

Tribhuvan University

Ambivalent Self-Reflective Identity in Milan Kundera's *Identity*

**A Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences
In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the
Degree of Master of Arts in English**

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T.U. Regd. No.: 6-2-605-286-2010

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Kirtipur, Kathmandu

February 2023

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Letter of Approval

This thesis entitled “Ambivalent Self-Reflective Identity in Milan Kundera’s *Identity*” submitted to the Central Department of English, Tribhuvan University, Kirtipur by Jagdish Upadhyay has been approved by the undersigned members of the research committee.

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Acknowledgments

I would like to express my sincere gratitude to my thesis supervisor Mr. Pradip Raj Giri, Lecturer of English at the Central Department of English, for making this work possible. His intellectual guidance, critical comments, and genuine suggestions carried me through the entire stages of writing the paper.

I would also like to give my warmest thanks to Prof. Dr. Jib Lal Sapkota, the Head of the Central Department of English, for approving this thesis paper in its present form. I am grateful to him for his valuable suggestions and guidance.

I would like to convey my special thanks to my teachers and colleagues who motivated and supported me in preparing this thesis.

Finally, I would wholeheartedly thank my parents for letting me through all the difficulties. I experienced their guidance, continuous support, and understanding when undertaking research and writing my project.

February 2023

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Abstract

This research work examines ambivalent self-reflective identity in Milan Kundera's Identity in the light of Identity Process Theory by Glynis Blackwell and fundamental categories of being by Jean-Paul Sartre. The novel revolves around the story of two characters: Chantal and Jean-Marc, in which the tension emerges when Chantal expresses her dissatisfaction with the growing disinterestedness of men towards her. Jean after being aware of her insecurity, thoughts to resolve it but happen to fill their relationship with turbulence. Therefore, this research work focuses on two specific questions: why does the novel present characters like Chantal, the protagonist, and her beloved, Jean-Marc who try to represent themselves more than what they are or what they are not? And why do characters go through social circumstances that consistently alter their identity? Focusing on these two significant characters of the novel, the paper argues Milan Kundera, in the novel, tries to debunk the conventional notion of multiple identities highlighting the significance of the process of identity formation. Kundera's characters are the replica of human society and their behavior is the vehement projection of the ambivalent reality they experience. Foreshadowing the interference of human psychology in identity formation, the novel portrays the significance of existential social reality that demands consciousness to relegate one to the social sphere. Therefore, the work claims that the novel strives to present the ambivalent self-reflective identity of an individual in a societal discourse where circumstances demand consciousness to overcome their problem. Moreover, it stresses, identity though it is not constant, is always on the verge of transition that comes with a new fabric over time.

Keywords: Ambivalent, identity, consciousness, being, reflectivity

Milan Kundera's *Identity* is a simplified projection of complex human identity that subverts the discursive notion of multiple identities, depicting the ambivalent self-reflective identity that constantly changes according to the situation, continuously overshadowing the former identities. The characters in the novel are the microcosm of real society who persistently try to show what they are not or more than what they are, which is an indispensable feature of social individuals. Kundera's motif to articulate these facets of human reality is to disrobe the philosophical stand in which social values have ever tried to justify the multiple realities at a time. The novel satirizes the human behavior through which they create their identity, illustrating the uncertain reflectivity of character performances in the process of identity formation, projecting consciousness as an outlet through which they can overcome their ambivalent situations.

The social function of identity has multitudinous facets that limitlessly urge an individual to cooperate with circumstantial passages of human life. In representing the ostensible face of identity as such, humans happen to conceal the other sides and elements of unrepresented identity, reflecting merely the acceptable part of society. In the process of self-reflectivity, the juxtaposition of disclosing and disguising results in forming an ambivalent identity. These occurrences have been articulated implicitly in Milan Kundera's *Identity*. How human beings, even in a circumscribed arena, are obliged to imitate the cruel reality of social functioning has been illustrated in the novel. Therefore, in short, Kundera's *Identity* is a portrait of social reality where individuals are compelled to fabricate ambivalent identities in the process of self-reflection.

Milan Kundera's *Identity* portrays the problems of people in a modern era emphasizing how the nature of people is transformed throughout time indicating that

the human mind is filled with taboos. The book takes an insightful and original look at how people interact with one another and reveals that we can merely learn about the other person through what they choose to reveal to us despite our intense love. The plotline presents the lady, Chantal who loses her infant child and as a consequence has divorced her husband. Eventually, she is on vacation at a hotel on the Normandy coast to enjoy her time with her lover and while being there she is amused to notice all the men whom she encounters are busy with their children and she points it as, "They aren't fathers, they're just daddies" (12). Moreover, she confidently delivers that even if she goes to seduce one among them he would say, "Leave me alone, I'm busy" (14). As she was there along with her lover, Jean-Marc she expresses her insecurity to him.

Though it was in a humorous way she mentioned that, "Men don't turn to look at me anymore" (23), Jean has taken her expression seriously. He thought she might have been feeling older and in need of much love and appreciation. After some days, they return back to their apartment in Paris. Jean began to write her anonymous letters which he claims to be a spy who finds her lovely, very beautiful. The letters initially fueled the couple's passion for one another, but they ultimately backfire. Addressing the backfire as a shameful objectification that Chantal and Jean experienced because of being someone that they both were not, in real, Kundra has characterized it as a threat in the modern era. They even lost their identities as lovers as a consequence of pretending to be beyond their actual identities in this invasive era.

