tolstoy himself. Tolstoy's personal experiences and inner conflict mark its presence in these works, and this biographical element increases its charm and liveliness.

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