

# Identity Issue Reflected in the Film of the Kite Runner

Rong Fan

Xi'an Mingde Institute of Technology, Xi'an 710124, Shaanxi, China

**Abstract:** *In the social jungle of human existence, identity brings the sense of survival. Therefore, seeking identity to obtain the proof of existence has become an indispensable content of individual life in every period. Film as a powerful medium, inevitably sets foot in identity issues. Identity in films is a unique way for audiences to understand themselves, their own nation and the world through the interpretations of film's content, discussion and mode from the view of culture. This essay aims to probe the identity issues brought by social systems and surrounding relationships reflected in the film of The Kite Runner and discussing the construction of subjective identities in the process of collision with social system and different cultures through Jacques Lacan's mirror image concept.*

**Keywords:** Identity; The Kite Runner; Mirror image concept.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Identity is a key concept of Western cultural research, receiving the special favor of feminism and post-colonialism. As a psychological term, identity is firstly proposed by psychoanalyst E. H. Erikson in his book *Childhood and Society*, and then widely accepted by the academic community. Erickson believes that identity which runs through the whole life is the unified ability of the individual psychology and society, which is developed into the sense and conviction of the organized ego in the social reality. It is human's identity that determines the sense of existence (Erickson, 59). At different stages, whether literary works or films, identity is always a central subject. In the field of cinema, the main manifestations of identity are national identity, female identity, racial identity, self-identity, etc. Most scholars tend to analyze the theories of identity, so as to expound the complex evolution of identity theories and the indispensable status of identity in cultural studies. However, using identity as a theoretical framework to study films is not quite common in contemporary society. The characters in movies and the way in which directors shoot and organize the development of plots are helpful for exploring identity issues in certain social background.

*The Kite Runner* (Marc Forster, 2007) concentrates on Afghan teenagers Amir who is from a rich family and Hassan, the son of the servant in the 1970s. Jacques Lacan's mirror image concept deems that the cognition and growth of the subject arise from the connection with the others (Lacan, 89). The film mainly describes Amir achieves psychological transformation and establishment of self-consciousness in the collision with Hassan and his father. Therefore, this essay tries to present the analysis of the characters and plots in the film of *The Kite Runner* which contain obvious self-identity, and use the concept mirror stage of Lacan to explain the growth process of Amir achieving self-identity and accepting social values from the cultural system to become an independent individual with social significance eventually, discussing the construction of subjective identities in the process of collision with social system and different cultures.

## 2. CONSTRUCTION OF SELF-IDENTITY IN THE KITE RUNNER

### 2.1 Mirror Stage Concept

Mirror stage is one of the core concepts and the starting point of Lacan's theory. Lacan considers that mirror stage is the formation stage and the essence of the subjects (Lacan, 102). It points out that the infants aged 6 to 18 months have no sense of wholeness or individual unity, but only fragmented physical experience. When they see their images in the mirror, they can recognize themselves slowly, thus their initial blurred self-consciousness is created. The infants identify themselves with the images in the mirror, gradually completing the process of obtaining identity. Lacan presents that we just need to understand the mirror stage as an acceptance. At this stage, infants begin their self-construction and self-recognition. For the first time infants see themselves in the mirror, they feel excited and dance with joy towards the mirror. When they realize the same actions with what they are doing in the mirror, they will consider that they have owned the abilities to control the images freely. At the same time, he

believes that human self-consciousness is connected with others. Images in the mirror do not just work in infancy, as the others, their portrayal of human beings runs through the whole process. Because of the lack of essence, they need external others to constantly enrich and confirm themselves. That is to say, the achievement of people's egos is accomplished with the intervention of others, which is a process of internalizing others. Lacan distinguishes the others. He holds that other refers to the first illusory image in the mirror and the influence of surrounding people including parents, friends, while Other is related to the background of the times, social requirements and the social environment else (Lacan, 96).

## **2.2 The Impact of Others in the Process of Subjective Identity Construction**

The growth of the protagonist Amir goes through the mirror stage proposed by Lacan. As the subject, the others who have the greatest influence on Amir's growth are his father and Hassan.

Hassan's existence is essential to Amir's self-identity. Amir who is about 12 plays together with Hassan. Hassan obeys Amir's words and do what Amir tells him to do whether right or not. Brave Hassan is the protector of the cowardly Amir. When Asif asks Amir why he makes friend with Hassan who is a Hazara, Amir responses that Hassan is not his friend, but his servant. However, he wanders that if he is good to Hassan, why does he never let Hassan participate in the games with other children? From this time, Amir begins to think about his relationship with Hassan. Subject is born in the mirror and mirror metaphors. Evan holds that self-consciousness as the basis of subject must exist relative to the other, and the other is the projection of the subject (Evan, 48). Infants are addicted to their images before the mirror at the beginning, but actually they only produce fantasies and fragments of consciousness, without the independent selves and the practical capacities to manage the images. At this time Amir is in the stage of contradict and broken self-perception. When they sit under the tree and look at each other, Amir is in a trance, feeling that he could see two faces of Hassan, one in his memory and the other hidden beneath the surface, which has occurred more than once. Facing the other Hassan, Amir is at a loss. Nevertheless, this fantasy of imagination offers him the desires to be recognized by others and the outside world in this period. Hassan is Amir's self-constructed image of the other. Amir finds himself from Hassan, and his self-awareness begins to be established owing to his realization of his relationship with Hassan. As Lacan says, the subject grasps the attractive sense of spatial identity and comes up with all kinds of fantasies starting from the fragmented images of the body, which ultimately builds a complete form with corrective effect (Lacan, 106). Breakthroughs from the inner world to the surrounding world create endless self-tests. Maybe Amir is willing to approach Hassan emotionally, but the obstacles of reality, such as class and race, make him unable to touch the other in the mirror.

