

Université de Montréal

Conceptions of the Self: A Theoretical, Fictional, and Analytical Investigation

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Université de Montréal  
Faculté des études supérieures

Ce mémoire intitulé:  
Conceptions of the Self: A Theoretical, Fictional, and Analytical Investigation

Présenté par:  
Heather L. I. Burt

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**Résumé de synthèse**

Ce mémoire traite de la portée sociale et psychologique de trois façons différentes de comprendre l'identité humaine, soit "monologiquement," "collectivement," et "dialogiquement." Ces trois interprétations du concept de l'identité sont dramatisées dans mon roman, *Adam's Peak*, qui soulève les limitations et les possibilités des trois façons de comprendre la genèse de l'identité, et qui constitue le sujet de mon analyse littéraire.

Le premier chapitre du mémoire présente ces thèmes en termes théoriques. Je soutiens que le concept monologique de l'identité pose en principe une conscience de moi qui développe de manière autonome et qui provient du for intérieur de l'individu. Le concept collectif du moi, par contre, est basé sur l'idée que l'identité est déterminé par son adhésion à un groupe particulier. Le concept dialogique, finalement, prend pour acquis que l'identité est construite en dialogue avec autrui et repose sur la contingence des relations sociales dans lesquelles l'individu est impliqué. Chapitre deux du mémoire offre un résumé concis d'*Adam's Peak*. Chapitre trois applique les concepts présentés dans le premier chapitre à une analyse d'*Adam's Peak*.

Tandis que mon premier chapitre critique le concept monologique et le concept collectif de l'identité, et sanctionne le concept dialogique, mon analyse d'*Adam's Peak* examine la façon dont le roman complique la question. Il peut être utile de concevoir l'identité en termes monologiques ou collectifs, le texte suggère, mais ces termes, si on les accepte sans reconnaître le caractère fondamentalement dialogique de l'existence humaine, peuvent être destructifs.

Mots clefs:

identité; individualisme; nationalisme; communautarisme; Sri Lanka; littérature canadienne, *Adam's Peak*

**Abstract**

This thesis is concerned with the social and psychological implications of three different conceptions of human identity, which I refer to by the terms “monological,” “collective,” and “dialogical.” These conceptions are dramatized in my novel, *Adam’s Peak*, which foregrounds the contrasting limitations and possibilities of the collective, the monological, and the dialogical conceptions of the self, and which serves as the focus of my critical analysis.

Chapter One of the thesis outlines the novel’s concerns in theoretical terms. The monological conception of identity, I argue, posits a sense of self that is constructed autonomously, from within the individual. The collective conception of the self is based on the idea that identity is determined by one’s membership in a particular group. The dialogical conception, finally, assumes that identity is constructed in dialogue with significant others and is contingent upon the web of social relations in which the individual is embedded. Chapter Two consists of a short synopsis of *Adam’s Peak*. Chapter Three applies the concepts I have outlined in Chapter One to an analysis of *Adam’s Peak*.

While my theoretical discussion criticizes the collective and the monological conceptions of the self and endorses the dialogical conception, my analysis of *Adam’s Peak* investigates the text’s problematizing of the issue. We might usefully conceive of our identity in collective or monological terms, the novel suggests, but those conceptions, if adopted without recognition of the dialogically determined horizons against which we determine who we are, are ultimately destructive.

Key words:

identity; individualism; nationalism; communitarianism; Sri Lanka; Canadian literature, *Adam’s Peak*

## Table of Contents

Identification du jury	ii
Résumé de synthèse	iii
Abstract	v
Acknowledgments	viii
Introduction	1
Chapter One: Theoretical Foundations	9
I.    The Fiction of Collective Identity	12
II.   The Fiction of the Unencumbered Self	19
III.  The Dialogical Nature of Human Identity	24
IV.   From Theory to Fiction	29
Chapter Two: Synopsis of <i>Adam's Peak</i>	39
Chapter Three: Conceptions of Identity in <i>Adam's Peak</i>	45
Conclusion	79
Works Cited	86

