

The Embodiment of Adolescent Identity in Literature

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ABSTRACT

Adolescence is the phase of transformation in an individual's life between childhood and adulthood. He would generally be considered careless, reckless, and thoughtless, even regarding his life and career, particularly at this stage. This stage of personality development is the most significant, characterized by intense psychological, emotional, and attitudinal changes that contribute to self-identity. This transformation would, of course, be the result of internal or external forces, albeit inadvertently. Literature is undeniably a “mirror” of society. It has been a powerful representation of both personal and social issues in any and every society. Matthew Arnold, one of the eminent Victorian poets and critics, observes, “Literature is a criticism of life,” in his influential essay “The Study of Poetry” (1880), reflecting the values, conflicts, and realities of society. Literature, as a reflective and interpretative medium, addresses not only the pervasive issues of a society but also the subsequent repercussions. contemplating the ways and means of redress, either directly or indirectly. It plays a vital role in embodying and articulating the complexities of adolescent identity. Literary texts from different genres, i.e., playwriting, fiction, and poetry, emphasize the identity crisis from different perspectives. This study examines the representation of adolescent identity in literature with respect to the selected texts, i.e., *DNA* by Dennis Kelly and *The Wolves* by Sarah DeLappe. It employs thematic analysis of the physical, psychological, or societal experience from both plays that shapes the adolescent identity. It explores that literature is a vital source of representing the self-identity of adolescents, addressing the related conflicts every now and then. This study concludes that adolescent identity is not a fixed essence but an embodied process shaped by the interplay of physical experience, psychological struggle, and social forces.

Keywords: Phase of Transformation; Inner Conflict; Institutional Authority; Personality Development; Physical, Psychological and Social Factors; External Expectations and Internal Struggles.

INTRODUCTION

The phase of adolescence is the moment of struggle for self or social identity. For this, an adolescent is influenced not by biological interaction alone but also through his/her psychological as well as social experiences. It shows that adolescent identity is the process shaped not by a single or particular force, either by psychological or social influences alone, but by multiple intersecting factors. The crucial period of human development is adolescence, which is marked by profound physical, psychological, and social transformations. This transitional phase is decisive in the life of anyone searching for self-identity.

For youth, the single story [of adolescence] is one of raging hormones, rebelliousness, and defiance of authority. In the context of schooling, assumptions about age, stage, and what is “developmentally appropriate” predominate. As such, a one-size-fits-all perception spurs adults to set limitations that do not always reflect the immediate circumstances accurately. (Adichie, 2009, as cited in Petrone et al., 2014, p. 509)

Adolescent identity is deeply influenced by social interaction and the cultural environments within which individuals are embedded. It is continuously shaped, negotiated, and redefined. Theoretical perspectives such as social constructivism and identity theory emphasize that identity is constructed through engagement with others, where social norms, expectations, and collective experiences play a decisive role. In this context, literature—particularly drama—serves as a significant medium for examining the formation of adolescent identity, as it captures the tensions between individuality and conformity within socially structured environments.

Contemporary drama offers compelling insights into the ways cultural forces shape adolescent behaviour and self-perception. Identity formation is portrayed within a crisis-driven peer group, in *DNA*, where fear and collective pressure lead to the suppression of individual moral judgment and the construction of a shared, albeit false, reality, as reflected in the assertion that “you don’t think. You just do what you’re told” (Kelly, 2012). Similarly, *The Wolves* presents adolescent identity as fluid and contingent, emerging through fragmented conversations, team dynamics, and the subtle influence of social and cultural norms, as captured in the self-reflective question, “Do I know anything about anything?” (DeLappe, 2016). While the former foregrounds the impact of extreme circumstances on group identity, the latter reveals how everyday interactions and language contribute to the shaping of selfhood. This paper argues that adolescent identity in these plays is not an inherent or stable construct but is actively produced through cultural forces such as peer dynamics, language, and social expectations.

Objectives:

1. To enhance the level of understanding of Adolescent experiences that shape the self-identity of an individual.
2. To promote awareness over the personal, psychological as well as the social challenges at the phase of adolescence with reference to the literature.
3. To highlight the impact of social pressures and peer influences which foster the formation of identity.