Infants identify with their images in the mirror and are even indulged in them. However, the complete image in the mirror is illusory and imaginary. When the infants try to reach out to find it, they figure out that the images in the mirror do not exist. This misidentification reproduces the opposition between the infants and the images. While the infants are attaching to the others, competitive relationships are established yet. Lacan considers that aggression is a tendency associated with narcissistic identification. This tendency not only determines the structure of identities, but also delivers the unique form of expressing the essence of existence (Lacan, 79). The illusory mirror image is the ideal ego of the infant, and the need for competition makes the actual imperfect infant inevitably aggressive towards the imaginary perfect image. There is an interdependent relationship between Amir and his illusory image Hassan in the mirror. Hassan seems to be the shadow of Amir's childhood. They are inseparable, sitting on the branches together joking, and crying together for the moving plot in the cinema. On the other hand, they are competitive. Amir hates Hassan's sincerity, loyalty, and selfless dedication. He is jealous of Hassan and regards him as a competitor for his father's love. He bullies and makes fun of Hassan, instigating him to shoot walnuts at his neighbor's German shepherd dog with a slingshot. Loyal Hassan never refuses his unreasonable demands. Amir's aggression against Hassan exposes his willful selfishness and moral distortion. There is a strong contrast between Hassan's honest and Amir's jealousy. The identity gap between the incomplete self and the perfect mirror image leads to Amir's psychological alienation. The disparity between ideal and reality makes him feel lonely and frustrated. The most serious aggression of Amir takes place on the Kabul's largest kite tour. Amir in the mirror stage aspires to his progress due to his father's long-standing indifference. He looks forward to winning the game and proving his ability to his father. In the competition, Amir is successful in cutting off his opponent's kite, and reliable Hassan crosses the streets to recover the kite for him. However, in order to protect the kite, Hassan is humiliated by the bad teenagers. Instead of fighting with them, the cowardly and selfish Amir runs away. The real reason for his escape is to win back his father. He creates a false phenomenon of Hassan stealing, framing him and forcing him away. For his father's intimation, Amir selfishly and cruelly betrays Hassan. When he finally gets his father's praises, guilty wraps his heart instead. Amir has fallen into the torture of sin and conscience since then, and he unable to extricate himself. His aggression against Hassan is a natural manifestation of his own nature.

Infants become mature gradually in the late mirror stage, and they are able to recognize their own images in the mirror. As a result, their inner egos grow up. In this process, the combination of physiological and psychological growth and the process of symbolization forms an individual with social and cultural significance. Amir acquires an unprecedented control of imagination and begins to look forward to maturity and social recognition. He goes through the first step of the mirror stage after conscience condemnation, inner struggle and reflection, getting mature. The Hassan he sees in the mirror is a unified and complete. Amir believes Hassan inherits his father's purity and nobility. He equates himself with Hassan who is the other image, and builds up self-consciousness, hoping that he could be as strong and brave as Hassan and sparing no effort to prove himself in front of his father. Rollo May once proposed that human beings acquire their initial self-experience from their associations with others, and once they lose dependence on others and feel lonely, they will get out of the experience of being an individual. The relationship between the subject and image otherness means Amir's growth and integration.

When children are brought to the mirror, the image of their father or mother is often reflected in the mirror. Children rely on their parents for the sense of security in their early childhood, acquiring their self-awareness from these relationships, which is the basis to establish their positions in life. There is no doubt that fathers play a key role in Amir's self-identity. Getting father's approval or mother's love is a key step for a fragmented subject to integrate his or her self-knowledge. Amir who lacks maternal love is sensitive and cowardly in his childhood. While Hassan is kind, brave, simple, and he is loved deeply by Amir's father from an early age. His father never forgets Hassan's birthday, and his eyes shows praise and concerns for Hassan from time to time. However, Amir's natural submissive and weak personalities make it difficult for him to be the strong man in his father's heart. His father talks about Amir with his friend Rahin Khan that Amir is lack of certain traits, unlike his son, while Hassan is strong for the reason that every time the neighbors' children bully Amir, Hassan always steps forward to protect Amir bravely. In front of his father, Amir is inferior and self-denial. He looks forward to being as strong and brave as Hassan, and eagers to prove himself to his father and get care and warmth. On the contrary, his father's unequal treatment arouses Amir's jealous of Hassan. Amir is repulsive to the other Hassan, but he wants to be close to his father. What's more, although Amir has been constantly looking for sustenance and spiritual comfort, hoping to obtain self-identity and social identity from religious beliefs, literature and art, the fear and depression caused by the difficulties of interpersonal communication and not being approval by his father have always surrounded his heart, making it difficult for him to achieve the desired recognition. The lack of identity in the process of growth makes Amir inevitably feel anxious. In a deeper sense, the father is actually a symbolic father, which represents the laws of family and social system. Amir who is a respectful and submissive child has been living under his father's laws since his childhood. The authoritative role of his father has been suppressing his desire and regulating his behaviors. Their relationship eases after Amir wins the kite race. For Amir, the real growth is at his father's funeral. When people cherish the memory of his father, he realizes his excessive attachment to his father. At that time, he positions himself as his father's son. He feels that he had lost his guide after his father pass away, he has to find his way of life by himself. Amir is freed from the contradictions and complete the growth road of independent subject.

