

THEME OF IDENTITY IN THE NOVELS OF PATRICK MADIANO

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Abstract

Patrick Madiano, the recipient of 2014 Nobel Prize in Literature, is a master of the art of cloaking a trivial item of news in fog and mystery. His works examine the art of memory with which he has evoked the most ungraspable human destinies and uncovered the life-world of the occupation. His early writings explore the mysteries of childhood and adolescence. His stories describe a universe of haunted cities, absentee parents, critically and lost youths. They are all located in Paris, the author's hometown, with the shadow of the Second World War looming heavily in the background. They often focus on the Nazi occupation of France. As a result, the Nobel Academy described him as 'a Marcel Proust of our time.'

Madiano's novels delve into the puzzle of identity as the characters try to tract evidence of their existence through the traces of the past. Obsessed with the troubled and shameful period of the occupation, he returns to the theme of identity in most of his novels. His Rue des Boutiques Obscures (Missing Person) deals with the theme of identity crisis. The protagonist in the novel suffers from amnesia and travels from one place to another in an attempt to reconnect with the past. The novel addresses the never-ending search for identity in a world where the sands holds the traces of one's footsteps and a few moments.

In the present paper an attempt is made on some of the novels of Patrick Modiano that deal with the theme of identity. Besides this the paper tries to present an overview on the writings of the 2014 Nobel Laureate.

The individual in any society yearns for peace and bliss. If he doesn't get it, he feels alienated and faces crisis in life. This experience is loosely called 'alienation' or 'identity

crisis'. There are three factors that are responsible for this identity crisis. The society around a person makes or marks a person's existence. If the society is highly materialistic and the individual is spiritual and aesthetic he feels alienated. In his thought provoking book entitled *Man and People*, Collin Wilson rightly observes '... the other man also has his here but this here of the Other is not mine. Our 'heres' are mutually exclusive, they are not interpenetrable, they are different, with the result that the perspective in which world appears to him is always difference from mine. Hence our worlds did not adequately coincide. For the present I am in mine and he is in his. And this is a fresh reason for radical solitude. Not only am I outside of his; we are mutually the two outsiders (fuera) and hence radically strangers (forasteros).' In Wole Soyinka's *Death of a Hired Man*, the protagonist feels alienated in the reign of a dictator.

To the second category of identity crisis may be included the family where a person lives. Supposing the members of a family do not understand an individual in a family, he may feel thoroughly alienated and faces crisis in that family. For instance, in the works of Derek Walcott one comes across many individuals who are not appreciated in their own families. In the words of Stewart Brown, 'Walcott presents the characters whose voice doesn't pervade in their own family.'

To the third category belongs the alienation within the mind of a person. Usually the individual is a maladjusted person and he is a psychopath. The works of Naipaul present quite a few characters who are psychologically perverted. In his *Half a Life*, Willy Chandran's father is in a way a psychopath. Thus, one finds the theme of identity crisis in the modern literature in general and in Commonwealth Fiction in particular. According to Malcolm Bradbury, 'In the commonwealth fiction one finds 'nowhere men' who are displaced outsiders.'

Besides the aforesaid writers, Patrick Modiano, a French novelist is another most significant writer who has "returned again and again to the same themes such as the theme of identity, the pull of the past, the threat of disappearance, the blurring of moral boundaries, 'the dark side of the soul'."¹ Born on 30th July, 1945, in Boulogne-Billancourt, a commune in the Western suburbs of Paris, from an Italian-Jewish father and a Belgian mother, Patrick Modiano has spent most of his childhood by himself, separated from his parents. The absence of his father and of his mother brought him closer to his brother, Rudy, who died of a disease at the age of ten. The death of his brother had a lot of impact on Modiano. As a result, the works that Modiano wrote from 1967 to 1982 were dedicated to his brother). Recalling this tragic period in his famed memoir *Un Pedigree* (2005), Modiano himself said

