Language and the Struggle for Identity in the Goldfinch: A Study of Youth and Crisis

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Abstract

Youth is a transformative period marked by the dismantling of childhood beliefs and the formation of an autonomous self. During this time, individuals seek independence while striving to integrate into society and establish a unique identity. This study examines *The Goldfinch* by Donna Tartt as a modern Bildungsroman to explore the protagonist's journey of identity formation, focusing on the conflicts and psychological trauma that arise when this process is disrupted. Using an interactional model based on the developmental psychoanalytic theories of Erik Erikson and James Marcia, this research investigates how unresolved crises during adolescence can lead to distorted identities. Developmental psychology posits that adolescence is crucial for identity development, during which individuals experiment with different social roles and vocations. Through a linguistic analysis, this study reveals how failure to achieve ego identity during this critical phase contributes to negative identity outcomes, such as engagement in criminal behavior and social isolation. The findings highlight the profound impact of disrupted identity formation on the protagonist's psychological development and social interactions.

Keywords: identity formation, Bildungsroman, linguistic analysis, psychological trauma, developmental psychology

1. Introduction

In literature, the theme of the individual's conflict with society often intersects with the influence of culture, which shapes societal expectations and norms. Society is not a monolithic entity but is formed by diverse cultural factors such as traditions, values, and beliefs, all of which impact an individual's sense of identity and personal freedom. During adolescence, cultural pressures can both foster a sense of belonging and restrict self-expression, adding complexity to the struggle between personal desires and societal demands. In The Goldfinch by Donna Tartt, understanding the cultural context is crucial to analyzing the characters' experiences and choices as they navigate the challenges of identity formation, with the writer's linguistic choices revealing the tension between individuality and societal expectations.

The transition period is not easy and the teenagers are often traumatized by the identity crisis. Moreover, developmental psychologists like Erikson and Marcia are also of the view that socialization has a very strong impact on the personality of a person especially the adolescent, because it is at this age that they begin to view the world with a more critical eye and begin to identify themselves to specific values, morals and attributes in life. The same issues are often studied in novels which are called Bildungsroman. It is the genre of literature which usually depicts the journey of an adolescent from immaturity to wisdom, from rebelliousness to stability and also the firmness in moral or social values that one has in life. However, Erikson and Marcia are of the view that it is not necessary that a person might resolve the identity crises and those who are unable to do so tend to develop a negative social identity. According to Erikson (1968), the most severely regressed youth are deeply influenced by a pervasive sense of distrust toward time itself where every delay appears to be a deceit, every wait an experience of impotence, every hope a danger, every plan a catastrophe, every possible provider a potential traitor.

The book delves into his traumatic past and the absence of parental love in his life. Tartt usually writes mysterious novels, which is often considered a reflection of her personality as she normally chose to remain mysterious and aloof from the outside world (Anderson, 2017). Formation of identity is a psychosocial process as it not only means having a positive sense of being unique but it also requires an individual to experience a sense of sameness with the society. Where such a development is an ongoing process, adolescence holds the most significant place for identity formation and failure to achieve ego identity at this stage results in the development of an unresolved crisis, which may lead an adolescent to develop a negative role identity in the form of rebellious denial of the expectations of parents and society by showing criminal behavior or/and social isolation. Hence, it is research worthy to investigate the present novel to analyze the circumstances that leads

the protagonist to form a prolonged identity crisis and the ways in which crisis in identity development give way to criminal behavior and social isolation. Such a journey of development is also a route map often taken by Bildungsroman novels so, the study will also evaluate if the present novel fulfills the parameters of being a Bildungsroman or not. The objectives of this study are to assess the circumstances that lead the protagonist to have an unresolved prolonged identity crisis leading to social isolation and criminal activity. Analyzing the linguistic choices of characters in a novel provides deep insights into their personalities, relationships, and emotional journeys. The way a character speaks—through their vocabulary, sentence structure, tone, and speech patterns—reveals aspects of their identity, education, social status, and cultural background. Language also reflects power dynamics, psychological states, and character development; shifts in dialogue can signal changes in a character's emotional or intellectual growth. Additionally, linguistic choices reveal the cultural and societal contexts in which characters live, highlighting social issues like class, race, or gender. Subtext in dialogue often exposes hidden motivations or desires, while tone and mood set by speech contribute to a character's portrayal as sympathetic, unreliable, or villainous. Language is also essential for conveying conflict, intimacy, and relationships, as the way characters interact through dialogue reveals underlying tensions, power imbalances, or affection. Ultimately, linguistic analysis helps uncover the deeper layers of characterization, thematic elements, and the overall narrative, allowing readers to gain a more nuanced understanding of both individual characters and the story as a whole.

This study examines the identity crisis during adolescence, focusing on The Goldfinch by Donna Tartt, and explores the novel within the framework of developmental psychology (Tandon, 2008). It analyzes the protagonist's transition from childhood to adolescence, highlighting issues of identity crisis and the biological and psychological changes that influence this stage of development. The research draws on the theories of Erik Erikson and James Marcia to offer a psycho-social analysis of identity formation. Additionally, it explores how these themes of identity crisis are depicted in the novel and whether The Goldfinch fits within the genre of Bildungsroman, considering its approach to character development and the linguistic choices employed. The study also acknowledges the universal nature of adolescence while noting cultural differences in how identity crises manifest

1.1 Bildungsroman

According to Buckley, a Bildungsroman is a novel that portrays all but two or three of a set list of characteristics, among them are "childhood, the conflict of generations, provinciality, the larger society, self-education, alienation, ordeal by love, the search for a vocation and a working philosophy" (Buckley, 1974). The impending crisis in identity formation as the protagonist moves from childhood to adolescence holds a significant place for defining the genre as Chris Baldick defines Bildungsroman novels as novels that follow "the development of the hero or heroine from childhood or adolescence into adulthood, through a troubled quest for identity" (Baldick, 2004) M.H. Abrams also notes that the genre is about the "development of the protagonist's mind and character, in the passage from childhood through varied experiences – and usually through a spiritual crisis – into maturity and recognition of his or her identity and role in the world"(Abrams, 1988). The "growth and maturity" occurs with a systematic pattern in which the protagonist often leaves his/her comfort zone, is tested in life through interactions, relationships, people and the like, but "finally finds the best place to use his / her unique talents" (Thamarana, 2015). However, Erikson is of the view that in reality, not all the conflicts of people are resolved and they often develop a negative identity.