It appears as though the story was made up of modules because the primary action is repeated repeatedly in small portions throughout. For instance, Chantal imagines the dread of losing Jean-Marc "that way someday" as she waits for him to join her at the Normandy resort and overhears two waiters discussing the popular

television show "Out of Sight" about people who have inexplicably vanished.

Additionally, she runs across a young tattooed man who seems to be threatening her sexually on multiple occasions in illogically diverse contexts.

Milan Kundera has successfully grabbed the attention of the readers, which has resulted in jolting their opinion from divergent perspectives by different literary figures. Martha Kuhlman, for instance, in her article: "Images of the crowd in Milan Kundera's Novels: From Communist Prague to Postmodern France" argues, "*Identity* . . . ventures further into the landscape of French postmodernity by exploring the intersection between kitsch, the crowd, and mass culture" (100). In tracing the effect of Kundera's literary presence on the historical events of France, Kuhlman exposes the implications of postmodern tendencies in the novel, seriously dealing with the contextual history and the literary agency to imprint the social changes. Indeed, an academic document does embrace the historicity of particular events, especially the contextual frame during the incubation of a work of art; however, a secular interpretation can go beyond the limitation and uproot remnant elements entangled with the literary product. The paper, in this instance, exposes the component and essence of the novel rather than the process of its hatching.

Apart from Kuhlman's historical resemblance and contemporary burgeoning issues, Christopher Lehmann-Haupt's article entitled, 'Identity': Nothing Is as It Seems, but Who Can Be Sure, published in *The New York Times*, praising Kundera's illusive writing style. As he assesses:

[B]y writing in a form that goes against one's expectations, Kundera has forced the reader to take nothing at face value, but instead to see as tricks what in other writers' works one might view as the straightforward elements of a story. As a result, the meaning of "Identity" keeps collapsing into its opposite

like an optical illusion that can be seen in two different ways. (np)

Lehmann-Haupt seems to be more tilted and fascinated towards Kundera's strategy to delude the expectations of the reader. How the narrative approach, embedded with dream and reality, debunks the linearity of events and creates a responsive error in its comprehension has been discussed by Lehmann-Haupt. Undoubtedly, Kundera is one of the leading literary figures of contemporary literature, and in this sense, Lehmann-Haupt's appraisal is worth noticing. Nevertheless, it is equally significant to observe what has been the byproduct of the artistic use of Kundera's writing and how it is unquestionably related to the issues of human reality.

Unlike Christopher Lehmann-Haupt, Andrew Blackman, in his article, "Identity" by Milan Kundera, dissatisfyingly notes: "The tenses of the narration shifted constantly, and I'm not sure why Perhaps the mixed-up tenses are part of the author's dream. Perhaps it's not Chantal or Jean-Marc who are dreaming at all, but Milan Kundera" (np) Blackman seems displeased with the narrative structure or Kundera's approach to articulating the deluded truth of human confrontation in the novel. He unseemingly quotes "and it was all a dream" and vehemently suggests it is a problem of the story because ultimately the plot blurs the entire actions of the characters. His review conspicuously exposes the general expectation of the reader and exemplifies how Kundera has succeeded in defamiliarizing the literature. The responses vary among the readers and it is not surprising to be dissatisfactory for some of the readers. Nonetheless, whether the audience makes it a favorite, or reckons the worst, after all the work of art is disseminated in the discourse. To be more precise, the critical commentary does not stop the multifaceted interpretive dimension. Therefore, this paper attempts to examine a particular aspect of the novel which has been implicitly embedded in the text.

Apart from the reviews aforementioned, in reviewing Kundera's *Identity*, in his article, "She's Scared to Blink in Case Her Man Turns into Somebody Else" published in *The Guardian*, George Steiner contends: "Perhaps the fairest way of experiencing Kundera's allegory is to take it as a scenario or script for a nouvelle vague film. As such, it is both adroit and dated" (153). Steiner examines the alternative skims of Kundera's repulsive and open definition of human suffering, dealing with the moving plot of the novel. Ultimately acknowledging the authorial description, he writes, 'Seeing' is what *Identity* is about" (153), which is a new definition of human introduction—far from what we have learned and understood so far. Steiner's point, the research assumes, is one of the possible interpretations of the novel, which is essentially a crucial aspect that the novel deals with. Distancing from his point, the paper observes the work of art from the locus of human nature and the process of identity formation rather than perception. In doing so, the research embodies the 'Identity Process Theory' by Glynis M. Breakwell and Jean-Paul Satre's notion of *fundamental categories of being*.

Glynis M. Breakwell, a British social psychologist, is famous for her idea, Identity Process Theory (IPT). She does not confine the limitation of identity within the social domain, but rather advocates Identity also has a psychological dimension. To be more precise, Identity, she argues, is the outcome of both psychological and social junctions. Her theoretical perception, as she contends: ". . . sought to examine the dynamic between individual identity, interpersonal relationships and social structure. It attempted to describe, at a number of levels of analysis (the intrapsychic, interpersonal and intergroup), the processes whereby identity changes" (21). Blackwell puts her view that identity is a dynamic entity of the human sphere where it remains changing in each facet.

