Religion And Identity Conflicts In Ravan And Eddie

Monika Chopra[1] & Divya Joshi[2]

Research Scholar, MGSU[1], Department of English, Govt. Dungar College, Bikaner [2]

Abstract

Identity, in its essence, encompasses the unique characteristics, qualities, beliefs, and values that distinguish individuals or entities from others. It serves as a cornerstone in shaping a person's self-perception and influences their interactions with the surrounding world. Within this framework, religious identity emerges as a specific facet of one's overall identity, intimately connected to affiliation with a particular faith or belief system. This facet comprises an individual's religious convictions, rituals, principles, and the significant role religion assumes in daily life. Religious identity carries profound weight in shaping a person's worldview, behaviour, and relationships with others. In particular, religious identity often revolves around a set of beliefs concerning the nature of the divine, the purpose of life, and the moral and ethical guidelines that govern one's actions. This paper delves into the intricate interplay of religious identity, cultural diversity, and the communal tensions that frequently manifest in the close-knit *chawl* settings portrayed in Kiran Nagarkar's *Ravan and Eddie*. It explores the intricate conflicts of identity, epitomized by the complex friendship and rivalry between Ravan and Eddie, shedding light on how their religious identities exert influence over their lives. Furthermore, this paper unearths the hurdles and biases they confront due to their diverse backgrounds within multicultural and multi-religious neighbourhoods. It also offers invaluable insights into the cultural and religious dynamics at play within the *chawls*, as well as the characters' struggles to harmonize their identities with the ever-evolving world they inhabit.

Keywords: identity, cultural and religious identity, linguistic identity, individuality, community.

Henri Tajfel and John Turner focus on how individuals categorize themselves and others into various social groups, including religious groups. They see religious identity as a part of one's social identity, and it often involves categorizing oneself as a member of a particular religious group, which can lead to in-group favouritism and out-group bias. Thinkers like George Herbert Mead and Erving Goffman, look at how individuals construct their religious identities through interactions with others and the symbols associated with their religion. They explore how religious symbols and rituals shape individuals' self-concept and

interpersonal relationships. Identity Politics is another perspective of identity used in political science and sociology, that focuses on how religious identities can be politicized and mobilized to promote specific social and political agendas. It examines how religious identity intersects with other forms of identity (e.g., race, gender, nationality) and how it can lead to social movements and political activism. Scholars in cultural studies examine religious identity as a cultural construct, exploring how it is influenced by media, popular culture, and societal norms. This perspective considers how religious identities are portrayed, represented, and contested in the public sphere. Postcolonial theorists like Edward Said and Homi K. Bhabha examine the construction of religious identities in the context of colonialism and postcolonialism. They highlight how colonial powers often shaped and manipulated religious identities to control and subjugate colonized populations. Feminist perspectives on religious identity explore how gender shapes and is shaped by religious identities. It examines the role of religion in perpetuating or challenging gender inequalities and how women and gender-diverse individuals negotiate their religious identities.

Psychologists like James Marcia and Erik Erikson have also developed theories of identity development that can be applied to religious identity. They explore how individuals go through stages of identity formation, including religious identity, and how this process can be influenced by personal experiences and social contexts. Scholars in fields like linguistic and cultural studies use narrative and discourse analysis to study the stories and language used by individuals and communities to construct and communicate their religious identities. They examine how narratives shape religious beliefs and practices. Structural Functionalism as a sociological perspective, associated with thinkers like Emile Durkheim, looks at how religious identities and institutions serve various functions in society, such as providing a moral framework, social cohesion, and a sense of meaning and purpose for individuals. Critical theorists like Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno examine religious identities in the context of broader power structures and ideologies. They explore how religious identities can be both liberating and oppressive, depending on the socio-political context.

These are just a few theoretical perspectives that can be applied to the study of religious identities. Researchers often use a combination of these perspectives to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the complexities and dynamics of religious identity in different cultural and historical contexts. Bombay, now known as Mumbai, is one of India's largest and most diverse cities. It has a rich history of cultural, religious, and ethnic diversity, which has contributed to its vibrant and dynamic population. Mumbai is often called the "City of Dreams" because it attracts people from all over India and the world in search of better opportunities. Mumbai is home to people from various religious backgrounds, including Hindus, Muslims, Christians, Sikhs, Buddhists, Jains, and others. This diversity has led to the city having a rich tapestry of religious traditions, festivals, and cultural practices Hindus constitute the majority of the population in Mumbai. The city has numerous temples dedicated to various deities, and Hindu festivals like Diwali, Ganesh Chaturthi, and Holi are celebrated with great enthusiasm. Mumbai has a significant Muslim population, and the city has numerous mosques. The city also has a substantial Christian community, with many churches, including the iconic St. Thomas Cathedral and Mount Mary Basilica. Mumbai has Sikh gurudwaras and Jain temples, reflecting the presence of these communities in the city. Mumbai is home to

