**UNIVERSITI PUTRA MALAYSIA**


*A PSYCHOSOCIAL STUDY OF IDENTITY*
*IN SELECTED NOVELS OF BALLARD AND THOMPSON*


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# A PSYCHOSOCIAL STUDY OF IDENTITY
# IN SELECTED NOVELS OF BALLARD AND THOMPSON

By

**MONA MODARRESI**

**Thesis Submitted to the School of Graduate Studies, Universiti Putra Malaysia, in Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of Master of Arts**

**October 2013**

# DEDICATION

To My Dear husband and

My Lovely Son;

May We Never Forget These Days!

**A PSYCHOSOCIAL STUDY OF IDENTITY IN SELECTED NOVELS OF BALLARD AND THOMPSON**

By

**MONA MODARRESI**

**October 2013**

**Chairman: Rosli Bin Talif, PhD**
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In the present globalized and fast-changing world, identity is among the most popularly studied constructs in social science. Focusing on context specific ways by which people act and speak is crucial in order to arrive at a dynamic social and psychological approach for recognizing identities. Within the social psychology discipline, Social Identity Theory has always been applied to clarify new dimensions of the different groups of people which form a society. These dimensions work toward distinguishing groups which are isolated, and seek to create and present their identity as being distinctive from that of members of a society who have conformed to the conditions of the time and are deemed acceptable by others. In other words, such dimensions result in distinguishing the "in-groups" from "out-groups". It is the representation of the lives of such a group of people who are isolated in society, and who seek to define their identity in a specific way, that forms the subject of the two novels which are the basis of this study. One of the novels, *Crash* (1973), written by J.G. Ballard, describes the lives of a group of strange people living in London. These

i

people, who had, at some point in their lives, been involved in at least one car accident, have subsequently become preoccupied with the idea that a car crash and the death that follows, possess the potential to unlock the key to "a new true identity"; which is perceived by the individual as being the permanent real life. The second novel discussed in this study, *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* (1998), written by Hunter S. Thompson, depicts the lives of two friends who head to Las Vegas, to cover a motor race report but in fact they seek their American Dream. Both novels are basically representations of a group of people who attempt to escape the world that they live in, to search for a new identity. Through the analysis of the two stories based on the Social Identity Theory formulated by Henry Tajfel and John Turner (1979), the researcher is conducts a psychosocial study on the protagonists' identities. In other words, application of this theory would help to explain how the major characters of the novels as individuals isolated from society undertake to define their identity, observe the society they live amidst and gain insight from.

Abstrak tesis dipersembahkan kepada Senat Universiti Putra Malaysia sebagai memenuhi keperluan untuk Ijazah Sarjana Sastera

# KAJIAN PSIKOSOSIAL BAGI IDENTITI DALAM NOVEL-NOVEL TERPILIH KARYA BALLARD DAN THOMPSON

Oleh

**MONA MODARRESI**

**Oktober 2013**

**Pengerusi: Prof Madya Rosli Bin Talif, PhD**
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Dalam dunia global dan sentiasa berkembang sekarang ini, identiti adalah antara konsep yang paling terkenal dikaji dalam bidang sains sosial. Memfokuskan ke atas cara konteks yang spesifik di mana manusia bercakap dan berinteraksi adalah sangat penting dalam mencapai satu pendekatan psikologi dinamik bagi mengenal pasti identiti. Dalam disiplin psikologi sosial, Teori Identiti Sosial telah banyak diaplikasikan bagi menjelaskan dimensi baru kumpulan-kumpulan manusia berlainan yang membentuk satu masyarakat. Dimensi ini bergerak ke arah kumpulan penting yang mana dipinggirkan dan mencari satu ruang untuk membina dan mengetengahkan identiti tersendiri mereka daripada ahli-ahli lain dalam masyarakat yang telah mengguna pakai keadaan bagi masa tersebut dan telah diterima pakai oleh ahli yang lain. Dalam erti kata yang lain, dimensi berkenaan menghasilkan yang membezakan "in-groups" daripada "out-groups". Ini adalah satu perwakilan kepada kumpulan manusia terbabit yang telah dipinggirkan dalam masyarakat dan mencari cara untuk menentukan identiti mereka dalam cara yang tertentu, yang mana telah