Societal factors influence the changing of human identity and this has been the major cause of the shift of human identity as it disrupts the formation process. To this Breakwell writes, “IPT proposes that this identity will encompass elements that are dynamically derived from every aspect of the person’s experience – social category memberships, interpersonal relationships, social representational exposure, individual activity and observation and so on” (24). Identity in the process of its formation collides with the variant elements present in the surrounding which therefore leads and defines identity as “a multifaceted, complex phenomenon. It is both a dynamic process and a dynamic state of being” (Breakwell 25). Through the complex manner, it establishes a unique view of a self and is characterized by the continuity of unsolved entities.

Moreover, the construction of an identity aims at an establishment of a coherent form but an inclination to the incoherent self proposes discontinuity and a lack of inner unity. In the words of Glynis M. Breakwell, “IPT as a result is an enormously complex model, seeking to be comprehensive” (21). The identification process's inclusive pattern is sophisticated and does not let either commit or exploit any identities. It is more likely to “explore multi-variate and multi-level relationships in those data and from a research focus upon societal changes that could be expected to create identity threats,” writes Breakwell (21), and the multitudinous formation can be anticipated to lead to the challenge in creating identity.

On the other hand, Jean-Paul Satre, a leading 20th-century ontological French Philosopher, exposes that to exist in the world itself is a process of being conscious. To put his words: “The being of consciousness, . . . is a being such that in its being, its being is in question, This means that the being of consciousness does not coincide with itself in a full equivalence. Such equivalence, which is that of the in-itself, is

expressed by this simple formula: being is what it is” (74). Sartre’s notion hinders the superiority of consciousness which is itself a part of the in-itself position. In fact, Sartre describes three fundamental states of consciousness in humans that itself are in-itself, for-itself, and for-others.

The phenomenological attitudes of human beings are so kindly rooted in their action that the possible interpretation and the cause of their differentiations are enormously extended more than one can assume. To be in existence has so pragmatic values that as Satre argues, “. . . being is merely one undifferentiated self-affirmation; the undifferentiation of the in-itself is beyond an infinity of self-affirmations, inasmuch as there is an infinity of modes of self-affirming. We may summarize these first conclusions by saying that being is in itself” (lxv). In contradictory but assertive words Satre illustrated that being has no dominant structure nor has it any paradigm to intervene with others.

Although being itself is uncommonly a matter of being in consciousness itself, Sartre adds: “. . . if being is in itself, this means that it does not refer to itself as self-consciousness does. It is this self. It is itself so completely that the perpetual reflection which constitutes the self is dissolved in an identity” (lxv). The conscious structure of self has no robust foundation that it can exist in the regime of identity. The liquidity of consciousness and impersonation of being in itself erodes the ground of self and reflects as a perpetual and perennial root of identity where the self vanishes and merely the outer fabric seems visible.

Sartre in defining in-itself is showing the limitation of human existence. Moreover, he is exemplifying how human duality collapses on the verge of the limited circumference of the infinite self. He addresses the limitations in the following ways:

When being is thus conceived there is not the slightest suspicion of duality in

it; this is what we mean when we say that the density of being of the in-itself is infinite. It is a fullness. The principle of identity can be said to be synthetic not only because it limits its scope to a region of definite being, but in particular because it masses within it the infinity of density. "A is A" means that A exists in an infinite compression with an infinite density. (74)

Sartre valorizes the essence of being. If there is being there is the absence of plurality, and if there is no plurality there is the regime of prolonged victory of the infinite self. However, it does not mean the existence is far from external interference but rather to comprehend that the self is infinitely possible because of destined infinite compression.

In these regards, for Sartre, "Identity is the limiting concept of unification: it is not true that the in-itself has any need of a synthetic unification of its being; at its own extreme limit, unity disappears and passes into identity. Identity is the ideal of "one," and "one" comes into the world by human reality" (74). The existence of an individual has a social collective effort from human reality; it will be misunderstood if humans happen to realize self in isolation. To form an identity, infinite existential components have to be dissolved and it is a regular phenomenon that humans cannot avoid it.

The philosophical sayings of Blackwell and Sartre are the credential factors embedded in the artistic creation of Milan Kundera. The novel, *Identity*, to be more precise, has interlocking playfulness associated with Blackwell and Sartre's ideas. Although Kundera, in his interview with Linda Asher said, "My novels are not psychological. More precisely, they lie outside the esthetic of the novel normally termed psychological" (119), the possible interpretation of his *Identity* boundlessly far from his definition which is more related to the facts of human society where identity

itself is more abstract and has relations with psychological reality.

It is not to doubt his philosophical stand that his writings are more concerned with humanitarian values and the dark secret of his social experiences, but this paper is an attempt to use an alternative mode of interpreting his novel from the location he dislikes. To recall Calvin Bedient: “Kundera is worth reading, quite largely, because he thinks and because his thought would be friendly to Concrete Existence” (96). It means that Kundera’s literature is tilted toward the fundamentals of human behavior which is palpable rather than the abstract entities of human nature.

The novel, *Identity*, is Milan Kundera’s exemplary writing that illustrates the process of identity formation for an individual in a community. The text aims to articulate how psychological tension consistently shapes its outer fabric, favoring the perpetual existence of transient identity. The two main characters: Chantal and Jean-Marc, and the relationship between them resembles the microcosm of societal discourses where individuals are closely associated with different relationships. For instance, Jean-Marc is Chantal’s new beloved who is younger than Chantal. Similarly, Chantal is older than Jean-Marc, who left her husband and is now staying with a new beloved: Jean-Marc.

