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Identity Crisis in Shandana Minhas's *Survival Tips for Lunatics* (2014):

An Eriksonian Reading



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Abstract

This study examines how characters' sense of identity, belonging, and social position is challenged and reshaped in Shandana Minhas's *Survival Tips for Lunatics* (2014). The main objective of the study is to investigate representations of identity crisis using Erikson's (1968) theory of identity. A qualitative research design is adopted, and selected passages from the novel are analysed through close textual reading. Erikson's (1968) theory of identity provides the main theoretical framework. The analysis focuses on how experiences of loss, extinction, violence, and displacement disturb characters' relationships with self, family, community, and homeland. The study argues that these disruptions destabilise individual and collective identities but also encourage resistance, adaptation, and reconstruction of the self. The study contributes to psychosocial literary criticism and the study of contemporary Pakistani literature, particularly children's and young adult fiction.

Keywords: Identity Crisis, Erikson, Psychosocial Development, Literary Criticism, Belonging, Identity, Survival, Shandana Minhas, *Survival Tips for Lunatics*

2. Background of the Study

Identity has become an important area of literary and cultural studies because literature often represents characters' struggles to understand who they are in relation to family, community, culture, and social roles. Erikson (1968) views identity as a developing sense of continuity, belonging, and social position. When individuals experience severe disruption, separation, conflict, or loss, their established sense of identity may become unstable, producing an identity crisis. From this perspective, disruptive experiences do not only produce emotional suffering; they can also affect how individuals understand who they are and where they belong.

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Recent scholarship on Shandana Minhas's *Survival Tips for Lunatics* has mainly focused on its anthropomorphic characters, ecological concerns, and representations of nature and human–animal relations. Rehman and Saeed (2024), for instance, examine the novel through ecocriticism and subject formation, highlighting how characters such as Bear and Markhor challenge human-centred perspectives and represent issues of extinction, domination, and resistance. More recent discussions of the novel continue to emphasize its environmental concerns, fantasy, childhood adventure, and the relationship between humans and the natural world. However, comparatively limited attention has been given to the novel's representation of trauma, memory, displacement, belonging, and identity crisis. The present study therefore extends existing scholarship by examining how experiences of loss, extinction, violence, and displacement affect characters' identities and sense of belonging through Erikson's (1968) theory of identity.

3. Statement of the Problem

Shandana Minhas's *Survival Tips for Lunatics* (2014) presents experiences of extinction, hunting, poaching, nuclear testing, environmental destruction, displacement, loss, conflict, and fear through a combination of humour, fantasy, anthropomorphism, and dialogue. Although these elements have literary, ecological, and social significance, their relationship with identity crisis has received limited critical attention. The major problem addressed by this study is therefore to examine how these experiences challenge and reshape characters' sense of self, belonging, community, and survival. Drawing on Erikson's (1968) theory of identity, the study examines how extinction, displacement, family separation, violence, and social conflict challenge and reshape characters' identities. The study further investigates how Minhas's anthropomorphic characters, humour, fantasy, and dialogue provide indirect ways of representing serious psychological, ecological, and social experiences related to identity. Thus, the study addresses the gap by examining the interconnectedness of identity, belonging, memory, survival, and resistance in the novel.

4. Methodology

The study employs a qualitative, descriptive-interpretive research design because its purpose is to interpret literary meanings rather than to measure variables statistically (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The primary text is Shandana Minhas's *Survival Tips for Lunatics* (2014). The selected data consists of thirteen passages supplied for analysis, including dialogues and narrative statements involving Bear, Sparrow, Markhor, and Velociraptor. The passages are treated as textual evidence through which the study identifies representations of loss, displacement, identity instability, and resistance.

The data is selected purposively rather than randomly. Purposive selection is appropriate because the research focuses specifically on passages that directly or indirectly represent identity (Patton, 2015).. The analysis first identifies the event or condition associated with disruption or loss. It then examines how the character understands or expresses it, and how the experience influences the character's sense of identity. The passages are subsequently interpreted through Erikson's concept of identity crisis.

The method of analysis is close textual reading. The researcher examines vocabulary, repetition, dialogue, imagery, characterization, references to time, expressions of loss, and statements concerning belonging and identity.

5. Theoretical Framework

The study is based on Erik Erikson's theory of identity. This theoretical perspective provides a suitable framework for examining identity crisis in *Survival Tips for Lunatics*.