iii

membentuk subjek bagi dua novel yang juga merupakan asas bagi kajian ini. Novel yang pertama, *Crash* (1973), ditulis oleh J.G. Ballard, menerangkan berkenaan kehidupan satu kumpulan manusia yang pelik menetap di London. Mereka ini, yang pada satu masa dalam hidup mereka telah terbabit dengan sekurang-kurangnya satu kemalangan kereta , telah menerima idea yang mana kemalangan kereta dan kematian yang selalu mengikutinya mempunyai potensi untuk membuka kunci bagi "identiti baru yang benar", yang telah dilihat oleh setiap individu sebagai kehidupan sebenar yang kekal. Novel kedua yang dibincangkan dalam kajian ini, *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* (1998), oleh Hunter S. Thompson, menggambarkan kehidupan dua sahabat yang menghala ke Las Vegas untuk membuat laporan berkenaan perlumbaan motosikal tetapi sebaliknya mereka ingin mencari "American Dream" masing-masing. Kedua-dua novel pada dasarnya adalah satu perlambangan kepada sekumpulan manusia yang cuba untuk lari daripada dunia yang mereka sedang alami bagi mencari identiti yang baru. Menerusi analisis bagi dua cerita berpandukan kepada Teori Identiti Sosial yang diformulasikan oleh Henry Tajfel dan John Turner (1979), pengkaji telah menjalankan satu kajian psikososial ke atas identiti-identiti protagonis. Dalam erti kata yang lain, aplikasi daripada teori ini dapat membantu bagi menjelaskan bagaimana karakter-karakter utama dalam novel sebagai individu yang terpinggir dalam masyarakat mencari jalan bagi menjelaskan identiti mereka, memerhatikan di mana mereka hidup dan dapatkan pandangan di tengah-tengah masyarakat.

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Besides all my love and thanks to my dear husband, Ata, who was always beside me through good and difficult times along this academic journey.

I certify that a Thesis Examination Committee has met on 23 October 2013 to conduct the final examination of Mona Modarresi on her thesis entitled "A Psychosocial Study of Identity in Selected Novels of Ballard and Thompson" in accordance with the Universities and University Colleges Act 1971 and the Constitution of the Universiti Putra Malaysia [P.U.(A) 106] 15 March 1998. The Committee recommends that the student be awarded the Master of Arts.

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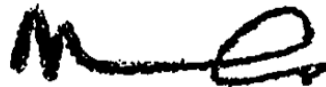Universiti Putra Malaysia
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vi

This thesis was submitted to the Senate of Universiti Putra Malaysia and has been accepted as fulfillment of the requirement for the degree of Master of Arts. The members of the supervisory Committee were as follows:

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vii

**Declaration by graduate student**

I hereby confirm that:
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This is to confirm that:
- the research conducted and the writing of this thesis was under our supervision;
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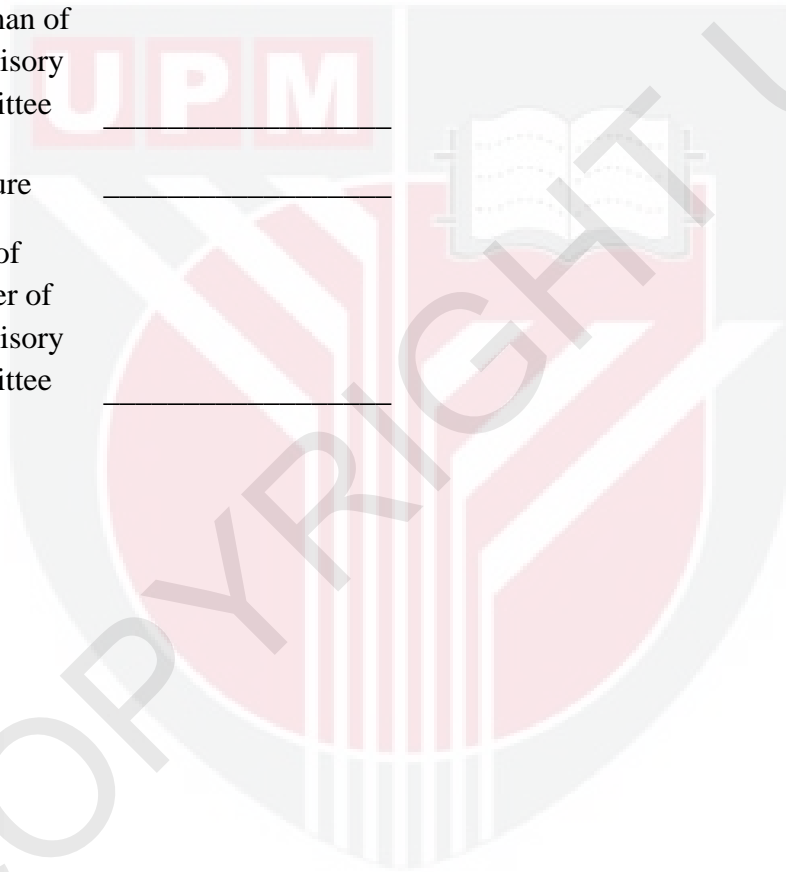Member of
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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

## 1.1 Background to the Study

Identity is presently one of the most commonly studied issues in social science, and the steady increase in the number of publications on the concept of identity over the past few decades is a testimony of its popularity. Throughout human history, the process of identity formation has been a relatively straightforward one. People needed to fit into the prescribed roles and norms that their parents and grandparents had lived by. Those who failed to fit into these roles were somehow singled out and isolated by society.