important Buddhist sites, such as the Global Vipassana Pagoda and the Elephanta Caves, which attract both Buddhists and tourists. Despite its diversity, Mumbai is known for its interfaith harmony. People of different religious backgrounds often live side by side and participate in each other's festivals and celebrations. The city has a long history of religious tolerance and coexistence. Mumbai's population has been significantly shaped by migration, both internal and international. People from various parts of India and abroad come to Mumbai for employment, education, and business opportunities, contributing to the city's cosmopolitan character. It's important to note that Mumbai's religious diversity is not limited to these communities, and the city is also home to people who practice other religions and belief systems. This diversity is one of the city's defining features, making it a melting pot of cultures and traditions. As Huston Smith writes, "While religions are deeply rooted in particular cultures, religions can reach across cultures and can, in the process, alter them. Religions, in other words, are both world-affirming and world-transforming."(224)

Ravan and Eddie is a novel by Kiran Nagarkar, first published in 1994. The novel is set in the bustling chawls of Mumbai (formerly known as Bombay) and follows the lives of two boys, Ravan and Eddie, who are born in the same chawl and share the same birthdate. The novel explores their journey from childhood to adulthood, their dreams, aspirations, and the challenges they face as they come of age. The story is a blend of humour and social commentary and is known for its quirky narrative style. It delves into the lives of these two characters and their families, as well as the dynamics of the chawl they live in. Ravan is from a Hindu family, and Eddie is from a Catholic family, which adds an element of religious and cultural diversity to the narrative. *Ravan and Eddie* are often praised for their wit and insightful portrayal of life in Mumbai, capturing the essence of the city and its diverse inhabitants.

Religion exerts a profound influence on the novel. It permeates the story, shaping characterizations and infusing the narrative with humour and significance. The novel prominently features two central characters: Ravan Pawar, a Maratha Hindu, and Eddie Coutinho, a Roman Catholic. These contrasting protagonists vividly illustrate the communal divisions and orthodox backgrounds prevalent in the story. Ravan and Eddie, both hailing from similar socio-economic backgrounds but belonging to different religious faiths, serve as a poignant juxtaposition within this religiously charged backdrop. The author skillfully conveys characters' perspectives on religion, delving into their psyches and exploring how they perceive and react to various situations through eloquent storytelling. Kiran Nagarkar employs a range of literary techniques such as contrast, comparison, satire, and hyperbole to underscore his observations and provide incisive commentary on religious beliefs. Amidst the backdrop of a Mazgaon chawl in the bustling metropolis of Mumbai, Nagarkar masterfully navigates the complexities of religious diversity. Remarkably, he manages to unveil two distinct religious worldviews while addressing the prevailing issue of majority-minority discrimination. In the novel, Ravan Shankarrao Pawar assumes the role of the primary character, embodying the archetype of an ordinary Hindu student. His parents, Shankar and Parvati, bear names closely associated with Lord Mahadeva and goddess Parvati, respectively, which underscores his deep-rooted connection to Hindu traditions. This naming choice subtly underscores Ravan's affiliation with the common people grappling to survive in the bustling metropolis of Mumbai. Ravan's involvement with the Hindu organization R.S.S. holds significant prominence in the narrative. Kiran Nagarkar skillfully portrays the mental landscape of

typical students who grapple with comprehending the intricacies of religion and find themselves compelled to defend it. It's worth noting the perspective of common housewives, particularly Parvati, and her thoughts regarding Ravan's decision to join the R.S.S:

Parvati had no idea of the political sympathies of the Sabha and it certainly wasn't Ravan`s idea to save India from non-Hindus. Parvati`s objectives were pragmatic. Keep the boy out of her hair and out of trouble. (17)

In The Chawl, the characters Ravan and Eddie navigate the challenges of growing up in a socioeconomically disadvantaged neighbourhood, dealing with family dynamics, and trying to achieve their dreams. Their lives are deeply influenced by the cultural and religious backgrounds of their families, and their interactions with other members of the chawl community shape their experiences. Language becomes a central component of exploring religious and cultural identity. Language includes not only the spoken or written language but also dialects, accents, and unique linguistic features associated with a particular culture. In *Ravan and Eddie,* other than religion, language issues also are an important aspect of the narrative, reflecting the cultural and linguistic diversity of Mumbai, India, where the story is set. Mumbai is a linguistically diverse city where multiple languages are spoken, including Marathi, Hindi, English, Gujarati, and more. Ravan and Eddie come from different linguistic backgrounds—Ravan's family primarily speaks Marathi, while Eddie's family primarily speaks Hindi. The multilingual environment of their chawl and the city itself underscores the linguistic diversity of Mumbai. Ravan and Eddie's families are from different linguistic and cultural backgrounds, which sometimes creates a language barrier between them. They often struggle to communicate due to their families' language preferences, leading to misunderstandings and tensions. I do not wish to sully my tongue with that abominable name." Violet advised her, "Beware of him. He killed my husband." (295-296).

