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**Shaping Identity, Confronting Violence: Exploring Childhood Experience in Anosh  
Irani's *The Song of Kahunsha***

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**Abstract**

*Identity is like an investment for body and mind, making humans more robust and supportive. Few use their identity to threaten the downtrodden and weaker section of people in Society. Erikson argued that identity certainty helps a person to become incongruent. He believed it is essential to be flexible rather than to survive solely for a strong identity. Anosh Irani's *The Song of kahunsha*, deals with experience of orphan children, seeking to explore their own identity in the streets of Bombay. This article explores the difficulties faced by these children in labouring for a local gangster, and also traces the issues of Babri Masjid, which affect their life. By bringing attention to the challenges faced by orphan children, this article aims to raise awareness and help create a more inclusive and supportive environment for these children to their identity.*

**Key words:** Identity, Deformation, Babri Masjid, Violence, Orphan, Child labour, Beggary, Mental illness, Childhood experience.

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Human beings consider identity as an essential part of them that guides their actions and behaviour. The sense of identity is integral to any form of intellect, in which without it, humans feel life is meaningless. As per Identity Crisis theory, psychologist Erickson says, “an identity crisis is developmental event that involves a person questioning their self of self or self in the world” (Cherry). The influence of projecting one’s identity in this Society plays a significant role in seeking attention and developing themselves from their past. For this to happen, they undergo various pain and suffering. Having an identity can give a sense of belonging, which is very important to human well-being and that, in turn, uplifts the level of confidence.

Methodology:

In this qualitative phenomenological study, the portrayal of life of orphan children and children who are forced into begging by dominant people of the society is analysed through literary lens. This approach is employed to deal with complex and broad topic and to understand various aspects and dimensions like identity crises, child labouring, deformation of children, and politics affecting common people.

Functioning with identity is possible. It is more important because humans are loved and valued based on their identity. Doing so can nurture fanaticism and inflexibility. A person must be open to shifts in identity. According to Erikson’s understanding, there are eight stages of psychosocial development, which follow one after another in a predictable order. The first stage of psychologist Erikson’s theory of psychosocial development is the Trust versus Mistrust. This phase lasts from birth until the infant is about 18 months old. Early childhood is the time for the second stage of Erikson’s theory of psychosocial development, known as Autonomy versus Shame and Doubt which focuses on infants gaining more self-control.

The preschool years are when the third stage of psychosocial development occurs. This stage is termed as Initiative versus Guilt. Children start to exert their power and control over the world at this stage of their psychological development through controlling other social interactions. The fourth psychosocial stage occurs between the ages of five and eleven, during the early school years known as Industry versus Inferiority. Children start to feel proud of their accomplishments and skills through social interactions.

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Tricky teenage years are when the fifth psychological stage occurs. This is crucial for forming a sense of personal identity that will affect a person's behaviour and development for the rest of their life. This stage is known as Identity versus Role Confusion. Teenagers must establish their identities and sense of self. Failure results in role confusion and a weakened sense of self, whereas success results in the capacity to stay loyal to oneself. Children explore their independence and grow in self-awareness during adolescence. Through personal discovery, those who are correctly encouraged and reinforced will leave this stage with a strong sense of self and sentiments of independence and power. Those who are still uncertain about their views and desires will feel puzzled about the future.

The sixth stage of development is Intimacy versus Isolation. Young adults must develop close, enduring relationships with others. Success produces strong relationships, whilst failure produces isolation and loneliness. Stage seven is Generativity versus Stagnation. In the seventh stage, Adults must produce or nurture things that will endure after they are gone, frequently by bearing children or bringing about a beneficial change for others. The last stage is Integrity versus Despair. This final stage of development concerns with looking back on life during old age. People at this stage of development reflect on their lives and decide if they are content in life or whether they regret what they did or did not do.

The article focuses on stage five, that its identity versus role confusion, it is crucial in adolescence when a person faces an extreme identity crisis. It represents a dilemma where one has to choose between ego and identity. It also focuses on these potential causes of identity crises which happens in stage five and as portrayed in the novel *The Song of Kahunsha*. Even though the fifth stage happens in adolescence, the protagonist in the novel goes through these potential causes before reaching the stage of adolescence.