"Of course, those in positions of authority and power may have had more choice in the latitude of their identities than others, but even their options were limited by restrictive social customs and the narrow range of roles available in the rudimentary economics" (Cote and Levine 1). The scenario mentioned above is reflective of the features of pre-modern societies where freedom of choice was hardly an option. However, the modern and late modern era saw a change in the situation. Within contemporary late modern societies "humans have attempted to adapt to modern and late modern forms of social organization, where choice has replaced obligation as the basis of self-definition, and identity formation has become a more difficult, precarious, and solitary process for which many people are unprepared in terms of their phylogenetic background" (Cote and Levine 1).

Living in a society where individuals are constantly faced with various levels of choice (about the kinds of identity), and not having the option of identity formation as a matter of individual choice for most part of human history, are some of the problems associated with the process of identity making. Not deriving much satisfaction from the consequences of one's choice of identity, and the fact that the chosen identity is not seen as acceptable by the majority of society, could be some of the problems here.

During recent years, scholars working in the field of humanities and social science have become increasingly interested in issues concerning identity, and attempted to seek solutions to identity problems by studying comparisons between pre and late modern societies. Issues related to identity formation and the consequences which an individual finally arrives at as a result are clearly reflected in contemporary literature of the late modernist era.

As this study highlights as it progresses, the protagonists in the selected novels have opted to choose for themselves individual identities that provide them satisfaction, and that they perceive as being positive (being normal, based on society's norms). By making a stand on their identities, the protagonists are actually distinguishing themselves from others, a fact which provides them with a positive feeling about themselves. But it is completely clear all through the study that they are different from the society's norms, are not accepted, and live as an isolated group as a modern community (deviated identities).

Here by modern community the researcher means a society in which traditions no more give meaning to the life, the communities are industrialized and technology has

dominated people's lives. The product of a major social psychological school of thought, the Social Identity Theory (Tajfel 1974; Tajfel and Turner 1986) has mainly discussed the concepts of identity and grouping, which are used as a framework of this study through which the psychosocial identity of the characters in the novels is analyzed. Tajfel and Turner believe that "individuals seek a positive social identity, a positive self-concept based on their membership through social comparisons between their own and other groups" and that "they try to achieve 'positive distinctiveness for their own group in order to protect and maintain their self-esteem as group member' " (quoted. in Billiet 386).

In line with the above, this study  will attempt to discover how an individual seeks to address the question of "who I am" based on the subjective conception of his/her own self, and arrive at the means by which he/she could adapt himself/ herself to the other groups that exist within the same society.

### 1.2  Purpose of the Study

This study examines how the major characters in *Crash* and *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*, who are individuals living in a modern society, and who possess similar interests and behaviors, are going to define themselves based on the identities that they choose. This study will also attempt to analyze the perception this group of individuals who are isolated from the society, have of the society on the whole, and the extent to which they are accepted by the society. In essence, this study is conducting a psychosocial analysis on individuals within a specific group; and the relation between in-groups and out-groups.

3

The novels, *Crash* and *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*, were selected for analysis because the characters in these novels are ideal representations of people who believe that identity should not be a mask imposed upon people by society, and that it must be dictated by individual choice based on their specific behavioral tendencies and interests. However, the depiction of characters in the novels appears to suggest that individuals are not always successful in deriving positive outcomes from the identities that they choose for themselves, and that they are sometimes rejected outright by the society which is made up of many other groups. The characters in the two novels are ideal subjects for a psychosocial study which hopes to foreground the issue of how an individual always tries to define the question of "who I am", and how one attempts to make oneself eternal in the process.

This whole issue of grouping and identity formation that takes place in the novels, between the major characters *in Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*, and among the group members, James and Catherine Ballard, Dr. Remington, and Vaughan Raoul Duke and Dr. Gonzo in *Crash*, is coherent with the concept of the in-group/out-group identity formation discussed in Tajfel and Turner's *Social Identity Theory* (1979).

## 1.3 Research Questions

This study addresses the following three major questions:

1. How is a minority group (a deviant identity here) viewed and conceptualized in a modern society?

2. How do deviant identities define (identify) themselves in the society?

3. How are minority groups successful in the process of identification?

**1.4 Objectives and Significance of the Study**

The main aim of this paper is to investigate how the process of identity formation of a group which is a minority, comes about, and is perceived by modern society. In other words, moving along the lines of the social identity theory of Tajfel and Turner, this study attempts to explore the major characters, their behaviors and language from a psychological point of view to see how a minor group in a society, which has specific ideas about forming identities that they want to be identified with permanently, reacts to a society which does not openly accept it. In the process of doing so, this study also attempts to inquire into instances where the concept of identity becomes a problematic issue for the individual who is not always successful in his choice, and who becomes faced with unsatisfactory outcomes.