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## **Introduction**

This study is concerned with the social and psychological implications of three different conceptions of human identity, conceptions that are dramatized in my unpublished novel, *Adam's Peak*.<sup>1</sup> Through its treatment of the relationships of two Canadian families — one originally from Sri Lanka, the other from Scotland — *Adam's Peak* foregrounds the contrasting limitations and possibilities of what I will call the “collective,” the “monological,” and the “dialogical” conceptions of the self. Taking this fictional exploration of identity as the foundation of my project, I will first outline the novel’s concerns in theoretical terms, then I will apply those terms to an analysis of relevant passages of the novel. My theoretical discussion of the three conceptions of identity will explicitly endorse the dialogical conception. This discussion will, however, engage in a necessary “tidying up” of certain features of human existence. The chapter analyzing the novel will argue that while the text of *Adam's Peak* is most sympathetic to the dialogical view of identity, it also demonstrates that theoretical abstractions about human identity easily lose their integrity in the messiness of concrete existence.

Given the somewhat unconventional content of this study — a critical analysis of my own fictional work — and the content of my novel itself, it will be helpful here, I believe, if I briefly comment on certain topics that a reader might expect to find in my discussion but that I will not in fact be addressing. The first of these topics is the relationship between the different parts of my thesis; the second is my “subject position” and its relationship to the content of my novel.

As the author of the fiction I will be discussing, I clearly occupy an unconventional critical position, which permits me, in theory, to treat the

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<sup>1</sup> An excerpt of *Adam's Peak* appears in issue 3.2 (Fall 2004) of *Blackbird: an Online Journal of Literature and the Arts*, published by Virginia Commonwealth University ([www.blackbird.vcu.edu](http://www.blackbird.vcu.edu)). At the time of completion of this thesis, my agent, Westwood Creative Artists, is seeking a publisher for the whole novel.

different parts of my thesis as being intimately connected. But while the relationship between my theoretical work, my fictional work, and my analytical work is significant in terms of the ideas expressed in each, I do not intend to address that relationship *in itself*. In other words, although I am, as author of the fictional work under consideration, in a position to discuss the genesis and evolution of the ideas in my novel, or to treat the primary text and the commentary related to that text as interdependent works, I will not be doing either of these things. Any discussion of “the writing process,” while potentially interesting, is not, I believe, relevant in the context of literary criticism. And while I cannot, of course, pretend that I am two different people — writer and critic — or that my fiction and my theory are not closely connected to each other and to the same world view, that connection is not, again, relevant to the aims of this study.<sup>2</sup> In short, I conceive of the three parts of my thesis — theoretical discussion, novel, and analysis — as separate, though related, expressions of an important and useful set of ideas concerning identity.

A matter connected to my decision not to address writing process issues is my decision not to deal in depth with the similarly subjective topic of the relationship between my personal history and experiences and the cultural content of *Adam's Peak*. While I was certainly conscious, during the writing of my novel, of the problem of cultural appropriation and of the potential for the text to slip into what Graham Huggan calls an “exoticist production of otherness” (13), neither those issues in themselves nor my own “qualifications” to write about the cultures represented in *Adam's Peak* are relevant to this discussion. The matter of exoticization is indeed one of the important thematic concerns of the

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<sup>2</sup> The one comment I will make on my writing process is that I did not actively foster the connection between theory and fiction during the writing of *Adam's Peak*. I did not work on the two simultaneously, and while my theoretical and analytical work necessarily depend on the novel, I did not alter the novel in response to ideas generated in the other parts of my thesis.

novel, but it is not the concern that I am choosing to focus on here. Regarding the relationship between my subject position and the cultural references of my novel, I believe that any attempt on my part to situate myself in relation to those references would not be useful. I say this in part because interpretations of ourselves are, like all interpretations, contingent and do nothing to ground our interpretations of the world. More importantly, I believe that to try to justify or qualify my decision to write about cultures other than my own (whatever “other” and “my own” might mean) through a description of my subject position would be to deny my most important power as a writer of fiction — the power of imagination. It would also be to endorse a conception of identity that this study criticizes, a conception that essentializes cultural experience and insists on the incommensurability of cultural “micronarratives,” to use Jean-François Lyotard’s term.<sup>3</sup> Thus, while I acknowledge that literary texts can fail to represent their real world subjects respectfully or plausibly, I also agree with Edward Said’s attack on the notion that, for instance, “only women can understand feminine experience, only Jews can understand Jewish suffering, only formerly colonial subjects can understand colonial experience” (“Intellectuals” 55). It is possible that I have failed, in *Adam’s Peak*, to represent my subjects effectively. But if that is the case, I do not believe that my failure is a result of my own particular subject position.