The novel *The Song of Kahunsha* is about a young orphan boy who leaves his orphanage in search of his father, who is left uncared for in the streets of Bombay. His hunger and starvation force him to befriend Guddi, who is helping to support her mother by working for a local gangster. The novel also documents harsh realities in the streets of Bombay representing the impoverished people as, "Bombay have no respect for human beings. His

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eyes have marked how cruel buses are to humans- they prevent people from getting on, and the people who do get on are forced to hang from the buses most dangerously”(18).

People try to locate their identity among others but identity is altered according to the person who dominates them. The potential cause of identity crises is losing a parent or spouse. Chamdi is well-taken care of in the orphanage but deep in his heart, he searches for his parents. He believes that Mrs Sadiq, who is in charge of the orphanage, might know the whereabouts of his parents and makes a bold attempt to enquire about his parents. Mrs Sadiq denies to give him the required truth in order to protect him from knowing the bitter reality. Thus, Chamdi plans to escape from the Orphanage to search his father.

Fleeing out from the Orphanage, Chamdi remembers Mrs Sadiq’s words, “You are no longer ten. Age does not matter anymore. You are man now, and it is my fault that I made you the man you are. Forgive me” (39). Irani narrates the fearless action of Chamdi “soon he is only a few feet away from the walls of the orphanage, and he knows that he is entering another world” (45). The loss of parents is reflected in Sumdi and Guddi, who are forced to work under Anand Bhai, a local beggar master who threatens innocent people with harsh punishments and forces Sumdi, Guddi to work under him after their father death who died in a car accident. The trauma of the loss of parents differs for Chamdi, Sumdi and Guddi. Chamdi has never seen his father, which resulted in the Identity of Chamdi as an Orphan. On the other hand, Sumdi and Guddi, despite knowing their father, they are identified as local beggars similar to Orphan because their mother fails to acknowledge them.

The loss of identity of certain people is taken for granted by a person like Anand Bhai, taking control over and turns innocent people into Beggars. They are forced to live in this hell, where Guddi says, “The problem is we live. We find just enough food to stay alive, and we are forced to live on and on in this hell” (124). Identity can be recognised through education, which is a fundamental right of all individuals in Society. Through education, people can increase their sense of self-worth, self-assurance, and understanding of what their hearts seek. Michael Wehmeyer, a distinguished professor in special education, states:

“Quality of life is a construct that attempts to conceptualize what  
“living the good life” means, and, as such, is almost by default a

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potentially important outcome on which to focus. The question that perhaps is more important is whether promoting self-determination is worth the time and effort involved. The proposition that self-determination is an educational outcome presumes that self-determination and positive adult outcomes are causally linked. The quality of life is enhanced by the education that one attains in one's life".(Wehmeyer and Schalock)

This gives a clear idea that identity is measured in terms of education and dealt with by Erikson during the fifth stage of development. In the novel *The Song of Kahunsha*, though Chamdi knows to read and write, it becomes useless to survive in the streets of Bombay. Guddi says that reading and writing are not helpful when the surviving factor depends on the art of begging. Sumdi teaches Chamdi the begging tricks as,

That's of no use at all, you fool! When you go to the taxi to beg, they will not ask you, 'excuse me, can you spell your name, please'? "What I do?" "You must act like you are suffering." "Hero, this is Bombay. No one cares about the truth. The people want emotion. Tears! Can you cry real tears?"(103)

In the novel, the antagonist's brother Navin is educated, and Anand Bhai is a local beggar master. People are so afraid for Anand Bhai and not for Navin. Although Irani does not decline educational qualification of Navin, it is evident that Navin is a well-mannered and educated man compared to Anand Bhai. The understanding of education differs between Anand Bhai and his family. Chamdi and Guddi are the same age, but their exposure to and understanding of education differ. The right to education is denied to the people like Sumdi and Guddi.

Irani brings out the harsh realities of children's childhood and the denial of educational rights from them. India holds a good position in the world's best education system list, but Bombay still takes hold of children's identity in terms of education. An individual's position is noted by their role in the society they live in, education qualification, marital status, or starting a job or career. However, in the novel, the characters lose their human identity. Anand Bhai chooses weaker people in Society because they are vulnerable and ineffectual. Erickson argues that Identity certainty helps a person reject incongruent self-

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evaluations; a strong sense of identity may be better equipped to ignore or reject bullying. Identity confusion leads to depression and anxiety.