These two characters do not exactly locate their identity but consistently project themselves as individuals with social and psychological junctions to mirror their identities. To be more precise, their identity is ambivalent and transient because of the interchanging psychological and social atmosphere that they reside. Their identities are constant and uniform until they are assessed on the basis of the psychological and social areas of their participation. In other words, the characters are simple with one identity in the individual sphere; however, complex and irregular as soon as psycho-social spectacle penetrates. To explore this reality, this thesis

discusses the aforementioned three characters respectively in the following sections.

Chantal—the protagonist of the novel— is in agony because, as the book presents, “She thinks to herself: I live in a world where men will never turn to look at me again” (13). Her displeased attitudes create tension with her young beloved. Depicting such a scenario where the leading character itself confronts a problem with her own identity significantly notes the fragility of human robustness. Her dissatisfaction and misery are not merely a resonance of identity’s temporality, but also a vehement inoculation of psychological torment tempted in an individual. In another way, Chantal’s anguish results from her resilient denial in accepting her reflective ambivalent identity. Her inner soul is still abundantly youthful; however, her aging has become the antagonist of her wish and the delightful warmth of her body. And indeed, this scenario resembles the ambivalent resemblance of Chantal’s self-reflective identity.

Nevertheless, Chantal’s denial has a significant historical fact that is fueling her sturdy will toward torment. Chantal had gone through crucible stages of her life in which, at her age, she would have got several identities. It is because, more palpably, human beings are so rooted in the social dynamic, and in adjusting to the changing social facets, the change in an individual’s identity becomes a byproduct.

Theoretically, to Glynis Breakwell the engagements are in the following ways:

IPT argues that the individual engages, consciously or unconsciously, in a dynamic process of constructing an identity and that this process is continual. Every new experience is interpreted in relation to the existing identity content and evaluation. Each new experience could potentially call into question the legitimacy of the existing identity structure, challenging whether existing identity elements can remain unmodified. On the other hand, each new

experience could potentially justify or enhance the existing identity structure.

(118)

Glynis Blackwell is in the line that identity formation is a continuous process in which individuals are intricately associated. Her imperative stress focuses that each changing identity is an interrogation of the formerly prevailed identity. To be more precise, Blackwell suggests that identity keeps changing, redrawing, remapping, and restructuring the previous identity—justifying the changes adopted by the individual.

From Blackwell's perspective, if Chantal's position is evaluated, the text discloses the open secret of her past. She was a wife and had a child in her past. Her social status was different and the relational position might have unreasonable variants to that of her present. The acquisition of her social identity came across different trajectories which made her maiden, a wife, a mother, and a disparate lover. In other words, she had acquainted with multiple identities; however, the journey is still persistent and analogously changing her identity.

In societal discourses, Chantal had endorsed several norms to sustain her life and in doing so she had occupied a tremendous volume of her different selves. As the novel describes, "When she was sixteen, seventeen years old, she used to cherish a certain metaphor; had she invented it herself, heard it, read it? no matter: she wanted to be a rose fragrance, a pervasive, overwhelming fragrance, she wanted to move thus through all men and, by way of the men, to embrace the entire world" (39). Moreover, "The pervasive rose fragrance: a metaphor of adventure. At the threshold of her adult life, that metaphor unfolded like the romantic promise of a sweet promiscuity, like an invitation to the journey through men" (39). In these happenstances, her performances resulted in shaping her identity which was consistently on the verge of crossing the boundaries because as Marianne E. Krasny puts it, "Identity refers to how we label

ourselves, how other people label us, and how we distinguish ourselves from other individuals and groups” (150). She tried to justify herself in terms of desire and circumstances, but her actions led her to a plural identity.

Chantal ever replaced her former identity and shaped a new one in her lifetime; however, what she is confronting in her present days is making her abnormal. She is not ready to accept her older appearance and her aging identity. A stubborn fact is that she still believes that she is as beautiful as she used to be; however, she is no more a youthful girl, full of pleasure and kinder. Her denial is the vehement rejection of the temporal identity of human beings because in the words of Sydney Shoemaker: “Instead of thinking of an identity as an individual essence, we might do better to think of it as something, perhaps a set of traits, capacities, attitudes, etc., that an individual normally retains over a considerable period of time and that normally distinguishes that individual from other individuals” (41). What humans do or what they possess remarkably sets their identity. The particular trait that Chantal encompass is the format that is shaping her identity; nonetheless, she is still rigidly impersonating her past in the present. Her act is like treating old tattered clothes as new ones. More importantly, knowing her oldness, she is deliberately trying to become a new one which is her self-reflective ambivalent identity.

On some occasions, Chantal seems to be a nurturing and caring mother who has lost her child and keeps remembering the dead ones. In the novel, she often recalls past events and is seen reminiscing about her baby. For instance, when there grows tension between the couple, the novel illustrates her recalling in the following ways:

That same evening, just before falling asleep (Jean-Marc was sleeping already), again she remembered her dead child and the memory was again accompanied by that scandalous wave of happiness. She realized then that her

love for Jean-Marc was a heresy, a transgression of the unwritten laws of the human community from which she was drawing apart; she realized she would have to keep secret the exorbitance of her love to avoid stirring up people's malevolent fury. (41-42)

This is not the first time Chantal is commemorating her baby; in fact, she repeatedly encounters a sense of nostalgia in the novel. In doing so, she fulfills her identity of motherhood in these instances. However, strangely, she is depicted in an alternative mode as well. As she remembers her child, contrarily, as the novel narrates, “She was happy that her son was dead” (41). Surprisingly, being a mother how she can be jubilant about her son’s death? Her reflective personality tilts toward her ambivalent motherhood identity which means she is in a liminal space in terms of her indistinguishable desire and love for her son. To be more subtle, Chantal wants to forget her past and wants to enjoy her present. Certainly, she loved her baby, but she has become sturdy enough to neglect her painful past. Indeed, the ambivalent remembering of her baby shows that human beings are compelled to be forgetful to live their life neither the past will destroy the present pushing them into the future of nowhere. Perhaps, this is one of the reasons that Milan Kundera, in the novel, wants to reflect the ambivalent identity of human beings in the process of self-reflection.