METHODOLOGY

The study of this paper is based on study of the plays *DNA* by Dennis Kelly and *The Wolves* by Sarah DeLappe which represent the theme of adolescent identity either directly or indirectly. It is the outcome of understanding and analysis of the relevant information obtained from different sources like books, journal articles as well as internet.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Theoretical perspectives have contributed to understanding how identity is shaped by both internal impulses and external social structures. The study of Petrone et al. pays attention to the preconception of adolescence as a cultural construct. They limit their purpose to describe the YL and to offer its implications for secondary literacy pedagogy and scholarship. Kelsey Sawyer’s study is confined to the embodiment of attachment and grief in adolescents. Vankerckhoven et al. concentrate on adolescence and its associations with identity functioning and eating behaviours. Moreover, research scholars emphasized that literature plays a significant role in representing these transformations, often portraying adolescence as a period of conflict and self-discovery. The studies on the representations of adolescence underline the themes of alienation, rebellion, and the search for selfhood. The researchers have examined how characters negotiate personal desires and societal expectations, thereby constructing complex identities. Much of existing research has focused on identity as a psychological construct. This literature review opines that there is still a scope of exploring physical, emotional, and cultural embodiment of adolescent identity.

DISCUSSION

Adolescent identity is not an abstract concept but a lived and negotiated experience that reflects the impact and influence of the body, the mind, and society on the adolescent youth. It is evident in the literature, particularly contemporary drama that embodies the tensions of selfhood within specific social and psychological contexts. *DNA* by Dennis Kelly and *The Wolves* by Sarah DeLappe offer compelling representations of how adolescent identity is constructed through external pressures and internal conflicts. De Mol et al. describe the embodiment of identity, thus:

The body as form, represents the holistic integration of the biological dimension of life, the body as lived experience actively engaged represents the integration of the psychological person, and the body actively engaged in and with the world points to the integration of the sociocultural and physical context. Thus,

embodiment entails the synthesis of how we, as active agents (psychological persons), influence and are influenced by our biological and sociocultural worlds.” (Kuczynski & De Mol, 2015, as cited in De Mol et al., 2018, p. 2)

The embodiment of self-identity is primarily shaped by social forces and psychological tension, where the adolescent self is constructed through conformity and collective behaviour in the play, *DNA*. It centres on a group of youth who attempt to cover up a crime and, in doing so, reveal the fragility of individual identity under peer pressure. The group repeatedly emphasizes collective responsibility, suggesting that they are bound together in their actions and decisions. The group repeatedly emphasizes collective responsibility, suggesting that they are bound together in their actions and decisions, as seen in the insistence that “we have to keep together. ” We have to trust each other” (Kelly, 2012). This sense of collective identity abrogates their personal moral judgment. It is an example to say how self-identity is affected by the psychological compulsions. Moreover, their emphasis on collective responsibility pinpoints the mechanism of control, compelling individuals to align their actions with the group. It shows that the members of the group become mechanical, losing their individuality and ability to think on their own. They are seen under a mechanism of control, compelling individuals to align their actions with the group. They are found as an instrument of compliance, performing actions dictated by social necessity rather than personal conviction. Kelsey Sawyer refers to Malone P., who comments on the phase of adolescence in an individual’s life, thus: “Developmentally, adolescents are encountering themes of 'identity formation, separation and individuation, relationships with peers and adults, and development of intimacy'" (Malone, 2018, as cited in Sawyer, 2019, p. 15). At the same time, their identity is also depicted as a fragile construct shaped by peer pressure, fear, and the need for collective belonging by the characters in a different situation in the same play.

The play also demonstrates how individuals within a group gradually abandon personal moral judgment in favour of socially constructed decisions, reflecting key ideas of social constructivism. The characters’ acceptance of a fabricated narrative surrounding Adam’s disappearance illustrates how reality itself becomes a product of group consensus rather than objective truth. Phil’s emergence as a leader further emphasizes how authority is not inherent but socially conferred, as the group relies on his detached logic to maintain control. This moral disengagement is evident when he reduces ethical consequences to practicality, suggesting that actions are justified if they resolve the problem, captured in the stark assertion, “What difference will it make?” (Kelly, 2012). In contrast, Leah’s persistent questioning— “But he’s not dead. He’s alive” (Kelly, 2012)—represents an alternative moral consciousness that is ultimately ignored by the group. From the perspective of identity theory, the characters assume roles within the collective, with Phil as the decision-maker and others as passive followers, demonstrating how identity is shaped through social expectations and group dynamics. Thus, the play reveals that adolescent identity is not autonomous but is constructed through conformity, fear, and the powerful influence of collective cultural behaviour.