1.2 Psycho-social Analysis

Psychoanalysis, developed by Sigmund Freud, is a theory aimed at uncovering repressed psychological issues by analyzing patients' narratives. Freud distinguished between conscious and unconscious cognitive processes, emphasizing that the unconscious mind holds repressed desires, fears, and unresolved conflicts. These unconscious elements often manifest in dreams or dysfunctional behavior (Freud, 1965). He argued that "the psychic processes are in themselves unconscious, and those which are conscious are merely isolated acts and parts of the total psychic life" (Freud, 1965, p. 15). According to Freud, these repressed emotions influence behavior in disguised forms, such as in dreams or symptoms (Freud, 1923).

Erik Erikson's theory of psychosocial development is also relevant here, particularly regarding identity formation during adolescence. Erikson (1968) proposed that each stage of life involves a critical conflict that must be resolved for healthy development. During adolescence, individuals experience an identity crisis, a critical period of transition between childhood and adulthood, and the resolution of this crisis is crucial for a positive sense of self. If this conflict is unresolved, it can lead to negative behavioral patterns and difficulties in later stages of life (Erikson, 1968).

Building on Erikson's work, James Marcia (1966) further developed the concept of identity formation. He identified four identity statuses based on two key dimensions: exploration and commitment. Adolescents who resolve their identity crisis through exploration and commitment reach "identity achievement." However, if they fail to explore or commit, they may fall into "identity diffusion," a state characterized by a lack of direction or a stable sense of self (Marcia, 1966).

1.3 Erickson's Stages of Development

Erik Erikson expanded on Sigmund Freud's psychoanalytic theory by introducing a social dimension to human development. His theory, known as the epigenetic principle, posits that development occurs in eight stages, with each stage building on the previous one. According to Erikson (1968), "anything that grows has a ground plan," meaning each developmental phase unfolds in a set sequence (p. 92). Development is shaped by the interplay between society and the individual, with psychosocial conflicts defining each stage. These stages include Trust vs. Mistrust, Autonomy vs. Shame/Doubt, Initiative vs. Guilt, Industry vs. Inferiority, Identity vs. Role Confusion, Intimacy vs. Isolation, Generativity vs. Stagnation, and Ego Integrity vs. Despair. This research focuses on the fifth stage—Identity vs. Role Confusion—where

adolescents (ages 12-18) strive to develop a stable identity, though this process is often fraught with confusion, stress, and even suicidal thoughts. Success in resolving identity issues leads to the virtue of fidelity, a lasting sense of self (Erikson, 1968, p. 92).

James Marcia (1980) further elaborated on Erikson's fifth stage, identifying four identity statuses: foreclosure, diffusion, moratorium, and identity achievement. In foreclosure, adolescents adopt societal or parental values without question, while in diffusion, they remain uncertain and fail to resolve their identity crisis. Moratorium represents a period of exploration, where individuals actively seek their own values, and identity achievement occurs when a person successfully resolves the crisis, developing a clear, committed sense of self (Marcia, 1980, p. 161).

This study combines Erikson's and Marcia's theories to analyze the protagonist in Donna Tartt's The Goldfinch. Both theorists argue that unresolved identity crises can lead to negative identity formation, characterized by diffusion or foreclosure. This stagnation can result in alienation, criminality, or isolation. In Bildungsroman novels, a character's journey from immaturity to maturity is typically resolved, leading to a philosophical outlook on life. However, Erikson and Marcia emphasize that not all individuals resolve their crises, and failure to do so can lead to maladaptive outcomes, as seen in some Bildungsroman narratives.

2. Literature Review

This research uses a triangulated approach, combining Erik Erikson's fifth stage of psychosocial development with Marcia's Identity Development Statuses. Erikson believed identity development results from the interplay between biology, psychology, and society within a historical context (Kroger, 2003). While influenced by Freud's work, Erikson focused on how an individual's inner self and societal factors together shape personality. As individuals grow, society's influence brings continual changes through new knowledge and experience. Erikson's eight stages of psychosocial development are interconnected, with each stage influencing the next. Identity development is an ongoing process, shaped by both past experiences and social realities (Erikson, 1968). Newman and Newman (2011) argue that even when a person is in a particular stage, they may still process conflicts from other stages. Overcoming a past conflict leads to the acquisition of positive qualities that persist throughout life, while unresolved conflicts can result in negative traits that affect future development. Erikson's fifth stage, Identity vs. Role Confusion, occurs during adolescence, a critical period bridging childhood and adulthood. In this stage, individuals begin forming a sense of identity, including values and future goals (Erikson, 1987). Adolescents become more independent in their thinking and start considering long-term aspects like career and family.

Marcia expanded on Erikson's theory, identifying four statuses of identity development: Foreclosure, Identity Diffusion, Moratorium, and Identity Achievement (Marcia, 1993). Adolescents typically begin by adopting societal and parental ideals. If these align, they experience Identity Diffusion, with little difficulty adhering to societal norms. If there's a disconnect, they enter Foreclosure, which may trigger an identity crisis. As they mature, adolescents move into Moratorium, experimenting with different identities before eventually reaching Identity Achievement, where they develop a stable and unique sense of self.