5.1 Erikson's Theory of Identity

Erikson (1968) views identity as an individual's developing sense of self, continuity, and belonging within personal and social contexts. According to his theory, identity is shaped through interaction with family, society, culture, and significant life experiences. A stable identity provides individuals with a sense of consistency between their past, present, and anticipated future, whereas major

disruptions such as loss, separation, displacement, or social conflict can disturb this sense of continuity and produce an identity crisis (Erikson, 1968). During an identity crisis, individuals may experience uncertainty about who they are, where they belong, and what role they occupy in society. However, identity is not necessarily fixed; individuals may negotiate, adapt, and reconstruct their sense of self in response to changing circumstances (Erikson, 1968). These concepts provide a useful framework for examining how trauma, displacement, loss, and survival affect identity and belonging in *Survival Tips for Lunatics*.

5.2 Application of the Framework

Erikson's theory is used to examine selected textual passages in order to identify how experiences of loss, extinction, violence, and displacement affect characters' identities. Particular attention is given to belonging, resistance, and survival. Anthropomorphism, humour, fantasy, and dialogue are also considered as literary techniques through which Minhas represents identity struggles. In this way, the theoretical framework connects the psychological consequences of disruptive experience with the characters' attempts to preserve, negotiate, or reconstruct their identities.

6.1 Bear and the Crisis of Extinction

Bear's statement, "I'm only the last of my kind if you let me be" (Minhas, 2014, p. 183), represents both the psychological consequences of species extinction and identity reconstruction. The expression "last of my kind" reflects how a past collective loss continues to shape Bear's present consciousness, and his survival consequently keeps the memory of his extinct species alive. At the same time, the conditional phrase "if you let me be" indicates agency and resistance.

From Erikson's (1968) perspective, identity develops through an individual's relationship with a wider social and communal identity. The disappearance of Bear's species therefore creates a crisis of belonging, while his determination to survive enables him to reconstruct a sense of self. Extinction thus functions as an identity crisis.

6.2 Human Violence and Identity

Bear further states, "thanks to human hunters and poachers, I am the last of my kind" (Minhas, 2014, p. 37). The statement directly connects past human violence with Bear's present sense of self as the final survivor of his kind, and his individual identity consequently becomes a carrier of collective memory and loss. From Erikson's (1968) perspective, the destruction of Bear's social group also disrupts the communal dimension of identity, since a sense of self is partly constructed through belonging to a social group. The passage therefore demonstrates how ecological violence produces fractured identity. It also supports Rehman and Saeed's (2024) argument that Minhas's anthropomorphic characters challenge human-centred narratives by transforming environmental destruction into an emotionally and psychologically recognizable experience.

6.3 Conflict, Loss, and Identity Formation

Sparrow tells the boys, "If you boys hadn't been so busy arguing, we could have saved your tent" (Minhas, 2014, p. 26). Although presented humorously, the incident introduces loss, vulnerability, and responsibility. Similarly, the statement, "It does not matter who starts it; what matters is how you end it" (Minhas, 2014, p. 43), shifts attention from the origin of conflict toward its consequences. From Erikson's (1968) perspective, such experiences contribute to the development of identity because individuals gradually negotiate responsibility, relationships, and social expectations. The boys' experiences therefore demonstrate that conflict can become a formative experience through which they develop cooperation, responsibility, and independence.

6.4 Loss, Family, and Disrupted Belonging

Sparrow warns, "If you don't leave this valley now, son, there won't be anything left for your Mom and Dad to get" (Minhas, 2014, p. 26). The address "son" establishes identity through the familial relationship, while the possibility that there will be "nothing left" creates a sense of impending loss and separation. Erikson (1968) emphasizes the importance of interpersonal relationships and

social belonging in the development of identity. The threatened loss of family therefore represents more than physical danger; it also threatens the child's relational sense of self. The passage consequently connects familial vulnerability with disrupted belonging, paralleling Bear's experience of losing his species.

6.5 Ecological Destruction and Identity

Bear recalls, "Big explosion under the ground. Then animal, birds, plants, insects...they all die" (Minhas, 2014, p. 48). The passage represents nuclear testing as a form of ecological and collective loss. The listing of "animal, birds, plants, insects" expands the experience beyond the human subject and presents ecological destruction as collective suffering. The passage therefore transforms environmental catastrophe from an abstract historical event into a remembered experience of loss. It also challenges anthropocentric assumptions by positioning non-human life within the sphere of identity and belonging.