In the novel, *The Song of kahunsha*, most characters undergo depression to have a solid identity. The name of the characters in the novel is not their birth names. Rather, their physical appearance provides them with names. They are also deformed by Anand Bhai who cripples their original identity. For instance, the character named Dabba, who has no legs at birth, works as a waiter in Irani's restaurant. A taxi Walla rammed him, and he loses his legs. Later Anand Bhai cut his arms too, and he is renamed as Dabba. Anand Bhai is cruel that he makes boxes out of human beings. Anand Bhai cripple Dabba for his benefit, he put him near the jewellery shop so that he could hear the conversation. Dabba knows when the consignment comes, what time, and where the money is kept. The motive is that the jewellers ignore him because he is a leper. Anand Bhai decides Dabba's Identity; he does not want anyone to wash him; the more he smells, the more people leave him alone.

The other character in the novel goes through similar suffering. These characters are not born with disabilities; Anand Bhai has disables identity. Another character Khilwona, Chamdi, notices a dark patch of blood trickling down his thigh. Chamdi was told that grown-up men play with him, Khilwona is physically abused, and Anand Bhai supports them. Khilwona denotes a toy in Hindi, and he is a mere toy for entertainment. The other two characters, Munna and Chottu, sell movie magazines but are skilled at robbery. Munna steals the keys to the car and gives them to Anand Bhai, and Chottu steals the wallet. They are made to believe their identity as beggars and robbers. Another character, Jackpot, places his slipper palms on the ground and gives a hard push and goes begging. He is only four years old, so foreigners give him more money and so Anand Bhai wants him to beg at Colaba, an affluent area. Jackpot has special privileges, and he can take a taxi to his begging spot.

“Loss can occur at several levels if humans like the body's functioning or part of the body; valuable possessions; intellectual or significant others; social or cultural loss; moral or spiritual belief” (Weigert and Hastings). Focusing primarily on the loss of academic or essential other, this is conceptualised as loss of identity. The children in the novel have no true identity in Bombay, so they dream of a place where their identity is considered and

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respected. Chamdi tells his mental agony by stating, “That is why I dream. Dreams are free” (196).

Psychologist Erik Erikson believes that forming and finding one’s identity is a real challenge that people face. More than seeing one’s identity, accepting the identity that humans possess is also an essential factor that makes humans stronger. In the novel, though, Chamdi comes out of the orphanage in search of his father. Deep in his heart, he suffers for being an orphan, but when Chamdi sees Sumdi, he accepts his Identity; Sumdi cannot walk or run properly and limps when he walks “His right leg is lifeless, and it forces him to walk with a limp. He supports the Portion with his right hand, tries to run, does so with his ridiculous limp, and smiles with pride as if he is a clown performing for Chamdi”. . . (74)

The physical appearance of an individual is vital in the concept of identity. In one instance, Sumdi sees Chamdi without his vest; he criticises that he does not see anyone, so tip in size as Chamdi’s ribs are visible. Even Anand Bhai asks about his protruding ribs, “what happened to your ribs? They are like knives” (251). The harsh reality is that the identity of human bodies, especially powerless individuals, is expendable. This is evident in the novel *The Song of Kahunsha* Chamdi realises that his life and identity have significantly less value. However, end of the day, his friends Sumdi and Guddi use him to steal money from the temple. They picked out Chamdi to carry out robbery for them. They chose Chamdi for his lean body that could fit inside the window bars of the temple. Chamdi feels that his identity is valued significantly less when compared to other people living with him.

The loss of identity is due to other external factors also. External factors, like Violence, are also the reason for the identity loss of an individual. Irani traces out violence detaching people from their identity. “Violence is omnipresent in the world around us on the root cause of contemporary global Violence. There is a factor that attempts to explain Violence by referring to antagonisms between collective identities” (Sen). Violence is caused for many reasons, and this novel uncovers the violation caused due to religion. Religion plays a critical and prominent role in people’s life. It can instigate people to be violent with other human beings. Religion often gets blamed for acts of Violence, including suicide, Martyrdom and terrorism, which are called Religious Violence.