Criminality plays a significant role in young adult literature as the most severe form of deviance. Individuals with criminal tendencies disregard social norms and are often indifferent to the needs and emotions of others. In sociology, crime is defined as deviant behavior that violates societal norms or cultural standards about how people should behave (Lumen, 2011). This perspective takes into account how social, political, psychological, and economic situations condition realities for a person (Kanwal, 2017). One of the primary causes of criminal behavior is identity crisis, particularly when an individual develops a negative sense of self. This can lead to self-centered behavior and disregard for societal norms. Another result of identity crisis is social isolation, which can range from temporary disconnection to deep-rooted alienation from society. Social isolation involves behaviors like withdrawing from family, friends, or colleagues and avoiding social interaction (Khullar, 2016).

Social connections and a sense of belonging are crucial for adolescent development, and research consistently highlights the negative effects of social isolation on mental and physical health. William Bukowski (2007) emphasize how isolation, particularly during adolescence, can lead to depression, anxiety, and poor self-esteem, with long-term consequences for emotional and physical well-being. Together, these scholars underscore the cumulative and long-term health risks of chronic isolation and the importance of fostering meaningful social bonds for adolescent well-being.

Hall and Lande (2007) studied over 4,700 teenagers and found that social isolation is strongly linked to higher levels of depressive symptoms and lower self-esteem. Lohre (2012) similarly reports that loneliness is significantly associated with depression and anxiety among 419 Norwegian children aged 7-16. Both studies also found that loneliness is connected to sleep disturbances, with Hall and Lande (2007) studying 200 British children (ages 8-11) and Lohre (2012) focusing on 11-17-year-olds. Hall and Lande's longitudinal study also linked depression in early adolescence to suicidal behaviors at age 15, and their research, along with a contemporaneous study of over 4,700 teens, revealed that social isolation increases the risk of suicide attempts. This is especially concerning given that suicide is the third leading cause of death among adolescents aged 15-19.

3. Discussion

The experience in a novel is shaped by the interplay of words, where language not only reflects the author's subconscious and the reader's interpretation but also the broader communicative and linguistic context (Naz, 2011). Donna Tartt opens **The Goldfinch**, with Theodore Decker, the protagonist, reflecting on his life from a bed in a Dutch restaurant in Amsterdam. Trapped by his choices, Theo feels disconnected from the world around him, likening his knowledge of the room to that of a "prisoner" (Tartt, 2013, p. 5). Tartt's linguistic

choices highlight Theo's emotional state: the outside world is described as lively and festive—"all activity and cheer… Christmas trees lashed to the backs of their bicycles", while the room is chaotic—"room-service trays; too many cigarettes; lukewarm vodka" (Tartt, 2013, p. 5). The contrast between these images reflects Theo's inner turmoil, as the external world is vibrant, while his internal world is chaotic and stagnant. His heightened anxiety is shown through phrases like "my heart scrambled and floundered" (Tartt, 2013, p. 6) and "muddied with... indeterminate anxiety" (Tartt, 2013, p. 7). These linguistic choices convey Theo's deep confusion and emotional crisis, marked by his feverish dreams and inability to find peace, signaling his personal conflict.

4. Circumstances at Onset of Adolescence: Identity Foreclosure to Identity Diffusion

The protagonist Theodore Decker at the onset of adolescence is present in the status of identity foreclosure. He has commitments, but he is yet to undergo an actual crisis. Similar to any teenager he has adopted the socially approved norms of behavior and character, but he is starting to question those norms. It is noteworthy that the circumstances around him are not much favorable for a smooth transition from role confusion to identity formation.

Early exposures impact later possibilities (Kanwal, 2018). Likewise at the age of 13, Theo is a troubled teen. He starts narrating his coming of age journey from his high school. He is a brilliant student on a scholarship. Like any good student he has worked hard and due to his intelligence, he has been placed in a grade higher than his age fellows, but he has been in trouble at school. At the day of the crucial incident of the blast, which took his mother's life, he is called by the school office for his unruly and disruptive behavior. He has been "suspended from school" He was "seen smoking at school property (p. 10). But Theo tells the readers that there is more to his suspension than cigarettes "Tom's cigarette was only the tip of the iceberg. I'd been in trouble at school for a while" (p. 11). He tells us that along with a friend he has been breaking in to houses and stealing stuff as well.

> Tom Cable and I had been breaking into empty vacation houses when I went to stay with him out
> in the Hamptons… Mainly we'd snooped through closets and poked around in dresser drawers,
> but we'd also taken some things…(p. 12)

Theo knows that his attitude is wrong which could cause him and his mother a lot of trouble. "How could I be so stupid? Breaking and entering was a crime; people went to jail for it" (p. 13). He also says "I tried hard not to think about some of the unpleasant fates that were about to befall me: some of them involving juvenile prison, or jail"(p. 15). The fact that Theo has a realization of the consequences, but still his behavior is most disruptive and nearly criminal, make the reader realize that there are some serious reasons for such behavior.

Theo's troubled family background is central to his character. His father left him and his mother months before, and although Theo feels they are "generally much happier without him" (p. 11), the sense of abandonment still affects him. His father, a drunk and abusive man, was a poor role model. Theo is sensitive to being compared to him, especially when his mother points out that his harsh words to her resemble his father's: "I looked away embarrassed… I heard it too, an annoying know-it-all tone" (p. 16). This comparison embarrasses him, highlighting his struggle with his identity.

Society treats Theo with pity after his father's abandonment, offering sympathy in ways that, although well-intentioned, undermine his self-respect. Teachers at his school, eager to support him, give him "special allowances and delayed deadlines and second and third chances" (p. 11), but this only leads him to feel like he is being treated differently because of his father's actions. Rather than helping, this pity deepens his sense of shame.