6.6 Environmental Change and Identity

Bear observes that unusual snowfall "must be part of the great change that was ushering one age into another" (Minhas, 2014, p. 114). The environmental transformation disrupts the characters' assumptions about stability, familiarity, and continuity. Erikson's (1968) theory emphasizes continuity and coherence in the development of identity. When the familiar environment changes dramatically, the characters' relationship with place and belonging is also destabilized. Environmental transformation consequently operates not merely as ecological change but as a crisis of continuity and place-based identity.

6.7 Human Identity and the Crisis of Responsibility

The dialogue, "The humans will take care of their own." "Will they? Have we not seen that the humans don't take care of their own?" (Minhas, 2014, p. 66), questions the assumption of human solidarity and responsibility. The animals expose the contradiction between humanity's claim to civilization and its failure to protect both humans and the environment. Erikson's (1968) theory is particularly relevant because identity develops through relationships, social

recognition, and belonging to a community. When humans fail to care for "their own," the foundations of collective identity become questionable. The passage thus connects social irresponsibility, collective identity, and ecological harm.

6.8 Wildness, Civilization, and Identity Crisis

Bear declares, "We might be wild, but we're not savages" (Minhas, 2014, p. 28). The distinction challenges conventional human definitions of animals as inferior or uncivilized. Although humans engage in hunting, poaching, and environmental destruction, the animals demonstrate moral awareness and ethical reasoning. Bear consequently rejects an externally imposed identity and reconstructs his self-understanding. This process can be interpreted through Erikson's (1968) concept of identity formation, particularly the negotiation between imposed social identities and an internally constructed sense of self. Thus, the rejection of the label "savage" becomes an act of identity resistance. This interpretation complements Rehman and Saeed's (2024) observation that Minhas uses anthropomorphic characters to challenge dominant human-centred narratives.

6.9 Markhor, Displacement, and Belonging

Markhor's lament, "O hills of home... Must I through you roam / All alone / Till I am skin and bone?" (Minhas, 2014, pp. 70–71), connects displacement with identity and belonging. The repeated reference to "home" demonstrates that geographical place is central to Markhor's sense of self. Erikson (1968) provides a framework for understanding how the disruption of belonging can destabilize identity. Markhor's loneliness therefore represents more than physical displacement; it signifies the loss of a social and spatial context through which identity is maintained. The passage consequently presents displacement as an identity crisis.

6.10 Artistic Voice and Resistance

Markhor declares, "You ask me to bottle my artistic voice!" and "You will never silence me!" (Minhas, 2014, p. 75). His artistic voice constitutes an essential component of his identity, and the attempt to silence him consequently becomes

an attempt to suppress his selfhood. Erikson's (1968) theory is relevant here because identity involves developing and maintaining a coherent sense of self within social relationships. Markhor's refusal to surrender his voice demonstrates his effort to preserve that identity, and his insistence on speaking can be understood as a movement from silencing toward self-expression, identity preservation, and resistance.

6.11 Velociraptor and the Crisis of Civilization

The Velociraptor states, "If we eat it, we become incapable of civilized conversation and spend our hours trying to dismember each other" (Minhas, 2014, p. 175). Through humour and irony, Minhas reverses conventional distinctions between civilized humans and savage animals. The Velociraptor's concern with "civilized conversation" challenges fixed categories of identity and exposes the contradiction between human claims to civilization and destructive human behaviour. Erikson's (1968) theory is relevant because identity is shaped through social roles, values, and relationships. The Velociraptor constructs an alternative moral identity in which civility is associated with ethical behaviour rather than biological species. The passage therefore contributes to the novel's broader questioning of civilization, identity, and moral responsibility.

6.12 Identity and Survival

Taken together, the selected passages demonstrate a sustained relationship between disruptive experience and identity crisis. Erikson's (1968) theory explains how experiences of extinction, violence, displacement, ecological destruction, and loss disrupt characters' relationships with self, family, community, place, and collective identity. Bear's extinction, Markhor's displacement, the boys' conflicts, and the animals' resistance to imposed identities demonstrate that loss and disruption can destabilize identity while simultaneously creating conditions for resistance, agency, and identity reconstruction. Minhas's use of anthropomorphism, humour, fantasy, and dialogue therefore enables the novel to represent identity struggles in accessible yet critically significant ways. Survival

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ultimately signifies more than physical endurance; it represents the preservation and reconstruction of identity, belonging, voice, and agency.