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Religious Violence in India includes the act of Violence by followers of one religious group against the follower and institutions of other religious groups, often in the form of rioting. In India, Hindu-Muslim riots are very general. Since the partition, Hindu nationalist mobs attack Muslims, forming a pattern of sporadic sectarian Violence between the Hindu - Muslim Communities. In India, the Bombay Riots in December 1992 and January 1993, caused death of 900 people, mainly due to the escalation of hostilities after large-scale protests by Muslims in reaction to the 1992 Babri Masjid demolition by Hindus in Ayodhya. Even after 25 years, the memories of the destruction remain firmly etched in people's minds.

Anosh Irani traces the Babri Masjid issue in the novel to create an impact on how Violence cripples one's Identity in Society. In the beginning, the novel reveals the condition of Bombay due to the Babri Masjid issue through Mrs Sadiq, and she feels it is unsafe to move out of the Orphanage. Mrs Sadiq, who runs the orphanage, does not allow children to step outside the walls for three weeks. "The Hindus broke down the Babri Masjid, a mosque in Ayodhya, a faraway place, and she said Hindus and Muslims were hurting each other in Bombay because of that. The street was not safe anymore, not even for children". (10)

In the end, when Chamdi enters the temple to steal money, there is a sudden Bomb blast due to the Babri Masjid issue. In the bomb blast, Chamdi was thrown down on the ground; he sees Sumdi, whose face is down and his back torn open. Sumdi's mouth was bleeding, his body was stuck under the cement slab, and dead.

In that split second, a great force throws Chamdi face down on the ground. Large blocks of cement fall from the sky. He covers his head and stays down. After a few seconds, he lifts his head into a curtain of thick, black smoke. White dust has stuck to his body because of the oil. (218)

Irani describes how people lie on the street of Bombay with one arm thrown on the road with a watch on the wrist. Poor people are unaware of the reason behind their crucial death, and innocent people lose their lives for the benefit of others.

In this attack, Chamdi tries to save Guddi and notices blood flowing from her nose and a deep gash on her forehead. Chamdi looks around for help, he takes her to the doctor's dispensary, but the door is closed. He carefully places Guddi on the dispensary doors.

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Chamdi goes to Anand Bhai to seek help, but he refuses, in order to get his attention, he lies about the jewellery shop that Dabba spies. Chamdi says he knows precisely the day, and they have planned to move the jewellery. Anand Bhai notices oil traces on Chamdi's body. Immediately, he becomes suspicious of Chamdi. After saving Guddi, Anand Bhai gets hold of Chamdi and asks him about his plans because only a person who wants to escape from someone will apply oil. Anand Bhai red-handedly catches Chamdi. Anand Bhai does not wish for Chamdi to get away. So, he punishes Chamdi and asks him to cut the tip of his tongue. Chamdi holds the knife by the handle and does not like the feel of it in his hand. The black handle does not look new it is smooth with use. Irani describes the cruelty of Anand Bhai as, "Now cut your tongue off, says Anand Bhai . . ." "You lied to me . . . So hold your tongue out and slice it off". . . "Please, Anand Bhai," begs Chamdi. "I'm sorry. I lied to save Guddi" (245).

Chamdi is sick with fear. He is frightened of the knife looming near his face. He even says that he is ready to do anything for him. He desperately says that he is prepared to steal, also. However, Anand Bhai wants to teach Chamdi a lesson, and he makes a small cut on Chamdi's tongue. "He makes a small cut on the edge of Chamdi's tongue. The blood trickles down the blade of the knife" (247). Some people, like Anand Bhai, exhibit their identity and power in Society. They threaten and cripple the identity of powerless individuals. Anand Bhai chooses orphan children and weaker people because they follow him and have no social identity. Though people work under Anand Bhai, he punishes them severely if they fail to abide by the rules.

Herminia Ibarra, a professor at business London school, argues that job transitions or even existing jobs that one has chosen can come with all unexpected emotions going for a job that is known, help to define people's identity to a new position as it brings all kinds of challenges. Ibarra says it is crucial to recognise how the changes affect people but to keep moving forward and even take the opportunity to reinvent humans in new roles (*How Your Identity Changes When You Change Jobs*).