Theo's mother struggles financially after his father's departure, and losing Theo's scholarship would be devastating for them. He admits, "If I lost my scholarship it would be catastrophic; we were broke since my dad had left; we barely had money for rent" (p. 12). Despite these hardships, his mother, a former art history student at NYU, exposes Theo to the world of museums. He recalls, "For me— a city kid, always confined by apartment walls— the museum was interesting mainly because of its immense size… I'd love to go there alone and roam around until I got lost" (p. 22). These visits provide Theo with a sense of solace, allowing him to escape the constraints of his life and find peace in the vast, silent galleries.

Along with being mesmerized by the beauty and mystery of museum Theo is also educated by his mother about the paintings such as a painting by a Dutch painter Frans Hals *boy holding a skull* (p. 26) etc. The most important painting that Theo's mother introduced him to and which later accompanies Theo in his search for 'self' is the painting of "the Goldfinch". It is a small painting of "a yellow finch against a plain, pale background, chained to a perch by its twig of an ankle" (p. 29). Painting is symbolic; the yellow bird is tied to a cage with a chain on his ankle against a dull yellow background. We can say that 'the bird' symbolizes youth 'the chain' symbolizes the customs and traditions of the world which binds a youth and forbids him from a free flight. Pale or dim background suggests the harsh and unattractive circumstances from which one passes through before forming a coherent self. Erikson (1968) addresses this very conflict in his 'theory of psychosocial development'. For him development is not just the matter of biological factors as suggested by Sigmund Freud but it is only in mutual agreement with social circumstances, traditions and customs that a person forms a complete whole i.e., complete meaning of self. The customs and traditions of the society are sometimes more binding for the youth than protecting or encouraging but it is only in coherence with society that meaning of self can be found. As what you think of yourself cannot remain unaffected by how people perceive you and the opinion they had about you. Only by forming a harmony between self and social perception of self can an individual form a coherent image of self as potentials of self and demands of society must go hand in hand. Theo is suffering from same conflict as his perception of life is not based upon his own thinking at this stage (Foreclosure) but on socially prescribed path mostly directed by his mother. Only when he will find a harmony between his own will and social will, will he be able to

find coherent self. The painting of *The Goldfinch* can be said as the most important symbol of the whole novel as Theo will hold on to the painting for the rest of his coming of age journey and it will only be when he will find his true self or identity that he will let the painting go.

As Theo and his mother passes through the art galleries, Theo's attention is diverted to a small girl, Pippa, who has come there with her uncle. She is little younger than Theo. "there was something about her that made my stomach go watery" (p. 28) Theo is infatuated by her as he says "Why do I obsess over people like this? Was it normal to fixate on strangers in this particular vivid, fevered way? I didn't think so… And yet it was the main reason I'd gone to those houses with Tom. I was fascinated by strangers"(p. 17) we can see in these lines that Theo admits to obsessing over people (Just as Pippa will be his lifelong obsession).He himself admits that it is an unhealthy and abnormal trait. We can link this trait to the family issues Theo is facing. He belongs to a broken family after his father's and mother's separation he has been living with a single mom. His mother has been trying to make the both ends meet. And although Theo says that he was better off without his father but it certainly does not seem to be the case. His main reason for fixation upon people seems to be abandonment by his own father and his background of a troubled family. He does not have proper attention at home, so he is fixating on other people who are total strangers and try to make sense of his own sense of abandonment and isolation.

As Theo and his mother roam through the art galleries, an explosion hits the museum. With "a huge dark flash and debris sweeping and twisting" (p. 34) Theo was thrown across the room as he lost consciousness. First memory that came to his mind after he came back to his senses was that he was being abused/bulled at school. A gang of tough, runty boys was bunched around me, kicking me in my ribs and the back of my head. My neck was twisted to the side and the wind was knocked out of me, but that wasn't the worst of it; I had sand in my mouth, I was breathing sand. The boys muttered, audibly. Get up, asshole. Look at him, look at him. (p. 34)

In fact, Theo was constantly bullied at school. Being an exceptionally smart student, he was considered a book worm of the class. The use of descriptors like "tough" and "runty" signifies the physical characteristics and qualities of the boys involved, highlighting their perceived toughness and small stature. The explosion is one of the most significant incidents of the novel as it changes the whole course of Theo's journey of identity development. Analysis of the words used to describe the event clearly shows how Theo was hurt both psychically and psychologically. He says, "My ears rang, and so did my body, an intensely disturbing sensation: bones, brain, heart all thrumming like a struck bell." (p.35) He was shocked and traumatized "I was gasping, half-choked with plaster dust, and my head hurt so badly I could hardly see. I wanted to sit down, except there was no place to sit." (p. 36) "My jaw hurt; my face and knees were cut; my mouth was like sandpaper. Blinking around at the chaos ... I was swaying there, choked and dizzy," (p. 35-36) All these lines suggest the incident as the most terrifying and baffling experience. "The grandeur and desolation of the space baffled me" Standing in the debris of museum Theo experienced an extreme sense of loneliness. He says "There was a strong sense of being alone, in wintry deadness. Nothing made sense in any direction."(p. 35) Winter is the season of darkness and death and that was exactly what he was going through. The coming of age Journey of a young protagonist is always passed in complete loneliness so is the search for identity. The extreme sense of loneliness is also evident as Theo was the only person standing. I was "the only person standing up in a room full of people. Everybody else was lying down except me"(p. 49).

As he passes through the art galleries looking for his mother he observes that "There was strange shallowness in the sound, a nightmare lightness" (p. 49) He again talks about the isolation and abandonment "The air of abandonment was unspeakably ceric" (p. 51). The incident is significant and implanted into Theo's mind because it is the incident that takes his mother life. We can see that all these instances suggest Theo heading towards the status of identity diffusion from foreclosure. He has adopted the values that are mostly dictated to him by the society especially his mother but he is unable to cope up with the demands of the society. This is because the circumstances around him are not favorable enough for him. Along with being a teenager with the physical changes and changes in perception; he is also a teen ager who has a troubled family and poor role models.