Although the issue of cultural representation in itself is not central to this discussion, it is necessary that I pursue the matter of cultural differences, in a somewhat different vein, for I recognize that readers of this thesis may not be familiar with the Sri Lankan context in which a significant portion of my novel is set. I will therefore turn now to a brief overview of the political and social

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<sup>3</sup> Lyotard’s most famous discussion of the untranslatability of micronarratives, or “*petits récits*,” can be found in *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* (trans. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1984).

context of those portions of *Adam's Peak* that are set in Sri Lanka.<sup>4</sup> My overview will necessarily be a far from comprehensive examination of Sri Lanka's demographics and complex history of internal strife. What I offer here are those pieces of contextual information which, in my view, are necessary to an understanding of the issues that I address in this study.

The island of Sri Lanka is populated by what have come to be treated as several relatively distinct ethnic groups.<sup>5</sup> I say that these groups have *come to be treated* as distinct, for, as Suvendrini Perera argues, Sri Lanka's conventional ethnic categorization, far from being distinct or natural, fails to represent the "multiple points of identification and difference between peoples" that characterize the country's population, and is "the *product* of very specific historical and political processes" (14, emphasis original). Perera's argument is an important one, and I will return to it later in this discussion. For now, given that ethnic categories play such a significant role in Sri Lanka's political life, I will briefly describe those categories in conventional, albeit problematic, terms.

Members of Sri Lanka's largest identified ethnic group, the Sinhalese, form a majority population in most areas of the island. They generally practice Theravada Buddhism and speak Sinhala, the country's official language. Sri Lanka's Tamil population is commonly described as consisting of two sub-

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<sup>4</sup> My overview draws on a variety of print sources and on information I have collected over the course of research trips to Sri Lanka in 1996 and 1998. Most of the information I cite here can be found in Lakshmanan Sabaratnam's essay "Sri Lanka: The Lion and the Tiger in the Ethnic Archipelago" (in Pierre L. van den Berghe's *State Violence and Ethnicity*, 1990). Much of the information in this overview is conveyed, implicitly or explicitly, in the text of *Adam's Peak*.

<sup>5</sup> As K.M. de Silva points out, the term *ethnicity* has "eluded very precise definition despite the attempts of many scholars" (13). It is used, variously, to denote race, or shared cultural tradition, or common origin by descent rather than by nationality (and here I use "nationality" to mean political state). In the Sri Lankan context, the term "ethnic group" seems generally to refer to a collection of people with a common language, religion, and set of cultural practices, as well as certain identifiable physical characteristics.

groups<sup>6</sup> : Sri Lanka Tamils, who have lived in the north and east parts of the island for centuries, and Tamils of Indian origin, who were brought to the island as plantation workers and have remained in the plantation areas of the south-central highlands. Most of the Tamil population practices Saivite Hinduism and speaks Tamil. Of the remaining minorities, who, together, make up about eight percent of the island's total population, I will mention only the Burghers, my reason being that the central Sri Lankan characters in *Adam's Peak* belong to this group. Burghers, "Christian products of Euro-Asian miscegenation who occupy small pockets in urban areas" (Sabaratnam 188), generally speak English as a home language.<sup>7</sup> As a result of their English literacy and European cultural origins, Burghers occupied a relatively advantageous position under the British rule of Ceylon. But in the wake of Sri Lanka's independence, increasing numbers of them emigrated, primarily to Australia, England, and Canada. The Burgher family in *Adam's Peak*, the Vantwests (originally Van Twest), moves from Colombo to Montreal in 1970, for unusual reasons; Toronto would have been a much more common choice at the time.