I couldn't write an autobiography, that's why I called it a 'pedigree.' It's a book less on what I did than on what other, mainly my parents, did to me.²

Modiano has contributed much to the French literature and won prestigious award such as the 2014 Nobel Prize in Literature, the 2012 Austrian State Prize for European

Literature, the 2010 Prix Mondial Cino Del Duca for lifetime achievement, the 1978 Prix Goncourt, the France's highest literary honour, for his novel *Rue Des Boutiques Obscures*, and the 1972 Grand Prix du roman de l'Academie francaise for his novel entitled *Les Boulevards de ceinture*. He is a versatile genius who has written in French, Spanish, Swedish, and German languages. He has written more than thirty novels and children's books and screenplays in his literary career. His works are translated into more than thirty languages. His works such as *La ronde de nuit* (*Night Rounds*, 1971), *Les boulevards de ceinture* (*Ring Roads: A Novel*, 1974), *Lacombe Lucien: Scenario* (*Lacombe Lucien: The Complete Scenario of the Film*, 1975), *Villa Triste* (*Villa Triste*, 1977), *Rue des boutiques obscures* (*Missing Person*, 1980), *Quartier perdu* (*A Trace of Malice*, 1988), *Vyage de nocces* (*Honeymoon*, 1992), *Du Plus Loin de l'Oubli* (*Out of the Dark*, 1998), *Catherine Certitude* (*Catherine Certitude*, 2000), and *Dora Bruder* (*The Search Warrant*, 2000) are some of the works that are translated into English.

Patrick Modiano is a master of the art of cloaking a trivial item of news in fog and mystery. His works have stemmed mostly from the complexities of his childhood. They examine the art of memory with which he has evoked the most ungraspable human destinies and uncovered the life-world of the occupation. His early writings explore the mysteries of childhood and adolescence. His stories describe a universe of haunted cities, absentee parents, critically and lost youths. They are all located in Paris, the author's hometown, describing the evolution of its streets, its habits, and its people, with the shadow of the Second World War looming heavily in the background. They often focus on the Nazi occupation of France. His novels delve into the puzzle of identity as the characters try to tract evidence of their existence through the traces of the past. Obsessed with the troubled and shameful period of the occupation, he returns to the theme of identity in most of his novels. In an interview, Modiano says thus:

After each novel, I have the impression that I have cleared it all away. But I know I'll come back over and over again to tiny details, little things that are part of what I am. In the end, we all determined by the place and the time in which we are born.³

Taking the above remarks, one may say that the search for his origins, childhood, and adolescence becomes the central theme of his novel. As a writer, he tries explores the mysteries of childhood and adolescence. This drive to solve the riddles and to clarify the mysteries without any real chance of success is the source of his desire to write, as though the exploration of his imagination, and writing, could finally help him to link up all the loose ends of his life. His ingredients are always the same –

His own story and that of his parents, his father's shady business dealings, his memories of abandoned childhood, and a string of sordid events, often related to the Occupation, the original night that still haunts him.⁴

He sifts and mixes his personal material and then breaks it down into tiny droplets. It is for this reason, the Nobel Academy described him as ‘a Marcel Proust of our time.’

Modiano’s debut novel *La Place de l’Etoile* (1968) is comical and violent branching out in many directions. It is a wartime novel about a Jewish collaborator. The novel has displeased his father so much that he tried to buy all exiting copies of the book. Due to this incident, he gradually rounded off using sharp edges in his writings and became increasingly spare. *Livret de famille* (1977) is another novel in which Modiano engages himself in the process of metaphorizing his own memory via the memory of the other. The novel consists of a series of fragmentary narratives with no chronological order. It may be read as combining the features of a novel, a book of short stories, an autobiography, and a family biography. In other words, the best shorthand definition of the work might thus be that of an ‘auto-bio-fiction.’ Modiano simultaneously endeavours to overspill the generic framework of the novel holding autobiography in a distinct category. As one reads the novel, one understands that Modiano explores the ways of breaking out of the cultural-psychological framework distinguishing one’s own memory from those of others. Apart from this, Modiano also focuses obsessively on the figure of his father, a Jew who nevertheless managed to get by during the Occupation years in Paris by collaborating with the German authorities. Thus, the man who remained an enigmatic absentee for most of Modiano’s childhood and adolescence proves in Modiano’s writings to be a persistent if ever-ghostly presence.