One of the traumas in identity crises is changing one's job or career. It plays a vital role in shaping an individual's identity. In the novel, Anand Bhai offers a job to Chamdi but

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the job is harmful and kills innocent people. Anand Bhai uses Chamdi as a weapon to fulfil his desires and revenge for the death of his friend Sumdi. In reality, Anand Bhai wants to kill a Muslim family to avenge a bomb blast in the temple. He wants to use Chamdi and his gang members to discuss Radhabhai Chawl, a neighbourhood where a few Hindus were attacked and burnt. Therefore to take revenge, he decides to burn Hannif's family for his vengeance. He manipulates Chamdi saying, "You will do as I say, Chamdi. You work for me now" (271).

Anand Bhai threatens to sell Guddi into prostitution if Chamdi refuses to throw a petrol bomb in Hannif's window. Chamdi knows it is wrong to hurt people yet he cannot raise his voice because he must face the consequences if he talks against Anand Bhai. Anand Bhai decides Chamdi's Identity in choosing his job/ carrier. The job provided to the individual should benefit both the people and Society. In the novel, the job supplied by Anand Bhai is not for the goodness of humanity. If Anand Bhai wants to give a job/carrier to Chamdi, he should have chosen to show the path of education that, in turn, descends with their own future job/carrier. Anand Bhai tries to make more people like him. Chamdi becomes very silent and speaks less after throwing the petrol bomb. His identity has been changed from orphan to a roadside beggar and then to murderer. The change of Identity results from the job offered by Anand Bhai.

Another major trauma under Erikson's identity crisis concept is becoming a parent. Direct and indirect influential factors can cause influence family life parenting also has an important on a child's identity. Usually, parents actively and deliberately teach morals and values. Parenting can also indirectly influence a child's identity and social development through active demonstration. The most impactful power that parents have is when they preach. Psychologist Erik Erikson has outlined a key parental influence factor in a child's development, contrary to parent's belief that adolescents are not the sole influence in their identity and choices. In the novel *The Song of Kahunsha*, Chamdi is an orphan who never knows anything about his parents besides a piece of white cloth. Chamdi's only parent figure is Mrs Sadiq.

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Sumdi and Guddi do not get guidance from their parents. Sumdi and Guddi find themselves in a pathetic situation where they go home to look after their mother, who is mentally ill. Erikson parental influence factor in a child's development can be visible here. Sumdi and Guddi work very hard to cure their mother's illness. Sumdi works as a beggar, and Guddi sells idols of goddesses to make their living. They planned to steal the temple to take their mother away from Bombay so that they could cure their mother's illness. If Sumdi's mother had been in good condition, they would have lived a better life. Sumdi and Guddi are too young, but unfortunately, the loss of their father resulted in a devastating state for them.

Parents are responsible for shaping their children's identity but reflecting on Guddi and Sumdi's case, they have become a parent to their mother. Once Chamdi comes out of the orphanage, Sumdi becomes his parent figure. He provides Chamdi shelter and food. Chamdi has a comfortable life considering them as his own family. Everything changes when Sumdi dies in a bomb blast, and Chamdi becomes lifeless and helpless. Anand Bhai uses his helplessness to take revenge for his desires. According to Anand Bhai, becoming a parent is very different. Though Anand Bhai has both his parents with him, they never try to change the Identity of Anand Bhai's profession but make Navin an educated person. Due to improper parenting, Anand Bhai's profession changes into a local gangster, local beggar master. Anand Bhai creates terror for him among his parents and Society.

People's identity change according to their place and with whom they stay. Outside environments has the potential to influence people. Influence happens directly and indirectly regarding the social contexts in which the individual can live, how he/she think and feel, and how they interact with people and places. Immediate family, peer groups and the physical environment are all factors that contribute to the ever-changing perception of the individual. Sometimes personal identity can be subtly reshaped over a gradual time frame, as the sense of identity is modified without personal recognition that the individual is changing. One generally refers to one's identity, which involves how society is ruined and its physical features.