When Chantal discovers mail from an anonymous sender, written merely a sentence: “I follow you around like a spy – you are beautiful, very beautiful, Her first reaction was unpleasant” (42). She thinks the mail is sent to bother her and less in than a minute she accepts it as unimportant. However, when she rereads the message on the bus she realizes that the woman beside her could read it too, thus she hides it. Now the question is if it was unimportant why was she hiding it? Undoubtedly, the answer is the letter was important, at least to medicate her displeased heart. As the

novel discloses, “If a man writes letters to a woman, his point is to prepare the ground for approaching her later to seduce her. And if the woman keeps those letters secret, it is because she wants today's discretion to protect tomorrow's adventure. And if she saves them besides, it means she is prepared to see that future adventure as a love affair” (98). And if it was important, it was to create her new identity, a lover of someone anonymous.

The dramatic changes engulf her behavior and a vehement sense of unanswerable questions reinforces her inner spirit. She starts suspecting the people around her and happen to analyze the surrounding more curiously. The girl's laughter nearby and the gentleman seating behind none of them remain out of Chantal's susceptible domain. When she is infuriated by the atmosphere created in her psychology, “She went into the bathroom, and leaning over the toilet, she looked at the liquid surface; she tore the envelope into several bits, threw them in, lushed, but the letter she refolded and carried into her bedroom. She opened the wardrobe and put the letter underneath her brassieres” (16). Although she is irritated by the psychological noise, she is still caring about the letters imprinted on the paper. Actually, to a large extent, it was not a threatening act for her but rather a lender that was paying a debt to her thirsty soul. In other words, the letters on the paper itself were what she needed, at least to please her, if not to agonize.

The way Chantal starts changing her attitude and behaviors is a crucial element to form her identity. More precisely, she was confronted with a new identity; indeed, the hardship she was withstanding was the process of forming it. In fact, to own identity demands a consistent and precise practice of soulful performance. In these instances, Jan E. Stets and Peter J. Burke put their words in the following manner:

Having a particular social identity means being at one with a certain group, being like others in the group, and seeing things from the group's perspective. In contrast, having a particular role identity means acting to fulfill the expectations of the role, coordinating and negotiating interaction with role partners, and manipulating the environment to control the resources for which the role has responsibility. (226)

Stets and Burke are clear that social identity and personal identity both demand practical exercises. The role of the individual ultimately is rewarded by a distinctive knowing where the old ones are overlapped. In this relevance, Chantal in the novel is similarly going through the same process where she is negotiating with herself, what she is acquiring. The point is her actions are the determiner to achieve what she unconsciously wants, though there is a constant tussle between her inner thought and the will of her spirit. That is to say, she is afraid of her social atmosphere, though her inner desire is to be loved by other males. The psychological tension is an imperative ongoing through which Chantal is motivated to idealize her identity, though unconsciously. In the words of Glynis Breakwell:

[T]he neurocognitive capacities of the individual provide the ongoing core to identity processes. Essentially, the individual interprets experience and assimilates its implications into his or her identity this core would operate through the lifespan and the content and evaluation dimensions of identity would develop as the individual aged. The implication was that both content and evaluation would accumulate and be organized (26)

The core feature of human beings is the determinant that establishes the reflective sense of their persuasive self, which is to say identity is manufactured through psychological and societal discourses. More critically, psychological functioning

leads to a bodily performance in society that ultimately forms an individual's identity. In this sense, "Identity is a multifaceted, complex phenomenon. It is both a dynamic process and a dynamic state of being" (25). The multiple aspects and components participate in the process of identity formation that intricates the identity itself. This difficulty is palpable in the novel. Chantal is in the process of new identity formation; however, it is quite questionable what sort of identity is she going through.

Chantal has got a new anonymous lover. She even receives letters frequently in her appraisal. These letters from an anonymous lover make a tremendous impact on Chantal. The letters significantly change the behavior, gestures, and homely environment of Chantal. Had she not received the letters, perhaps, the plot of the novel would have been different; however, since the letters are diverting remarks, they work as a mechanism to show changing reality of human beings that is dark and secret. In other words, the letters play a significant role to expose human nature which is so connected with the unseen factors of human identity. Moreover, the letter becomes the triggering factor or the circumstances itself through which Kundera has succeeded in articulating the ambivalent identity of human being in the process of self-reflection.

The letters are so dearer to Chantal; meanwhile, she is suspicious of her beloved Jean-Marc. She thinks her husband is cheating on her and sending mail from an anonymous sender. She visits a graphologist-psychologist to ensure that the letter was written by Jean-Marc. When the letters of Jean-Marc and the letters imprinted on the mail are declared to be written by the same people, Chantal says, "this isn't real! I'm hallucinating, I'm hallucinating, it can't be real!" (102). Chantal's words mirror her inner desire. She was not in acceptance that the letter was written by her beloved rather than the anonymous lover.