7. Discussion

The analysis demonstrates that identity crisis is a central concern in *Survival Tips for Lunatics*. Bear's statements, "I'm only the last of my kind" and "thanks to human hunters and poachers, I am the last of my kind" (Minhas, 2014, pp. 37, 183), illustrate how past violence continues to shape present identity. Erikson's (1968) theory explains how the loss of Bear's species disrupts his sense of collective belonging and forces him to reconstruct his identity.

The same relationship emerges in the representation of ecological destruction. Bear's recollection that "animal, birds, plants, insects... they all die" (Minhas, 2014, p. 48) demonstrates how disruptive consequences extend beyond the individual to the wider ecological community. Similarly, the boys' conflicts, fear of family separation, and subsequent development of responsibility demonstrate Erikson's (1968) view that identity develops through relationships and social experience. Their movement from conflict toward cooperation suggests that difficult experiences can contribute to identity development rather than merely producing psychological disruption.

Markhor's repeated longing for his "hills of home" (Minhas, 2014, pp. 70–71) further establishes the relationship between displacement and belonging. His loss of place destabilizes his sense of identity, while his declaration, "You will never silence me!" (p. 75), demonstrates resistance through artistic expression. From Erikson's (1968) perspective, maintaining an artistic voice enables Markhor to preserve a coherent sense of self despite external attempts to silence or redefine him.

The statements "We might be wild, but we're not savages" (Minhas, 2014, p. 28) and the Velociraptor's concern with "civilized conversation" (p. 175) further complicate the relationship between identity and civilization. Minhas reverses conventional human/animal binaries and demonstrates that moral identity is not

determined by species. This finding complements Rehman and Saeed's (2024) argument that Minhas's anthropomorphic characters challenge human-centred narratives.

The analysis indicate that Erikson's (1968) theory explains how disruptive experiences of violence, loss, extinction, and displacement destabilize and subsequently reshape individual and collective identity. Minhas consequently presents survival as a psychological and social process involving belonging, resistance, agency, and reconstruction of the self.

8. Findings

The study found that identity crisis was a central concern in Shandana Minhas's *Survival Tips for Lunatics* (2014). The analysis revealed that experiences of extinction, hunting, poaching, nuclear testing, environmental destruction, displacement, separation, and conflict challenged the characters' sense of self beyond the original events. Bear's experience as the "last of my kind" showed that ecological destruction had produced both individual and collective identity disruption, while his resistance demonstrated an attempt to preserve his identity. The study also found that displacement and loss of home, particularly in Markhor's experience, had disrupted the characters' sense of belonging and contributed to identity instability. In accordance with Erikson's (1968) theory, the findings showed that identity had been shaped and challenged through relationships with family, species, homeland, community, culture, and survival. Furthermore, anthropomorphic animals had challenged human-centred ideas of civilization and savagery, while humour, fantasy, and dialogue had provided indirect but effective ways of representing serious psychological, ecological, and social concerns related to identity. The findings indicated that these disruptive experiences had destabilized identities but had also encouraged resistance, adaptation, survival, and reconstruction of the self.

9. Conclusion

The study concluded that *Survival Tips for Lunatics* had represented identity not simply as a stable given but as a continuing process whose disruption and reconstruction had shaped characters' relationships, memories, and sense of belonging. Erikson's (1968) theory demonstrated that experiences of violence, extinction, environmental destruction, and displacement had challenged established identities and had forced characters to reconsider who they were and where they belonged. The analysis also concluded that Minhas had used anthropomorphism, humour, fantasy, and dialogue to communicate serious identity-related concerns in an accessible literary form. Rather than portraying characters only as victims, the novel had presented them as survivors who had responded to loss through resistance, self-expression, adaptation, and the reconstruction of identity. Therefore, the study concluded that identity crisis had functioned as a central dimension of the novel, while survival had emerged as a process of preserving identity, belonging, voice, and agency.

Authors' Contributions

1. **Ayesha Habib** ⁽¹⁾: Principal author; literature review, textual analysis, data collection, and manuscript drafting.
2. **Sikander Hayat** ⁽²⁾: Conceptualization, development of the theoretical framework, critical analysis, interpretation of findings, and manuscript revision.
3. **Dr. Nijat Ullah Khan** ⁽³⁾: Corresponding author; research supervision, theoretical guidance, critical evaluation, interpretation of results, and final editing of the manuscript.

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