The characters struggle to reconcile their inner conscience with their outward behaviour. It also shows the psychological facet of identity in this play. Until they are, as a group, together, they learn to follow others, losing their individual ideas and ideology. Because they will be ready to follow the words of the other members of the group. At the same time, when there is any issue, no one will be ready to take the claim. This fragmentation of identity is evident when they attempt to justify their actions by displacing responsibility onto the group. The group denies personal accountability, framing the incident as something beyond their control. In this situation, their psychological identity conflict between their guilt and survival is clearly established. It shows the emotional detachment of the characters and their inability to think of taking further and relevant action collectively. This mindset highlights the instability of adolescent identity, which is shaped by fear and the need for belonging. Phil is dominant among the group. His authoritative attitude determines the mindset of the entire group. It shows how the social forces like power regulate the identity of an adolescent. Thus, the play *DNA* also represents the concept that identity is imposed through social pressure. It is not necessarily self-determined.

In *The Wolves*, adolescent identity is portrayed as a fluid and socially constructed process shaped by peer interaction and cultural context. The play’s structure—characterized by overlapping dialogue and the absence of fixed names (with characters identified by numbers)—reflects the instability and collective nature of identity formation among adolescents. Drawing on principles of social constructivism, the characters’ sense of self emerges through their engagement with one another, where language becomes a primary medium of cultural

exchange. Their conversations, which move rapidly between topics such as global politics, body image, and everyday experiences, reveal how external cultural influences are internalized and negotiated within the group. For instance, the casual remark, “We don’t do genocide until senior year” (DeLappe, 2016), reflects both limited awareness and the shaping of knowledge through institutional culture. Similarly, the questioning tone in “Do I know anything about anything?” (DeLappe, 2016) underscores the uncertainty inherent in adolescent identity formation. At the same time, the pressure to conform to team norms illustrates the relevance of identity theory, as individual identity is shaped by roles and expectations within the collective. Thus, the play demonstrates that adolescent identity is not a stable or independent construct but is continuously formed through interaction, language, and the subtle pressures of social environments.

In contrast to the play DNA, which focuses on the role of social conformity and psychological struggle, *The Wolves* explores adolescent identity through social force. This play is structured around the conversations of a girls’ soccer team and captures the everyday realities through which identity is performed and negotiated. The process of such negotiations, in which the adolescent body is central, will definitely articulate self-awareness and social perception that help for identity. It leads to self-consciousness among the entire group. One of the characters in the play *The Wolves* expresses insecurity and anxiety over her physical appearance, reflecting a desire for social validation. It indicates that the identity is shaped by the perception of others. The question reflects an internalized perception, in which the individual constantly evaluates herself through the imagined judgment of peers. It indicates the lack of self-consciousness of that particular character. It is nothing but identity with the peers. It is also an example to say that the identity is not carved out in isolation but is formed through interpersonal recognition and group interaction. The characters in this play are constantly engaged in dialogue, negotiation, and comparison, suggesting that identity is constructed through participation in a social group. The play underscores the intersection of the physical and the social experience in a moment in which one of the characters openly shares the onset of menstruation during a team activity. At the same time, the speaker feels that she is being constantly observed by others. By this, one can understand that the character is with a heightened sense of self-consciousness, perceiving that she is under the scrutiny of those around her. It shows the peer awareness that indicates behaviour is influenced by observation and expectation, aligning identity with performance. It also reveals that the social pressure in *The Wolves* operates subtly, through norms, expectations, and the desire for acceptance.

Identity is formed by a force in the play DNA, either externally or internally. It is nothing but the psychological means of carving out the behaviour of an individual. In contrast to that, the play *The Wolves* highlights social pressure being the weapon in the forming of adolescent identity. This play operates subtly, through norms, expectations, and the desire for acceptance. Analyzing both the plays with respect to embodiment of the identity, it is observed that identity appears fluid and relational, continuously shaped by the dynamics of the group. In comparison, the play DNA represents the identity through the coercive group dynamics and *The Wolves* through the performative interactions. However, while DNA portrays identity as fragmented and imposed through fear and conformity, *The Wolves* presents it as evolving and negotiated through interaction and embodiment. In spite of both plays’ convergence and divergence in their representation of adolescent identity, the psychological instability in DNA contrasts with the relational fluidity in *The Wolves*. However, one can observe that both the plays underscore the absence of a stable, unified self.