The novels, *Crash* and *fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*, are selected for this study because they share some similarities which help the reader to pursue some themes common to them. Not only were these novels written during the second half of the twentieth century, a period which we refer to as 'modernism'; they both were written based on autobiographical incidents, or the images and imagination the authors have considered for the modern world around.

James Ballard is the name of the main character in the novel *Crash,* by James Graham Ballard, and Raoul Thompson is the main character in *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* written by Hunter Thompson, and studying these two characters provides an insight

into the authors' concerns about the identity of human beings in a modern era. What makes this study significant is the angle from which these stories are looked at.

Numerous studies have been conducted on both novels but hardly any has looked at the novels from a psychosocial point of view, or from the angle of identity. The story of *Crash* is mostly discussed as a depiction of symphorophilia or car-crash sexual fetishism; and most of the studies carried out on *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* have discussed the story as a chase towards the American Dream, excessive drug use, and the decline of culture in the city of insanity, Las Vegas.

In this study, however, the researcher attempts to examine them from another important angle, and prove that the initial novel, which discusses the major characters as being involved in a new form of sexuality; and the latter one which illustrates the characters as being sunk in illegal hobbies born from a new and perverse technology, are clearly representative of an individual's search for his/her true identity in a modern society. In other words, this study hopes to demonstrate that the selected stories are basically illustrations of individuals who are sometimes too involved with new technology that they become deceived by its extremities, and become confused in the process, and who then move towards seeking their true identity.

## 1.5  Methodology

This study is based on a qualitative research which will be done through close reading of the novels *Crash* (1973) by J.G. Ballard and *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* (1978) by Hunter Thompson. Through the analysis of situations depicted in the stories, a close study of the characters is also carried out. In other words, since this work is a

psychosocial study, the characters will be psychologically analyzed based on their language, thoughts and behaviors; on the social atmosphere in which the characters exist, and on the feedback the characters receive from society.

In this study Tajfel and Turner's Social Identity theory (1979) would be used based on which the in-group and out-group relations and some related features would be explained. To make a better image of how the theory would be applied to the novels under study, a diagram would be presented in Chapter Three (Methodology).

## 1.6 Conceptual Theory

The conceptual theory utilized in this research is based on Tajfel and Turner's *Social Identity Theory,* which was developed in 1979. In fact, it would not be an overstatement to claim that this theory is Tajfel's greatest contribution to psychology. Tajfel believes that groups such as social class or families are important sources of pride and self-esteem. (*simplypsychology.org*) He claims that it is a group that gives an individual a sense of belonging to the social world. In other words, he believes that groups or a sense of belonging to a group would easily provide an individual with a sense of social identity.

This theory believes that by belonging to a group, a kind of self image is created which may result in the onset of discrimination and prejudice against those who are not members of that group (out group). Tajfel proposes that the stereotyping happens based on an ordinary cognitive process. In other words, there is a tendency (for the members of one group) to group things together based on the differences between groups and the similarities that exist within a group.

7

He believes that people are categorized in the same way in that the group to which we belong to (in-group) appears to us as being different from other groups (out-groups) and we view members of the same group as being similar. Here the social categorization leads to prejudiced attitudes between the in-group and out-groups (*simplypsychology.org*).

To construct this study based on Tajfel and Turner's social identity theory, it falls back on Stets and Burke's (2000) logic which believes that "In social psychology, we need to establish a general theory of the self which can attend to both micro and micro processes, and which avoid the redundancies of separate theories on different aspects of self" (224) (here micro process refers to social interactions of people and how they react to each other while macro process in a broader sense examines the groups of people and social classes). In fact in the theoretical world of self and identity, researchers in the fields of psychology and sociology, often work hand-in-hand. Chryssochoou believes that "identity is a concept that occupies a prominent place in the literature of social science and psychology" (343).

Stets and Burke believe that some theories such as the social identity theory would help to establish a more integrated view of the self in society (224). Here, the issue of identity would be discussed based on different groups and their roles in society. Stets and Burke believe that by examining the self through the lens of social identity theory, anybody would move toward a general theory of the self (224).

## 1.7 Limitation of the Study

In social science and humanities, "identity" is viewed as a complicated and broad concept, which is also widely discussed in political, cultural, social, anthropological, and historical fields. To understand this concept better, one should have precise and analytical knowledge of the subject in relation to all the other fields it is often associated with. However, this research has limited the study of identity within the psychosocial parameters alone, and although the psychosocial study itself covers a broad range of ideas and theories, this research is limited to looking at "identity" from the angle of in grouping-out grouping.

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