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THE ORIGIN AND POLYSEMY OF THE TERM IDENTITY

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Abstract:
The article traces the genesis and semantic evolution of the term identity in the humanities and analyzes its polysemy in literary studies. It examines the main historical-philosophical and socio-scientific antecedents of the concept, the ways it was borrowed by literary scholarship, its key characteristics (multiplicity, dynamism, relativity, narrativity), and methodological implications for analyzing literary texts. Special attention is given to the contributions of Erik H. Erikson, Stuart Hall, Anthony Giddens, Paul Ricoeur, and Homi Bhabha in shaping modern approaches to identity and their applicability to literary analysis.

The concept of identity today is central to the humanities: psychology, sociology, cultural studies, political science, and, of course, literary studies. In literary contexts, identity functions simultaneously as (1) the subject of artistic representation (character, nation, community), (2) an analytical category (how the "self" is narrated and interpreted), and (3) a methodological tool (linking textual forms with cultural practices and historical realities).

The word identity originates from Latin philosophical vocabulary (idem — "the same"), where in classical philosophy it referred to the problem of sameness and difference: what makes an entity the same across time and change.

In modern usage, two main strands emerged:

1. A philosophical-metaphysical one (sameness, essence, persistence).
2. A psychological-sociocultural one (self-identification, belonging, role).

In the 20th century, identity acquired further meanings: in psychology — as a stage of ego development and personality integrity; in sociology and cultural studies — as a result of social practices, discourses, and power formations [1][2][3]. This explains why today identity is a multilayered, interdisciplinary concept.

Erik H. Erikson introduced the notion of identity as a developmental stage of personality, linking it with adolescent crises and the dialectic between self and society [1]. In his classic work, Erikson described the young person as undergoing a "search for identity," emphasizing that identity is not a fixed property but a process of role selection, integration of biographical experience, and negotiation of social expectations.

For literary studies, Erikson's insight is fruitful because literature often depicts the formation or disintegration of individual identity: from inner dialogue of the character to conflicts with sociocultural norms. Following Erikson, literary criticism began to treat "identity crises" as productive analytical motifs.

Stuart Hall made a decisive contribution by redefining identity as culturally constructed and historically contingent [2]. His thesis that cultural identity is not an immutable core but a

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process, constituted through history and discourse, helped dismantle the binary between "inner self" and "external signs."

Hall stressed that collective identities (ethnic, national, diasporic) are constructed within relations of power, representation, and memory; they are multiple and polyphonic. This approach became foundational for postcolonial and cultural analysis.

In literary studies, this means that the identity of author, character, or nation in a text should be examined as the effect of representational practices, not as an essentialized given.

Anthony Giddens developed a sociological theory of selfhood under conditions of "late modernity" [3]. He argued that in modern societies, reflexivity and institutional transformations compel individuals to continually reconstruct their self-identity in light of new social roles and biographical possibilities.

For Giddens, self-identity is a project — a task of creating a coherent life narrative — constantly revised in response to a changing world.

For literary studies, this is key: many 20th–21st century texts portray characters striving to construct their biographies and identities under accelerated social transformations such as migration, modernization, or globalization.

Paul Ricoeur introduced the concept of "narrative identity," arguing that identity is an effect of configuring disparate life events into a coherent story [4]. According to Ricoeur, self-understanding and the understanding of others occur through narratives, both in individual and collective memory. Narrative provides continuity across change, making identity possible.

In literary analysis, Ricoeur's concept is widely applied: literary narrative not only reflects but also constructs identity, shaping both characters and communities, while offering readers models for interpreting life experience.

Homi K. Bhabha offered a seminal perspective on identity in colonial and postcolonial contexts [5]. His notion of "hybridity" shows that identity in such contexts is not binary (colonizer/colonized) but emerges "in-between" — in interstitial cultural spaces that produce ambivalent, fluid self-understandings.

Bhabha highlights that representations of the "national" and the "cultural" are often tied to mechanisms of power, mimicry, and negotiation, which generate new identities.

For literary analysis (especially of postcolonial works), it is crucial to account for hybridity and ambivalence in the self-definitions of characters and authors.

Judith Butler, developing the idea of gender performativity, demonstrated that gender identity is not an internal essence but the outcome of repeated social acts and linguistic performances [7]. This expands "identity" into the realm of ritual and discourse. Literature, accordingly, can be analyzed for how it reproduces or disrupts gender identities.

Edward Said, in Orientalism, showed how Western discourses construct the "Other," shaping identity as an object of representation rather than a self-sustaining category [6]. Identity, in his account, is inseparable from power relations and cultural domination.

Synthesizing the above contributions, the following characteristics define the modern usage of identity in literary analysis:

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1. **Multiplicity.** Identity is plural: personal, collective, ethnic, gender, linguistic, and religious identities coexist, overlap, and conflict [2][7].
2. **Dynamism.** Identity changes over time; biographies, history, migration, and modernization alter self-perception [1][3].
3. **Relationality.** Identity is constructed through interaction with others and through discourses that name, marginalize, or empower [2][6].
4. **Narrativity.** Identity is an effect of storytelling — the configuration of events into a coherent self [4].
5. **Embeddedness in Power.** Identity is always entangled with politics and power: who has the right to define, represent, or institutionalize "national" or "cultural" identity? [5][6].

Applying the concept of identity in literary scholarship entails several methodological consequences:

1. **Multi-level analysis.** Textual analysis must include the personal (character), narrative (plot structure), and socio-cultural (historical context, representation).
2. **Interdisciplinarity.** Drawing from psychology, sociology, cultural theory, and philosophy enriches interpretation.
3. **Attention to representation history.** Scholars should trace how institutional and historical forces shaped notions of self and nation at the time of writing.
4. **Narrative-semiotic approach.** Focus on how narrative techniques (focalization, retrospection, omission) construct identity effects.
5. **Ethical responsibility.** Analyzing identity involves representing real communities; scholars should avoid reductionism and essentialism.

Consider a postcolonial novel. Applying the above theories, one can:

- Identify the hybrid identity of the protagonist (Bhabha): caught between tradition and modernity, negotiating "in-between" spaces [5].
- Examine the narrative identity (Ricoeur): how storytelling weaves migration, loss, and return into a coherent biography [4].
- Analyze external representations (Said) [6] and internal identity crises (Erikson) [1] shaping the character's selfhood.

The concept of identity has proven exceptionally fruitful for literary studies, as it bridges the personal and collective, the textual and contextual, representation and power. Its historical roots — from philosophical sameness to psychological development and cultural theory — explain its polysemy. Particularly productive for literary analysis are the combinations of: Ricoeur's narrative perspective, Hall's and Bhabha's cultural/postcolonial critiques, Giddens's sociological view of the self as a project, and Erikson's focus on developmental crises.

Modern literary scholarship must remain interdisciplinary, historically sensitive, and attentive to how texts construct and transform identities.

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