He is a scholarship student and was once popular among his teachers, but this is not the case anymore. Since his father abandoned him and his mother, he is under a lot of stress. His parents fail to provide a sound basis for his stage of identity coherence versus role confusion. As the father is drunk and abusive and mother is barely able to make both ends meet. Theo is surrounded by sense of abandonment and despair. He is unsure about the ideals he needs to follow for a successful future. The influence of peers like Tom Cable further worsens the situation. He is not just older than Theo but also far below than Theo in terms of academic achievements. Still Theo prefers his company because his pride is hurt by constant show of pity and mercy by the teachers and other students after his father left. He feels the need to show the society and more importantly to assure himself that he is not a below others, that is the most likely reason for breaking into houses and smoking cigarettes.

The incident of the bomb-blast is the most significant incident of the novel as it serves as a marker between the Identity foreclosure and identity diffusion. Theo's mother is the central figure of his life and he himself suggests that his life can be divided in before and after her death.

> Though everything that's happened to me since then is thoroughly my own fault, still when I lost her I lost sight of any landmark that might have led me someplace happier, to some more populated or congenial life… Her death is the dividing mark: Before and After… I've never met anyone who made me feel loved the way she did (p. 7)

As stated the result of the adolescence stage of identity diffusion versus cohesion is fidelity or the ability to form relations or belonging to an idea or person. The incident of the death of mother in a tragic blast will have a lasting effect on Theo's ability to form such relations or

belongings in future.

4.1 Middle to Late Adolescence: Identity Diffusion and Negative Role Identity

After the death of his mother Theo slowly moves from identity foreclosure into identity diffusion status. He has commitments earlier but with the death of his mother these commitments dissolve them self as most of these commitments were prone socially not psychologically. Theo was either directed by his mother towards the goals of his life or they were simply the dominant norms of society. His ideals were not well tested and were not formed on the basis of experience, which is why with crisis these ideals shatter. The result is that Theo fells into diffusion status, where he is totally uninterested in identity related issues and adopts a role oppose to the socially acceptable norms i.e., Negative role identity. Theo is placed in the custody of Barbours family right after the death of his mother. Where he feels that he is unwelcomed and wanted,

> Everything was lost, I had fallen off the map: the disorientation of being in the wrong apartment,
> with the wrong family, was wearing me down, so I felt groggy and punch-drunk, weepy almost,
> like an interrogated prisoner prevented from sleeping for days. Over and over, I kept thinking I've
> got to go home and then, for the millionth time, I can't. (p. 98)

Theo always feels that he is unwelcomed, and the family will get rid of him as they saw fit "all I understood… was that the official parties had convened to judge my fate and dispose of me as they saw fit." (p. 115) Theo's abusive father shows up on the door to pick him up and he takes Theo to Los Vegas with him. Upon his arrival in Los Vegas Theo says "Away we glided into depthlessness and space… feel like we had touched down on another planet." (p. 245) This statement is a hint on his identity diffusion status. Theo is now in a whole different place where he is not watched or cared for in any sense. He has found a new friend, Boris, an equally disturbed teen, and their endeavors include shoplifting, stealing, drinking and taking drugs. They say that drugs "was something we looked forward to" (p. 362). He is totally uninterested in any character building or relation formation. They both just go by their life laughing and playing. "We rolled our backs and roared with laughter. As week and nauseated as I felt I thought I would never be able to stop" (p. 307). Theo says about the effect of drugs as "all semblance of real life had vanished: we'd been neutralized, fictionalized, flattened; my field of vision was bordered by a black rectangle… I realized if I didn't want to be lost forever in this grainy Nosferatu world, sharp shadows and achromatism". (p.373) Theo and Boris take these drugs to move away from their troubled life of reality. Theo feels that he might not be able to come out of the adverse effects of drugs but still reality of abandonment and loneliness is too much to bear. The diffusion status is also evident in Theo's forgetting everything he was taught by his mother.

> The strangeness exalted me also frightened me a little. In New York everything reminded me of
> my mother- every texi, every street corner, every cloud that passed over the sun- but out in this
> hot mineral emptiness, it was as if she never existed; I could not even imagine her spirit looking
> down on me. All traces of her seemed burned away in the thin air desert. (246)

Theo was bound to traditions of the society, he was bound to have a socially approved identity in New York under the authority of his mother or the supervision of the Barbours but he has no restriction now he is free to live however he wants without any control or supervision by anyone. He himself is amazed on his new life "How had I fetched up into this strange new life, where drunk foreigners shouted around me in the night, and all my clothes were dirty, and nobody loved me?" (p.285) Theo often wrote to Hobie while he in Las Vegas and he was the only person who replied him. He wrote in one of his letters "may be there's something to be said about the rawness and emptiness of it all … but I think of you, it's as if you've gone away to sea on a ship-out in a foreign brightness where there are no paths, only stars and sky." (p. 313) The statement clearly reflects Diffusion status as Theo was on a voyage on a strange land where he has no clue or direction for his future.

Theo reaches New York again after the death of his father. It is noteworthy that from here on forward Theo is more prone towards a negative identity. During his stay in Las Vegas he was totally uninterested in Identity related issues. He was undergoing self-destructing criminal activities but without realizing or caring for consequences. But from here on forward he his acts of criminality are well thought off and conscious.