The happiness blossoming in her life because of the latter instantly fades away with the words uttered by the graphologist. It was not Jack's reality that was shocking her but rather the sense of insecurity that men do not turn to look at her anymore has grandiosely become the immediate resonance that was the source of her disgruntled. Chantal was keeping the things secret not because it was too confidential but because it was the source of her pleasures. As the novel notes:

What people keep secret is the most common, the most ordinary, the most prevalent thing, the same thing everybody has: the body and its needs, its maladies, its manias-constipation, for instance, or menstruation. We ashamedly conceal these intimate matters not because they are so personal but because, on the contrary, they are so lamentably impersonal. (105-106)

Chantal was secretly enjoying the letters and musing words enchanted within. However, the subject itself was not personal stuff to be enjoyed; the letter was the reason that was strengthening the relationship between them. Indeed, as A. C. Grayling recalls Jean-Paul Sartre, "[W]e are always trying to be more than what we are, or something other than what we are" (488), same goes for Chantal's impersonation. Chantal is trying to be more than what she is or what she is not. She has become decrepit; nevertheless, she is not trying to accept the fact. She is no longer a choice for young men, nor a youthful Chantal. Even though, she is still roughly trying to be more than what she is.

Chantal's willingness to be a choice of others means that she is using her consciousness to show who she is. In other words, Chantal is trying to dissolve herself to regain her identity for another's purposes. In Sartre's words, she is consolidating her being in a for-itself position. To quote Sartre: "[T]he being of consciousness, since this being is in itself in order to nihilate itself in for-itself, remains contingent;

that is, it is not the role of consciousness either to give being to itself or to receive it from others” (81). The in-itself state of being is the condition of human beings when they are conscious of themselves but not deliberately using their consciousness. As soon as they use their consciousness they enter into the realm of being-for-itself because “[W]hile being in-itself is contingent, it recovers itself by degenerating into a for-itself” (81). Sartre clarifies that the state of in-itself is not an independent situation when an individual can use consciousness but rather a dependent situation when they liquify their solidarity of in-itself with the intrusion of consciousness. The point is when an individual uses consciousness, the individual is trying to imitate the self or it is the process of trying to become the self, accumulating notions from social discourses. In this connection, Chantal, in the novel's atmosphere, is trying to become herself using her consciousness, which is the state of being for-itself. To articulate it in a more conspicuous way, Chantal is trying to be Chantal herself but that Chantal which she used to be. With the use of consciousness, she is disintegrating her in-itself state of being and impersonating herself to relinquish her position. In doing so, Chantal is creating a new identity though, the process of identity formation may not be deliberate.

Chantal moves to London when she discloses Jean-Marc’s secret. To her, Jean was not merely a cheater but also an impostor who deliberately annihilated her joy budding. When she moves away, “ She promises herself: when the bus stops at the Care du Nord, she won't move; she'll keep riding. But when the bus does stop there, she is surprised to find herself getting off. And as if sucked along, she moves toward the railroad station” (132). Chantal relentlessly adheres to leaving Jean-Marc but a strange force undeniably stops her ways; however, she continues her journey. The loneliness she confronts and the horrific situation that she deals with, end when she

wakes up. After all, these are all dreams. The novel does not address when Chantal started dreaming; nevertheless do not fail to address the vulnerability of identity symbolically. The cyclic path of human identity is so fragile like a fantasy, which has merely a blur of traces in human reality.

Jean-Marc, the counterpart of Chantal, analogously echoes Chantal's ambivalent self-reflective identity. He is astonished by the words uttered by Chantal; however, he constantly tries to submerge himself to fulfill Chantal's wish. When he asks Chantal the reason drowning her to the bottom of sadness, she finally says "Men don't turn to look at me anymore" (21), he does not understand what she is saying or what she means. He is incapable of understanding Chantal not because he has no sense but rather because Chantal is not Jean-Marc. The point is it is difficult to understand others. To recall Sartre: "The Other is the one who is not me and the one who I am not. This not indicates nothingness as a given element of separation between the Other and myself. Between the Other and myself there is a nothingness of separation" (230). There is a fundamental depletion between the rigid demarcation between self and other. Indeed, if one happens to misunderstand the primordial factor of being in-itself as being in consciousness, there is no hierarchical distinction between self and other. The creation of nothingness or "This nothingness does not derive its origin from myself nor from the Other, nor is it a reciprocal relation between the Other and myself. On the contrary, as a primary absence of relation, it is originally the foundation of all relation between the Other and me" (230). Sartre very logically advocates the preliminary ground of self and other that do not precisely differentiate the existence of self and other; however, what Sartre is trying to say is the distinction of these two fundamental entities exist when the consciousness interplays between their relationship of nothingness. In this relevance, Jean-Marc

initially does not understand Chantal's words because he distances himself from Chantal and tries to locate her problem from his point of view. But as soon as he realizes the necessary elements of fundamental ground he starts opting for her to redeem himself from her surrogate pain. As he realizes, "[E]very woman measures how much she's aged by the interest or uninterest men show in her body" (37), he delves into the reality of Chantal and works for the solution.

Jean-Marc does not ostensibly reflect his inner spirit to console Chantal; however, deep down he uninterruptedly supports Chantal and ascertains Chantal's vulnerability. Indeed, he was drowning with the thought that "He did not have to conquer her: she was conquered from the first instant From the start, he was the stronger one and she the weaker. This inequality was laid into the foundations of their love. Unjustifiable inequality, iniquitous inequality. She was weaker because she was older" (38-39). The fragility and suppleness were the by-products of Chantal's oldness. Jean-Marc takes those sensitive factors as a signaling victory over Chantal, favoring her.