Thus, in both the plays, a consistent application of social constructivism and identity theory reveals that adolescent identity in DNA and *The Wolves* is fundamentally shaped through social interaction rather than individual autonomy. The group collectively constructs a false narrative surrounding Adam’s disappearance, in DNA, demonstrating that reality itself is socially produced and maintained through consensus. The characters assume roles within this constructed framework, with Phil emerging as a rational authority figure whose power depends entirely on group acceptance. Similarly, in *The Wolves*, identity is negotiated through the team’s overlapping dialogue and shared cultural references, where belonging is contingent upon conformity to group norms. The use of numbered characters further emphasizes the fluidity and interchangeability of individual identity within the collective. Thus, both plays illustrate that adolescence is a period in which identity is not discovered but actively constructed through participation in social

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Identity emerges as deeply influenced by the overwhelming force of social pressure and group dynamics in the play DNA. The way in which the need for belonging can override individual morality, leading to a fragmentation of the self, can be revealed from the characters' actions. The collective decision-making process, coupled with the suppression of personal guilt, illustrates that identity is not autonomously constructed but is instead imposed through conformity and fear of exclusion. The psychological instability portrayed in the play underscores the fragile nature of adolescent identity, where the mind becomes a site of tension between ethical awareness and social compliance. In this way, the play DNA depicts how external forces can distort the development of the sense of self-identity.

The play, *The Wolves*, explores adolescent identity through the lens of the embodied female experience within a social and performative context. It underscores the significance of the body as a central component of identity, highlighting how physical awareness, gender expectations, and peer observation contribute to the formation of the self. Interactions from the character of this play, emphasizing the shared experiences, such as social anxieties, reflect the relational nature of identity, suggesting that the self is always in dialogue with others. It underlines the fluid and evolving nature of adolescent identity through its portrayal of collective yet individualized experiences, in contrast to the play, DNA. Thus, both the plays reveal that the adolescent identity is fundamentally embodied, shaped through lived experiences rather than abstract reflections. Martin et al. comment on the nature of identity, thus:

Identity comprises many elements of human experience. While some define identity as “the distinguishing character or personality of an individual” (Merriam-Webster, n.d. a), we contend it encompasses much more than this straightforward, singular definition. We find that researchers have explored identity for decades from various angles and approaches, reflecting its multifaceted and subjective nature (Branje et al., 2021). Ultimately, the concept of identity is complex and continues to evolve with growing knowledge from human experiences. (Martin et al., 2025, p. 1)

The body participates in actions dictated by social pressure, while the mind struggles with the consequences, resulting in a fractured identity in DNA. In *The Wolves*, the body becomes a site of awareness, performance, and interaction, contributing to a more dynamic and relational sense of self. These representations reveal that identity is not merely internal but is produced through the interaction of physical presence, psychological processes, and social forces.

CONCLUSION

The analysis of both plays, DNA by Dennis Kelly and *The Wolves* by Sarah DeLappe, demonstrates that adolescent identity is shaped by the physical, psychological, and social forces. In the first play, DNA identity is shaped by the psychological conflict between their guilt and survival, which leads to their emotional detachment and their inability to think of taking further and relevant action collectively. In this play, the identity is shaped by the psychological conflict. However, in another play, *The Wolves*, the identity of one character is shaped by the perception of the peers, in which the individual constantly evaluates herself through the imagined judgment of peers. Thus, this analysis observes that the forces of shaping identity are not fixed or stable. They may be psychological, social, or physical. However, both the plays offer compelling representations of adolescence as a period marked by vulnerability, transformation, and negotiation, where the self is continuously formed and reformed in response to internal conflicts and external pressures. While DNA emphasizes the psychological and social dimensions of identity formation, *The Wolves* highlights the role of the body and gender in shaping the adolescent self. Both texts ultimately reveal that identity is constructed through a complex interplay of forces

that often produce tension, uncertainty, and transformation. This study through analyzing both the plays, *DNA* and *The Wolves*, shows that literature serves as a vital space for exploring the lived realities of adolescence, offering insights into the challenges and possibilities of identity formation. It not only deepens the level of understanding of the literary representation of the embodiment of the adolescent identity but also contributes to broader discussions on youth, society, and the processes through which identity is negotiated and defined.

Data availability statement: Data sharing is not applicable to this article as no new data were created or analysed in this study.

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