Theo reaches Hobie's house, an acquaintance of Pippa. He takes Theo in and take his temporary guardianship. He once again tries to fit in to the civil life but there are numerous factors, mentioned ahead, which again refrain him from forming a stabled identity. The shift is evident from the lines

> I hadn`t been around a mirror in a while and I Barely recognized myself: bruised jaw spattering of
> chin acne, face blotched and swollen from my cold– eyes swollen too, lidded and sleepy giving
> me a sort of dumb Shifty, homeschooled look. I looked like some cult– raised kid just rescued by
> local law enforcement, brought blinking from some basement stocked with firearms and
> powdered milk. (p.421)

Theo looked like a lost person "Mowgli the Jungle Boy!" (p. 411). He was living away from the social world and was without any identity or felt any crisis of identity. It was after Theo came back to New York that he tries to live a civil life which is too difficult for him now.

Theo is unable to adjust to new life in New York "no beer for me: it was weird readjusting to my life as a minor, like going back to crayons and kindergarten."(p.461) Theo has been admitted to an early college program. But he knows how hard it was "how could I

explain to him , in the chain of disorder and senselessness that had followed her death, exactly how irrelevant those old wishes were." (p. 451) It was Hobie and Theo's attorney Mr. Bracegirdle who motivated him for it stating his mother's wishes. "I know what your mother would have wanted for you… a fresh start." (p.451) But he is uninterested in work he has lost all the drive to work hard and even when he do hard work for his mother's wishes Theo feels like he is punishing himself. "It was as if I was trying to punish myself- maybe even make things up to my mother– by setting my sights so high." (p. 440) Theo feels like his stay in Los Vegas has rendered him unable to do anything productive. "I was worried that my exuberant drug use had damaged my brain and my nervous system and maybe even my soul in some irreparable and perhaps not in a readily apparent way." (p. 427) People call him lucky but Theo was still not happy

> I knew just how lucky I was still it was impossible to feel happy or even grateful for my good fortune. It was as if I`d suffered a chemical change of the spirit: as if the acid balance of my psyche had shifted and leached the life out of me in aspects impossible to repair, or reverse, like a frond of living coral hardened to bone (p. 460)

The result of such feeling of hopelessness was that Theo barely makes it out of college without any distinction. He starts working at Hobie's wood shop. But instead of being grateful to Hobie, for providing him home to stay in and a job, he starts steeling and selling fake antiquities from his store as real. He starts making fake transactions. "I sold heavily altered or outright reconstructed pieces as original, out of the light of Hobart and Black well". (p. 504) Theo did it not just because he wanted money but because he wants some happening in life. He wants to get the same feeling and excitement as he felt in Los Vegas while stealing, shoplifting and doing drugs

 "But it wasn`t just about money, I liked the game of it" (p. 512). The drug use also become a permanent habit, "Jerome the bike messenger I bought drugs from. The pills I's stolen from Xandra had started me on a bad road: oxys, roxys, morphine and Dilaudid when I could get to it." (p. 510) With other criminal acts of stealing and drugs, Theo kept the painting of Goldfinch with him that he had stolen from the museum, right after his mother's death. Theo was always paranoid about the painting as he is familiar that he had made a big mistake by stealing such a master piece. But since its been a long time he can't do anything but to keep it. He wants to sell the painting after a confrontation with Hobie "we can't have even one of those things out there purporting to be real" (p.555). Hobie suggests buying those pieces back at double the price if they had to but they don't have that much money. Theo wants to run away from the town

> There was a great seductive loneliness in the hum, a summons almost, like a call of the sea and for the first time I felt the impulse that had driven my dad to cash out his bank account, pick up his shirts from the cleaners, gas up the car, and leave town without a word." (p.549)

By selling the painting he can get money but he came to know that it was stolen from him by Boris, his friend in Los Vegas. Boris showed up after all those years. He told Theo that he had stolen his painting and sold it. He offers to buy the painting back to make it up to Theo. But in the whole situation of getting the painting back without getting police involved Theo shots a person to death. "It had happened before it even happened… because I have no memory at all of picking the pistol off the floor… I didn't really hear the bang until I felt the kick and the casing flew backand hit me in the face… I shot again and hit him above the eye red burst that made me flinch" (p. 761)

Theo, apart from the vocational front, was also a mess in respect of emotional front. He fell in love with Pippa; whom, as described earlier, he met at the museum and became obsessed with. "For years she had been the first thing I remembered when I woke up, the last thing that drifted through my mind as I went to sleep." (p.518) He also says, "She was the golden thread running through everything, a lens that magnified beauty so that the whole world stood transfigured in relation to her and her alone" (p.520) but it is an unrequited love, Pippa never loved him back more than a friend. Theo knows this fact and it disturbs him greatly " I tried to keep my eyes away always it seemed I was glancing up by mistake and there she was laughing at someone else joke or smiling at someone who wasn't me, always a fresh pain, a blow straight to the heart."(p.518) Theo was heartbroken "It was hopeless more than hopeless: Humiliating." (p. 520) "the thought of her gave me such continual anguish that I could no more forget her than an aching tooth." (p.517) It is due to this unrequited love that Theo did not   have stable relationships.

Theo starts dating Kitsey Barbours, daughter of Barbours family. As mentioned above, it was the family that took Theo in after his mother's death before his father took him. Kitsey had a personality opposite to introvert personality of Theo, "Kitsey was never tired, Kitsey was never unhappy. She was appealing, enthusiastic, affectionate. She was beautiful, with a luminous, sugar white personality that turned heads on the street." (p. 575) But Theo was not actually in love with her, Pippa is still on his mind, as he says "And beside wasn't it the time to move forward, Let Go, turn from the garden that was locked for me? Live In The Present, Focus On The Now instead of grieving for what I could never have?" (p. 569). He constantly has to remind himself of how lucky he was to be with Kitsey Barbour "Remembering how lucky I was." (p. 569) They soon decided to get married "She was the one who had asked me to merry" (p.571) but Theo knows he was not over Pippa and he felt like he was lost. The feeling of discomfort was also a result of the fact that Theo felt he and Kitsey were moving forward too fast.