His *Rue des Boutiques Obscures* (*Missing Person*) deals with the theme of identity crisis. The protagonist in the novel suffers from amnesia and travels from Polynesia to Rome in an attempt to reconnect with the past. The novel addresses the never-ending search for identity in a world where the sands hold the traces of one’s footsteps and a few moments. In *Du Plus Loin de l’Oubli* (*Out of the Dark*), the narrator recalls his shadowy love affair in the 1960s with an enigmatic woman. They meet again after fifteen years of their breakup. But she has changed her name and denies their past. Modiano’s obsessions and elegiac prose that typifies dreamlike incidents makes the readers to think what is real and what is not real.

Dora Bruder is a literary hybrid. It is built on the true tale of a fifteen-year-old Jewish teenager who ran away from her home in Paris in the middle of the Occupation years and was subsequently arrested, deported, and became one of the victims of the Holocaust. It fuses together several genres like biography, autobiography, and detective novel. It tells the history of its title character Dora. She is a fifteen year old daughter of Eastern Jewish immigrants. She, after running away, from the safety of the convent that was hiding her, ends up being deported to Auschwitz. Modiano has written the novel with the help of newspaper cuttings, vague testimonies and old telephone directories, looking at outsiders living on the outskirts of the city. In the opening of his novel, Modiano says thus:

He first became interested in Dora's story when he came across her name in a missing persons headline in a December 1941 edition of the French newspaper *Paris Soir*.⁵

Regarding Dora Bruder, Modiano himself remarks thus:

I shall never know how she spent her days, where she hid, in whose company she passed the winter months of her first escape, or the few weeks of spring when she escaped for the second time. That is her secret.⁶

Modiano's *Dans le café de la jeunesse perdue* is set in 1960s Paris. It is about Louki, who, we are told on the last page. She has ended her life by throwing herself from a window. A group of people, including a detective of shady background, express their wonder after hearing the news of her death. They even fail to guess what is or was the matter with her. Though the author gives plenty of geographical details in the novel, the reader is left a sense of vagueness such as what happened to her and when. Modiano, for the first time in his literary oeuvre, uses various narrators who, from their point of view, relate what they think and what they know about the woman. In fact, the protagonist Dora herself relates episodes from her life but she remains difficult to grasp. The author creates a number of instabilities on various levels of his text and this signifies how literary figures can or cannot be created.

L'Horizon (2011) is about Jean Bosmans, the narrator of the novel. He is a fragile man pursued by his mother's ghost and dwells on his youth and the people he has lost. Among the people whom he meets Margaret Le Coz, a young woman, is the one who is enigmatic. He falls in love with her. The two loners spend several weeks wandering and winding streets of a long-forgotten Paris, fleeing a phantom menace. One day, without notice, Margaret boards a train and vanishes into the void – but not from Jean's memory. Forty years later, Jean once again starts looking for his vanished love. But his search remains in vein. The novel not only epitomizes Modiano's style and concerns but also marks a new step in his personal quest, after a mysterious walkabout in Berlin, a city that is completely changed and rebuilt from the ashes of war. Besson remarks that such symbolic roots gave rise, over the years, "to one of the most wonderful trees in French literature."⁷

To conclude, one may say that Modiano has remained a mysterious character to his readers by writing such works that deal with various themes and aspects. This has led to the origin of the French term "modianesque," used to describe a mysterious person or situation.

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