### **2.3 Deep Meaning of Kite Image**

Kite, emerging in the title of the film and also frequently appearing in the film, is not only the main line of the film plot development, but also changes the lives of the two protagonists, Amir and Hassan. The kite is not only a pronoun of traditional Afghan games, but also a carrier of multiple images. Especially the use of the dual opposition image of kite plays an important role in shaping characters and expressing themes. Binary opposition is a basic concept of structuralism, proposed by Saussure. He holds that all structures are not single but complex. The function of each structure depends on its position in the whole structure. Two opposing basic combination elements in the whole structure and the juxtaposition, opposition and transformation relations among the components can be found. The collision and tension between dualities constitute the movement and change of the whole structure and play the role of the whole structure. It is a deep-seated analytical method to explore the narrative combined function and form in literary works by using the analysis method of dualistic opposition in structuralist linguistics. Image is a kind of artistic image created by objects through emotional activities with a unique theme. Image is neither the subjective feeling nor the objective existence, but the product of subjective and objective combination, which has dual nature. The so-called image in literary works can be considered as an object that integrates the author's thoughts and feelings, endowed with certain literary and special meanings. The function of image is to shape the characteristics of figures and express the thoughts of the subjects. The kite carries multiple meanings. For the protagonists, Hassan and Amir, kite includes elements of binary opposition, that is, happiness and pain, good quality and cruel reality, lack of father's love and acquisition of father's love, conscience condemnation and spiritual salvation. At the same time, different element groups are interdependent and interact

with each other, which is helpful for narration. In addition, kite is also the cultural symbol of Afghanistan. In a sense, running kites is a metaphor for the identification and follow towards national culture. The destiny of the country for Afghanistan, a war-torn country, is like a kite swaying with the wind, controlled by others. Despite the fact that Afghanistan is full of suffering, poverty and discrimination, it used to be peaceful and beautiful country, evolving towards modern civilization. Nevertheless, this process is broken by dictators with big powers, making Afghanistan like a kite with broken line plunging down from the sky. As described in the film, there are a group of brave and persistent Afghans, including Hassan, Amir, Amir's wife and his father who are still running that kite which represents their country. They not only look forward to the tranquility of their motherland, but also stick to their traditional culture which is their root.

Jacque Lacan's mirror image theory holds that the cognition and growth of subject is derived from the inter-association with others. Only through the other, a linguistic mediator of symbolic significance, can the subject become a real human with social functions. Amir goes through the mirror stage, accepting social values from cultural systems and assuming social responsibilities to become an independent individual with self-awareness. This film not only describes the protagonist Amir's spiritual state in the search for identity, but also shows the close relationship between this spiritual state and the multiple factors of contemporary society, culture and so on, which has universal significance of cultural thinking.

### 3. CONCLUSION

The impact of relationships on people especially teenagers are explained by Lacan's theory. The establishment of self-identity is the premise of existence. The focus of identity is the relationship between self and others. The process of the protagonist's growth makes it clear to see the influence of others including surrounding people and social background.

In addition, the mirror stage concept of Lacan is used to analyze identity by many scholars. Mirror stage is the formation stage and the essence of the subjects. When the infants see their images in the mirror, they can recognize themselves slowly, and thus their initial blurred self-consciousness is created. They identify themselves with the images in the mirror, gradually completing the process of obtaining identity. In this essay, it can be seen that human beings acquire their initial self-experience from their associations with others, and once they lose dependence on others and feel lonely, they will get out of the experience of being an individual. The cognition and growth of subject is derived from the inter association with others. Only through the other, a linguistic mediator of symbolic significance, can the subject become a real human with social functions. Therefore, others play essential roles in subjective identity construction.

Film as a powerful medium, conveys the social values, the thoughts of the directors and the universal issues. In other words, film is a powerful reflection of reality. Through the plots, organized style, shooting techniques and other features of films, the views of directors, the common concerns of people and the development direction of the society can be figured out. Analyzing identity issue reflected in cinema provides the access for audience to understand anxious mentality, loneliness, confusion, or even conflicts in different contexts and find resonance.

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