> Just why I felt so lost I didn't know. I wasn't over Pippa and I knew it, might never be over her, and that was something I was going to have to live with, the sadness of loving someone I couldn't have but I knew my more immediate difficulty was in rising to an uncomfortably escalating social pace (p.573)

Along with an attempt to get over Pippa, this marriage also seemed to Theo as a way to repay Mrs. Barbours kindness in letting him in her house immediately after the death of his mother. "My thoughts went not only to Kitsey but also Mrs. Barbour, whose happiness made me

feel reassured and nourished in channels of my heart that stood dry for years." (p. 574) But things fall apart as Theo came to know that Kitsey loves him only as much as Theo does. She had an affair with Tom Cable, Theo's other companion in crime from when his mother was alive. Upon confrontation Kitsey boldly accepts the affair and apologize. She says "Don't be like that, you know what I mean. why should we let this spoil things, 'head not heart then,' …'if that's how you put it,'" (p. 673) Theo makes a compromise here as well. But on the day of the wedding during the ceremony he finally has the realization that without love it was all meaningless. "Now that it had settled I was used to the idea (Cable? Kitsey?) it was almost like some scurrilous bit of gossip that had nothing to do with me. She was wearing my mother's earrings… they didn't suit her at all." (p. 715) he left the party unannounced.

Kitsey's cheating on Theo stirred a chain of events. It is after this incident that Theo enters the status of moratorium. He has crisis and instead of sitting back and doing nothing he step out and try to solve these crises. He refuses to marry Kitsey and finally confesses his feelings to Pippa in a long letter. He also gets the painting back to return it to its proper place i.e., the museum. These incidents,of him standing up and setting things right, suggests that Theo came out of his diffusion status and started his journey forward.   Theo has been in diffusion state. He develops an identity which is oppose to the social standards. His activities are criminal and relations not stable. He is suffering from a deep sense of loneliness and isolation. The factors that play a role in Theo's Negative identity formation are as under

4.2 Low Self Esteem

For Theo his mother was the central figure of his life. With a careless and abusive father all the focus of his ideals and character building was his mother. Even as a child Theo says, "I'd been obsessed with learning to read a clock face" so that he could 'unlock the pattern' of his mother's 'coming and goings' and 'Addition and subtraction were useful mainly insofar as they helped me track her movement' (p.61). "she was wholly herself: a rarity" (p.8). With her death Theo felt that he has lost all his chances to be happy as she was his only support and mentor "I thought about it again and again after her death and indeed… that candid circle, a tableau vivant of the daily common place happiness that was lost when I lost her." (p.8) The place and manner of her death are also significant in this regard as the reason they went to the museum that morning was due to Theo's suspension and he blames himself for her death

> Her death was my fault. Other people have always been a little too quick to assure me that it
> wasn't; and yes *only a kid, who could have known, terrible accident, rotten luck, could have*
> *happened to anyone,* it's all perfectly true and I don't believe a word of it (p.9)

For Theo the trauma of losing a parent is accompanied by the guilt of being responsible for the death. These self-blaming tendencies moves Theo further down the road towards identity diffusion. Theo, as seen at the on-set of adolescence, was an exceptional student but he started feeling embarrassed of himself as people started taking pity on him after his father abandons them. Now with his mother's death he is again a subject of unwanted sympathy.

> Everything was terrible. People offered me cold drinks, extra sweaters, food I couldn't eat:
> bananas, cupcakes, club sandwiches, ice cream. I said yes and no when I was spoken to, and spent
> a lot of time staring at the carpet so people wouldn't see I'd been crying. (p.90)

His post-traumatic stress is also evident from the fact that Theo looks for his mother everywhere he goes; whether it is the abandoned buildings or streets corners etc. Coming to terms with the death of his mother is not easy for him. "The bad part wasn't trying to find her, but waking up and remembering she was dead" (p.123).   Theo remembers all the miserable scenes of death and blood. Many time he woke up wailing. He had horrible night mares which are evident of his PTS

> Sometimes in the night I woke up wailing. The worst thing about the explosion was how I carried
> it in my body-the heat, the bone jar and slam of fit. In my dreams, there always a light way out
> and a dark way out. I had to go the dark way, because the light way was hot And flickering with
> fire. But the dark way was where the bodies were.(p. 312)

In the coming years he developed many obsessive-compulsive habits like dusting "Dusting soon became an obsessive habit – enough that I went out and bought my own dust clothes, even though Hobie had house full of them."(p. 447) He never used any social media devices or platforms to socialize with any one "Only I hadn`t , I wasn`t on Facebook for reasons of paranoia and seldom looked at the news but still I couldn`t  imagine how I hadn`t heard – except that, in recent weeks"(p. 504) all these instances are evident of his post-traumatic stress. Together self-pity and post-traumatic stress rendered him unable to perform his social duties efficiently.

4.3 Uncertainty of Place and Time

In The Goldfinch, Theo's identity formation is significantly shaped by his sense of displacement after the death of his mother. He experiences a profound loss of belonging, especially in the apartment that once felt like home. After the explosion, Theo describes the apartment as unnervingly still: "The stillness in the apartment was unnatural... even the loud talking on the television didn't drive it away" (p.71). The absence of his mother makes everything feel cold and unfamiliar, as he notes, "the living room... had shrunk to a cold, pale discomfort" (p.77). Theo's isolation is compounded by the uncertainty of his future. When social workers arrive to place him in custody, he is still in shock and unable to process his mother's death, seeing it as something that might be "straightened out" (p.82). With no knowledge of his father's whereabouts and no family willing to take him in, foster care becomes the only option, though Theo resists, "I don't want to go to a foster home" (p.84).