Different societies have multiple perceptions of laws, government, religion, culture and general ethics. They represent how people live and how they behave. A strict community

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with harsh regulations and punishments will cause people to be more reserved and controlled. An organisation with a high level of Violence and unethical behaviour will usually cause future generations to act similarly. The physical features of a location can also influence behaviour and identity. The identity of place is a versatile concept upon which many psychological theories of human-environment relations are built. Proshansky, in his work *The City and Self-Identity* (1978), initially defined identity of place as “those dimensions of self that define the individual personal Identity concerning the physical environment employing a complex pattern of conscious and unconscious ideas, feelings, values, goals, preference, skills and behaviour tendencies relevant to a specific domain”(155).

The novel traces the realities of life in Bombay. Known as the “city of dreams” for the rich to the poor, Bombay has space, work and opportunity for everyone. Bombay portrayed in *The Song of Kahunsha*, shows the harsh and cruel survival factor in Bombay. The city of Bombay is the industrial, commercial and financial capital of the country. On contrary, it is also infamous for its underworld, slums and poor residential area. Bombay is pervaded by socio-spatial fragmentation and is considered a divided city.

The highest level of segregation in Bombay is based on the religion of Muslims and Non-Muslim. In 1993 Bombay was on the verge of being torn by Racial Violence. Chamdi has rarely ventured outside the Orphanage and entertains an idyllic fantasy of the city as a paradise. The place Bombay become no safer to live. When Chamdi says, “An orphanage is where they keep children without parents.” “There’s another name for such a place.” “What?” “Bombay “(100) Chamdi feels that Orphanage is safe, but for Sumdi, the entire Bombay is Orphanage. He wants to ask Sumdi about Bombay. He has seen no colours, smiling faces, or exchange of love. He wants to know why Sumdi was a spy for Anand Bhai. He wonders how quickly the information is passed to others.

“I spy. I watch. I listen”. Give him tips.

“Tips? What’s that?”

In a city like Bombay, information is everything. I stand outside the tea stalls, jeweller’s shops, taxi stands, and any place where conversation happens. And if I see interest, I report to Anand Bhai. You’ll understand later. (120)

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Chamdi was shocked when he heard the bomb blast for the first time due to Hindu-Muslim riots. He often thinks that Mrs Sadiq is right. He realises that Bombay has gone mad and people are terrifyingly hurting each other. The place in Bombay changed Chamdi's identity changes from an orphan to a beggar and then to a murderer. This fact is analysed by Aamodt, a professor of Psychology at Radford University, who says, "The murder rate for the U.S. falls about in the middle of the rate for other countries" (Sterbenz, Christina). Chamdi a 10-year-old orphan boy's life and dreams have been entirely changed by place-identity conflict. These traumas in identity crises lead to mental barriers.

#### Results and Discussion

In the novel, *The Song of Kahunsha Chamdi*, mental trauma due to improper parenting, lack of education, and survival in the streets of Bombay created psychological barriers. He finds his identity is not valued. Erikson points out that such trauma is the reason for an Identity crisis.

The novel, through the vantage point of Erikson, shows how identity plays a vital role in protecting themselves from the Violence that leads to crippling one's own identity. Here, a person like Anand Bhai uses the persona of a subject or an oppressed person to engage in wicked deeds in this Society. This oppression is evident in how Anand Bhai projects himself before the kids to do his forbidding and uses that small boy. Anand Bhai's impact on the powerless and cast a shadow on their lives is evident here. Violence indicates not only physical damage but also mental damage. These reasons also make an individual become a psychopath in society and ultimately a threat to himself and the entire community. Mental barriers are a set of limiting beliefs the individual has about themselves. If people start attaching themselves to these thoughts, they can prevent them from taking action or moving forward. Even if people want to do their work, paying too much attention to limiting beliefs may make them feel that they are not capable or talented enough to pursue them. They are termed emotional or psychological barriers and mental barriers. These barriers can manifest in thoughts, opinions, feelings, or attitudes toward others.

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## Conclusion

Irani indirectly traces his path in this way to show how crippling one's identity by body power and societal Violence can turn an individual life upside down. The necessities of human life revolve around the preservation of it. Food, shelter, and clothing are all essential requirements to care for the human body and identity. Since time immemorial, human identity has been a subject in various fields of study. However, in the modern times, it has become a study of social science and literature. In contemporary times of incredible advancement and development, the study of identity and how it affects individuals are very essential for a better society.

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