Jean-Marc seems to be in contemplation so often in the novel. He urges questions to himself and finds the answer that satisfies him the most. For instance, he questions, "Nostalgia? How could she feel nostalgia when he was right in front of her? How can you suffer from the absence of a person who is present?" (40). In response, he finds the answer: "you can suffer nostalgia in the presence of the beloved if you glimpse a future where the beloved is no more; if the beloved's death is, invisibly, already present" (40). What is happening on the set is something beyond the practice of supernatural things. It is precisely the process of dissolving the self in the mixture of self and other.

Jean-Marc has his own identity; even though, he, to rejuvenate the

psychological breeding of Chantal, tries to understand Chantal from her perspective taking his consciousness. In doing so, Jean-Marc writes a letter to Chantal with an anonymous sender. In these happenstances, Jean-Marc tries to be what he is not or more than what he is. In fact, Jean-Marc is Chantal's beloved, with whom she is unquestionably familiar; however, despite being keenly amicable with Chantal, Jean-Marc is trying to become the anonymous one. The contradictory self-reflection of Jean-Marc shows his ambivalent identity. He undoubtedly loves Chantal; meanwhile, he is trying to be Chantal's secondary lover behind the curtain. He is Chantal's lover but is still willing to be an anonymous lover. Therefore, without thinking beyond, he wrote the letter. Indeed, "He had no plan, he intended no future, he simply wanted to give her pleasure, right then, immediately, to rid her of the depressing sense that men no longer turned to look at her. He did not try to foresee her reactions" (96). His ultimate goal was to vindicate Chantal from deeper distress.

Jean-Marc consoled Chantal through the letter, but in doing so, he was accumulating a sense of social identity that was different from that of him. His psychological actions and performance were manifesting a different Jean-Marc, if not himself. It is because as Glynis Breakwell puts it: ". . . identity resides in psychological processes but is manifested through thought, action and affect. Identity can be described in terms of both its structure and in terms of its processes" (28). In the light of Breakwell, Jean-Marc is structuring and processing the identity which is manifested in his action. His temptation to release Chantal from anguish explicitly converts him into a secret lover, though it was not original.

The contextual occasion was demanding a new Jean-Marc, no doubt. However, the social realm in which Jean-Marc was adjusted was not isolated from the metamorphosis of his identity. In front of Chantal, he had double identities, side-by-

side, though she was merely taking the conspicuous side of Jean-Marc. And this is what James Paul Gee says about Identity. As he states: "Being recognized as a certain "kind of person," in a given context, is what I mean . . . by "identity." In this sense of the term, all people have multiple identities connected not to their "internal states" but to their performances in society" (99). From James Paul's perspective, Jean-Marc has been recognized as an individual with certain characteristics which is to say Jean-Marc is forming a social identity. But the problem is that, does he have multiple identities at the same time? No! Not exactly. Indeed Jean-Marc is the beloved of Chantal and Chantal's secret lover as well. Nevertheless, these identities do not appear simultaneously. In fact, Chantal merely knows one at a chance; and when one is visible the other is overshadowed.

Glynis Breakwell is strictly suspicious of the existence of multiple identities of an individual. She does not accept the multiple identities of human beings but rather suggests in the process of identity formation, they constantly overlap the older one. In her words: ". . . the structure of identity is postulated to be regulated by the dynamic processes of accommodation/assimilation and evaluation, which are deemed to be universal psychological processes" (29). In this connection, Jean-Marc is persistently accommodating and assimilating his surrounding, regularly creating his identity. The psychological process is forcing him to perform his action which, as a tool, is easing himself for the double articulation of his identity.

Indeed, Jean-Marc has possessed double reflective identities; however, it is not a tremendous faculty of his identity. The societal processes through which Jean-Marc is heading are constantly processing his identity which is manifested and acknowledged by his counterpart; however, it does not mean Jean-Marc is struggling for the formation of his selfhood. The point is identity, though it is taken so seriously, is

merely a process. In Alessandro Torza's words, ". . . when we loosely speak of 'identity' across worlds, what we really have in mind is this counterfactual notion of identity expressed in the modal language, rather than the metaphysical notion of transworld identity expressed in the possible-world language" (75). The notion of identity has been vaguely articulated which in a normal sense cannot be comprehended but if it has to be understood pragmatically and practically the definition should encapsulate the most common language that can easily narrate the reality of human essence. Identity is a process or it is in the state of becoming rather than being. Thus, every human activity is the crucial mechanism that cements the fundamental ground for the formation of identity. In this connection, Jean-Marc is constantly solidifying his identity in some practical way. But the question is how is he depicting or reflecting his identity?

Jean-Marc is a contingent being who finds himself from the point of receptive others. He tries to consolidate his relationship with Chantal and tries to be a caring lover but in doing so he uses it as a secondary mechanism to solidify his reality. In a critical sense, he finds his identity relevant to Chantal. In other words, Jean-Marc's existence happens to reflect the necessity of others. Indeed, "The Other is a thinking substance of the same essence as I am, a substance which will not disappear into primary and secondary qualities, and whose essential structure I find in myself" (Sartre 223). There is no clear distinction between self and other, they are constantly overlapped instead. Jean-Marc, perhaps, relies on the other because he so often dissolves his self to understand the mechanistic part of the human world where there is an indispensable relationship between self and other.