Theo's sense of disorientation continues in Las Vegas, where he describes the city as "so bare and lonely" (p.250) and his room as "as bare as a jail cell" (p.252). His father, now heavily drugged, is distant and indifferent, a stark contrast to the once demanding figure in New York (p.254). Living with his father and Xandra, Theo feels like a stranger in their home: "Living with them was like living with roommates I didn't particularly get along with" (p.258). At school, Theo loses interest in academics, finding refuge in books rather than engaging with the social world around him, which is dominated by who has lived in Vegas the longest (p.260). Theo's journey through loss and dislocation exemplifies the psychological consequences of identity diffusion, as he struggles to find meaning in an unstable world.

4.4 Absence of Role Models

One of the main reasons Theo falls into negative identity development is the absence of reliable role models, particularly in his father. Theo's father is described as unreliable and abusive, with Theo stating, "My dad was so unreliable … because he drank. And when he was in a bad mood – which was much of the time – he was red-eyed and clammy looking" (p. 61). His father's alcoholism prevents him from being a supportive figure in Theo's life—he doesn't attend school events, have meaningful conversations with Theo, or even eat dinner with him. Instead, he spends most of his time in pubs, drinking until he loses control. Theo reflects, "He didn't eat dinner with us or attend school functions... he was seldom home at all past my bedtime" (p. 62).

When Theo's father leaves, it's clear he has abandoned both Theo and his mother. Theo recalls, "My father was heading off to 'start a new life' in an undisclosed location" (p. 63). After his mother's death, Theo is placed in foster care because his father is absent and unreachable, even when child services tries to contact him. Theo is repeatedly questioned about his father's whereabouts, which causes him significant distress: "Interrogations about my father's whereabouts… might as well have been grilling me about the missile sites in Pakistan" (p. 92).

Months later, Theo's father reappears, sober and with a new girlfriend, Xandra. However, Theo is skeptical and feels trapped: "This was all moving a little too fast for me" (p. 205). When they move to Las Vegas, Theo learns that his father works as a gambler. He brags about his control and competitiveness, but Theo, uninterested in his father's lifestyle, refuses to praise him: "My father was in need of something I was unwilling to give... an audience in the flash of winning" (p. 315). While Theo's friend Boris admires his father, Theo sees through the façade and rejects his father's attempt at reconciliation, remembering how badly he treated both him and his mother: "He was an asshole to us, we were glad when he left" (p. 316).

Without a reliable and supportive father figure, Theo's identity remains fractured and negatively influenced by his father's instability and selfishness, leaving him with little guidance or role models to aspire to.

4.5 Peer Influence

In Theo's journey of negative identity formation, peer influence plays a significant role in shaping his behavior and self-perception. Initially, Theo befriends Tom Cable, a troubled peer who introduces him to smoking and breaking into houses after Theo's father leaves. Their bond, described as having a "wild, marine quality" (p. 101), encourages destructive behaviors that Theo later regrets. After his mother's death, Theo blames Tom for the chain of events, reflecting, "If Cable hadn't fingered me to Mr. Beeman... if Cable hadn't got me suspended..." (p. 102). This shows how deeply peer influence can exacerbate guilt and responsibility in vulnerable adolescents (Erikson, 1968).

Later, in Las Vegas, Theo forms a close bond with Boris, another troubled teen. Boris, who has experienced severe trauma—including his mother's suicide and a constantly unstable life due to his father's job—shares Theo's feelings of alienation. He describes his rootless existence, saying, "I've lived in Russia, Scotland... Australia, Poland, New Zealand..." (p. 264). Despite their instability, Theo and Boris become inseparable, with Theo acknowledging, "Before Boris I had borne my solitude stoically enough... we wouldn't have become quite so inseparable, so fast" (p. 273). This peer connection, born out of mutual understanding, provides both teens with emotional support and a sense of belonging.

Thus, while peers like Tom Cable exacerbate destructive behavior, friendships like the one with Boris offer a form of solace and shared experience. Peer influence can be both harmful and redemptive, highlighting its complex role in identity development (Marcia, 1966; Erikson, 1968).

5. Conclusions

The Goldfinch follows Theodore, a troubled adolescent who, after the tragic death of his mother, struggles with isolation, identity, and direction. He turns to criminal behavior and grapples with his past while moving between different places. Ultimately, Theodore embarks on a journey of self-discovery, confronting his mistakes and finding a sense of purpose, embodying the classic elements of a Bildungsroman. In The Goldfinch, Donna Tartt's language is a powerful tool for conveying the emotional depth and psychological complexity of her characters. Through rich, sensory descriptions, Tartt immerses readers in the world of the novel, using vivid imagery and metaphor to evoke loss, trauma, and longing. Her long, intricate sentences mirror the inner turmoil and fragmented thoughts of her protagonist, Theo, while his reflective tone and often disjointed stream of consciousness reveal his emotional instability and confusion. Tartt's use of layered metaphors and symbolism, such as the recurring motif of The Goldfinch painting, underscores the themes of beauty and destruction, capturing her characters' struggles between survival and surrender. The dark, Gothic elements in her language amplify the novel's somber mood, while the rhythmic pacing of dialogue contrasts characters' psychological states, from the introspective Theo to the chaotic Boris. In this way, Tartt's linguistic choices deepen our understanding of her characters, using language not only to tell a story but to reflect the characters' inner worlds and the complexities of their experiences.

Authors' Contribution

As the main author of this study, I was responsible for the conception and design, data collection, analysis. The co-authors analyzed, interpreted the draft. They further revised and proofread the manuscript.

Competing Interests

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

Informed Consent

Informed consent was obtained from all participants. They were informed about the study's purpose, procedures, risks, and their rights, including confidentiality and voluntary participation.

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No additional data are available.

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