Parallel worlds can only meet in a geometrical Utopia called the Horizon. Then where did Eddie learn to speak Marathi like a native? And how did Ravan discover the sin of Cain? How did Hinduism bring those mortal enemies Eddie and his sister Pieta closer? What made Taekwondo part of Ravan's physical vocabulary when hardly anybody in India had heard of the Far Eastern martial arts? (78)

The portrayal of indigenous religions and the interactions within the chawl's ecology also contribute to the novel's thematic complexity. It also emphasizes Nagarkar's storytelling choices in revealing these aspects through the eyes of the younger characters, leading to a deeper understanding of the cultural and social dynamics at play. The disparity between the Hindus and Catholics in the chawl serves as a focal point in Nagarkar's portrayal of societal divisions. This theme not only highlights the communal divide but also underscores the intricacies of coexistence in a shared living space. Ravan's and Eddie's perspectives serve as lenses through which readers can explore the evolving dynamics of religious coexistence. Their experiences also illustrate how societal expectations and familial influences shape their perceptions and choices.

Catholics preferring to use non-vernacular names, like Paul Junior, adds another layer to the cultural dynamics within the novel. The difference between high-caste Hindus and 'untouchables' within the chawl culture highlights the ongoing issues of caste-based discrimination despite the post-independence push for social equality. "Hindu's bath in the morning, Goan Catholics in the evening. Hindus are betel nut and chewed paan and tobacco and spat with elan and abandon in the corners of staircases… Catholics ate beef and pork. Hardly any of the Hindu boys went to college. Catholics went straight to heaven or rather it's….. St. Xavier's College….."(112) This reveals the enduring challenges marginalised communities face even in the urban environment. The depiction of separate floors for different religious categories within the chawl emphasizes the physical manifestation of these divisions within the characters' living spaces. It effectively showcases how the novel engages with these issues to provide a nuanced portrayal of the character's lives and the societal dynamics they navigate.

It did not cross the minds of most Hindus that barring exceptions, they were responsible for Catholicism in India. The outcastes of Hinduism, the untouchables, who fell beyond the pale of the caste system had ample reason to convert to Catholicism. The caste Hindus, as a matter of fact, left them no choice. As sub-humans, they were little better than slaves. (179)

In an essay that comes within the novel,

The discussion of Ravan's descent and Parvati's decision to rename Ram as Ravan provides a striking example of how Nagarkar subverts traditional norms and narratives. This inversion of the Ramayana's characters and their roles creates a thought-provoking dynamic that questions established notions of identity and morality. The incorporation of Hindu-Christian mythological consciousness adds depth to the narrative. Ravan's complex journey and Parvati's renaming contribute to the novel's exploration of identity and self-discovery. The renaming of Ram as Ravan symbolizes a departure from traditional expectations, reflecting Ravan's quest for a unique identity beyond societal norms. Ram as the *Maryada Purushottam* and Ravan as a representation of virtue and vice highlight the duality of characters in both the novel and the original Ramayana. The epic's conflict between Ram and Ravan takes on new layers of meaning within the context of *Ravan and Eddie.*

Ram's 'fall' being denied by his renaming as Ravan adds depth to the character's journey. The dual personality and the renaming reflect the complexities and conflicts within modern identity. This juxtaposition of traditional and contemporary elements deepens the narrative's exploration of character development. The connection drawn between Ram's transformation and the biblical myth of the first 'sin' and 'crime' is thought-provoking. This association adds another layer to the narrative's exploration of morality, transgression, and the complexities of human nature. The influence of the social and historical context on writers' sensibilities, themes, and styles is a significant aspect of literary creation. The interweaving of geographical settings with cultural and historical elements often shapes characters' journeys and quests for identity. The interconnectedness of character development, narrative reinterpretation, and geographical context within *Ravan and Eddie* demonstrates a keen understanding of the novel's complexities and the various layers of meaning embedded in the narrative. The caste system's impact on individual

identity often outweighs religious differences, highlighting the deeply ingrained nature of caste dynamics within the society.

The characters' engagement with popular culture and their involvement in various aspects of the narrative's themes in Kiran Nagarkar's *Ravan and Eddie.* The mention of Eddie watching *Rock Around the Clock* and Ravan attending *Dil Deke Dekho* showcases their interest in popular culture. This reflects the broader cultural influences of the time and provides insight into their personalities and preferences. The observation that both characters become entangled in certain types of illegal activities adds layers to their characters and introduces elements of conflict and moral dilemmas. Eddie's involvement in the unlawful economy of purchases and Ravan's connection to individuals seeking his involvement in criminal activities highlight the complexities of their lives and the challenges they face.