Moreover, Jean-Marc seems sharply in fragility when Chantal recognizes his trickery. When Chantal leaves him, "The pain he feels does not wish to heal; on the

contrary, it seeks to aggravate the wound and parade it about the way one parades an injustice for all to see. He hasn't the patience to wait for Chantal's return to explain the source of the misunderstanding" (129). The suffering through which he is understanding the absence of his beloved is actually what Jean-Paul Sartre says about being for-others. In Sartre's words, "Being-seen-by-the-Other is the truth of seeing-the-Other" (257). When Jean-Marc is caught, he is being seen by the other, Chantal and he is seeing what Chantal is. It means Jean-Marc is observing himself from Chantal's perspective using his location. This is a situation when an individual is caught showering.

The reality that Jean-Marc was possessing was not for him but rather for others. He was impersonating himself to articulate a distinctive feature that he did not have. But the reality is: "The man is defined by his relation to the world and by his relation to myself" (Sartre 257). The two-fold relationship has an extensive connection with the real world and myself; this connection ultimately shapes the underneath reality and identity of human beings. It is because as Martin P.J. Edwardes argues, "We each recognise each other, and ourselves, as individual beings; and our society and culture are arranged around recognising these details of selfhood" (27). The robust assimilation between surroundings and selfhood is the demanding apparatus to underpin the identity of an individual. Therefore, as Sartre claims: "The Other is not a for-itself as he appears to me; I do not appear to myself as I am for-the-Other. I am incapable of apprehending for myself the self which I am for the Other, just as I am incapable of apprehending on the basis of the Other-as-object which appears to me, what the Other is for himself" (242). The sturdy relationship between self and other is nothingness and in this nothingness, the formation of identity germinates through a process of social functioning.

Jean-Marc loves his beloved; he is displeased with Chantal's astounding words; to recover Chantal from the agony she impersonates herself and becomes an anonymous lover as well and ultimately when Chantal discloses the truth he remains deteriorated. In all the scenarios, Jean-Marc consistently goes through the process of self-representation which leads to the proceedings of identity. In these approaches, Jean-Marc follows what Breakwell opines: "People are normally self-aware and actively monitor the status of their identity. The levels of self-monitoring and desired identity states may differ across the lifespan and it is considered possible that they may vary across different cultures" (28). Jean-Marc goes through several processes and acquires several distinctive identities. His former identities no longer sustain as long as he achieves the new one but when he happens to use his consciousness his self-reflective identity becomes ambivalent.

The novel obliquely represents the dark secret of human life, though the process is reflected vividly. The standpoint of the novel is cemented with the firmness of identity but by debunking the possibility of multiple identities, Milan Kundera has sensibly articulated the admixture of the process of identity formation and its fragility. Kundera has addressed the logic of Anne K. Armstrong et al. As they write: "Identity is fundamentally a way of defining, describing, and locating oneself" (44), Kundera elasticizes the definition and extends the horizon of identity, reflecting the blurry location and its vulnerability. Kundera also acknowledges the significance of identity necessitated by Peter J. Burke and Donald C. Reitzes. As they point out, "An identity provides an individual with a standpoint or frame of reference in which to interpret both the social situation and his or her own actions or potential actions" (84), Kundera's *Identity* implicitly claims the fundamental location of identity through which an individual comprehends self. The novel discloses the underneath reality of

identity through fictional characters who are more than the real character themselves.

To sum up, Chantal and Jean-Marc with the passage of variant societal stages create different identities. Chantal being an old woman tries to be a young lady which indicates that she is striving to be more than what she exactly is. Her attempt to be more than what she is creates an ambivalent identity. This also results in differentiation in her reflective and real identity and this consequently builds contradiction in her reality and reflective identity. In a similar instance, Jean-Marc being a lover of Chantal tries to be Chantal's anonymous lover for her happiness. He attempts to be someone he is not. His reflective identity varies from his real identity and this is a deliberate act. Both strive to gain identity through the process overlapping their prior identity but when there is an intrusion of consciousness because of circumstantial fact the reflective identity becomes ambivalent.

Chantal, being the wife of Jean-Marc, tries to reflect herself as a beloved of anonymous lover whereas Jean-Marc, being the husband of Chantal, tries to project himself as an anonymous lover. The reflection of their identities is their own creation; however, the duality they incorporate exposes their ambivalent identity. To be more precise, it is significantly daunting to understand both characters. For instance, is Jean-Marc a lover? Or, Chantal's husband? Or, an anonymous lover for whom Chantal is secretly in love? The same goes for Chantal. Is she Jean-Marc's wife or beloved? Or, is she what Jean-Marc wants to see? The two characters struggle to form their identities; nevertheless, when they exercise their reality their identity shatter, making them ambivalent and difficult to recognize.

Therefore, Milan Kundera's *Identity* is a vehement depiction of human identity which is formed through the processes they exercise in societal discourses that become ambivalent when an individual happens to reflect it. In other words,

Kundera's novel is a projection of human reality in which individuals are confronted with multiple issues that help them to form their identities. These identities are not permanent nor are they present simultaneously. The circumstances draw them to a certain limitations that compel them to project more than what they are or what they are not, ultimately leading to a self-reflexive ambivalent identity. These foundations are Kundera's fundamental ground in his novel *Identity*.

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