While the novel does address issues of social chauvinism and the divisions that can arise from religious and cultural differences, it also emphasizes the importance of maintaining a sense of identity that embraces the cultural richness and lifestyles that characterize Bombay. Despite the challenges and conflicts, the characters' lives intersect in a way that reflects the intricate tapestry of the city's culture. In this portrayal, the chawl represents both the challenges of assimilating different identities and the potential for unity amidst diversity. It underlines the significance of recognizing and celebrating the individuality of each culture and community while also finding common ground that binds people together. Ultimately, *Ravan and Eddie* offer a nuanced exploration of Mumbai's cultural landscape, emphasising the need to navigate issues of identity, social dynamics, and unity in the face of a complex and multifaceted urban environment.

The notion of parallel worlds meeting at the horizon, like a geometrical Utopia, sets the stage for exploring the intersections of diverse lives within the story. The questions posed here invite readers to delve deeper into the complexities of the character's experiences and the influences that shape their lives. The mention of Eddie's proficiency in Marathi and Ravan's familiarity with the story of Cain and Abel raises questions about their backgrounds and the diverse influences that have impacted them. The contrast between their origins and their acquired knowledge suggests a convergence of different worlds, challenging the boundaries that typically define them. The mention of Hinduism bridging the gap between Eddie and his sister Pieta adds another layer of complexity to their relationship, hinting at the potential for shared experiences to transcend religious differences. The inclusion of Taekwondo in Ravan's physical vocabulary in a country unfamiliar with Far Eastern martial arts underlines his unique journey and how external influences can shape one's identity:

Even the Hindu neighbours had no way of figuring out what the priest recited, though it was in their mother tongue, Marathi. He didn't give a damn about the meaning of the words, the feeling behind them, the poetry of the language or the complex manoeuvres of the plot line. He had no thought for metaphysical implications nor time to translate them in terms of everyday life. He was telescoping words, sentences, and paragraphs, hurtling through chapter after chapter. He was vomiting all over the place, choking on his breathless mess. What came forth were huge boulders and sharp and clangourous bits and parts of iron pistons and bridges and girders. (223)

Through the lens of Ravan and Eddie's lives, the novel provides insights into the complexities of post-independence Bombay, highlighting the challenges faced by individuals from diverse backgrounds as they attempt to navigate their relationships and define their identities. The narrative unfolds against the backdrop of the chawl, depicting the intricacies of communal living, cultural diversity, and the interplay between personal lives and shared community spaces. As Ravan grows up, he grapples with physical changes, sexual development, and the formation of his self-image. His search for identity is a central theme, as he tries to understand who he is, where he belongs, and what he believes in. This identity crisis is a common theme in coming-of-age narratives, and in *Ravan and Eddie,* it is explored within the context of cultural and religious diversity in Mumbai. Homi K. Bhabha in one of his theories:

The theoretical recognition of the split space of enunciation may open the way to conceptualizing an international culture, based not on the exoticism of multiculturalism or the diversity of cultures, but on the inscription and articulation of culture's hybridity. It is the in-between space that carries the burden of the meaning of culture, and by exploring this Third Space, we may elude the politics of polarity and emerge as the others of ourselves. (345)

To conclude we can say that the novel does not shy away from addressing communal tensions and conflicts that can exist in a multicultural and multi-religious environment like Mumbai. It portrays the challenges and conflicts that arise between different communities and individuals. These tensions are often rooted in historical events and social dynamics. The novel captures the lives of ordinary people and how their identities intersect with the larger social fabric.

Works Cited

Appiah, Kwame Anthony. *Cosmopolitanism: Ethics in a World of Strangers.* W. W. Norton & Company, 2006.

Durkheim, Émile. 1982 [1901]. "Preface to the Second Edition". Pp. 34–47 in *The Rules of Sociological Method and Selected Texts on Sociology and its Method*, edited by S. Lukes, translated by W. D. Halls. New York: The Free Press.
Hall, Stuart.

https://warwick.ac.uk/fac/arts/english/currentstudents/postgraduate/masters/modules/asiandiaspora/hallculturalidentityanddiaspora.pdf

http://christosaioannou.com/Tajfel%20and%20Turner%201986.pdf

https://courses.lumenlearning.com/adolescent/chapter/identity-development-theory/

Mead, George Herbert. (1934). *Mind, Self, and Society from the Standpoint of a Social Behaviourist*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Nagarkar, Kiran. *Ravan and Eddie*. India: HarperCollins Publishers, 2021.

Smith, Huston. *The World's Religions*. Harper One publications, 2009.