The complicated and violent internal conflict that has plagued Sri Lanka since the mid-1950s has involved all Sri Lankans to some extent, although, reduced to its principle players, it is a confrontation between political representatives of the "Sinhalese majority" and of the "Sri Lanka Tamils." After independence, the perception among many who identified with the first of these groups was that the Tamil minority — described in stereotypical terms by K.M. de Silva as "an achievement-oriented, industrious group" (12) — had, as

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<sup>6</sup> Perera points out that the Tamil population is further sub-divided into "'Jaffna,' 'Colombo' and 'Batticaloa' Tamil" (14), and that ambiguities in each of the other ethnic categories, too, have been translated into subdivisions.

<sup>7</sup> The "European roots" of Burghers are generally British or Dutch; the "Asian roots" are either Sinhalese or Tamil.

Lakshmanan Sabaratnam explains, “benefited a great deal under the British, being overrepresented in the administrative system and the professions” (204). In 1956, a Sinhalese nationalist government came to power and began immediately to pass legislation intended to reverse these perceived benefits. Since that time, in response to what Perera calls the “post-independence chauvinism of the state,” which “recast the multiplicity of Sri Lanka into a binary struggle between essentialised ‘Sinhala’ and ‘Tamil’ antagonists” (15),<sup>8</sup> and to increasing episodes of civilian, military and state violence directed against Tamils,<sup>9</sup> a Tamil separatist movement has gathered strength. This movement comprises a variety of advocacy groups, the most well known being the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), who employ guerrilla tactics and acts of terror in their efforts to secure a sovereign Tamil state (Tamil Eelam), and who, according to Sabaratnam, enjoy “a still-extensive support” (213). The January 1996 bombing of Colombo’s Central Bank, which has been attributed to the LTTE, figures importantly in *Adam’s Peak*.

The novel’s other non-Canadian national context is Scotland. Because I am assuming that this context will be more familiar to readers of this thesis, and because Scotland’s history and politics do not figure prominently in *Adam’s Peak*, I am not including an overview of the Scottish context. This omission is not intended to imply that I find the Scottish context (or the Canadian) any less complicated or worthy of attention than the Sri Lankan.

<sup>8</sup> In 1956, for example, the government passed the Language Act, making Sinhala the official language of the country; in 1972, the year Ceylon severed political ties with Britain and adopted the name Sri Lanka, the leaders of the new state passed an act requiring Tamil students to achieve higher university entrance scores than Sinhalese students. K.M. de Silva argues that S.W.R.D. Bandaranaike’s victory in 1956 “represented the rejection of the concept of a Sri Lankan nationalism based on an acceptance of pluralism [. . .]” (24).

<sup>9</sup> In July 1983, following the deaths of several Sinhalese soldiers in an ambush, mobs of Sinhalese people in Colombo attacked Tamil homes and property, while the police and military either ignored them or assisted in the attacks. As Sabaratnam points out, “the supply of Tamil house lists indicated government complicity in the pogrom” (215).

A final brief word concerning the content and organization of the following chapters is necessary here. Chapter One establishes the theoretical foundations of the analysis I will undertake in Chapter Three. The focus of this first chapter is the three conceptions of human identity that are at stake in *Adam's Peak*. My discussion of these conceptions draws significantly on the ideas of theorists of nationalism, such as Michael Ignatieff, Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, and on the ideas of thinkers concerned with community, including Charles Taylor, Michael Sandel, and Seyla Benhabib. The chapter concludes with a brief discussion concerning the value of fiction, compared to theory, as an expression of important ideas about the world. Chapter Two consists of a short synopsis of *Adam's Peak*. Chapter Three applies the concepts outlined in Chapter One to a thematic analysis of the treatment of identity in *Adam's Peak*.<sup>10</sup> The critical approach I take in Chapter Three is an eclectic one, aimed at highlighting important features of the text — conflict, character, form — and connecting those features thematically to the issue of identity.

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<sup>10</sup> For the purposes of this analysis, I refer to the manuscript of *Adam's Peak* that is housed in the English Department office of the University of Montreal.

**Chapter One**  
**Theoretical Foundations**

The main characters of *Adam's Peak* are struggling to construct meaningful identities for themselves. In one way or another, they have asked themselves the question "Who am I?" and have arrived, initially, at what Charles Taylor terms "a radical uncertainty of where they stand" (*Sources* 27). Their identities are, in other words, in crisis. In its development and resolution of these crises, *Adam's Peak* dramatizes three different ways in which individuals might conceive of their identity. The labels I will attach to these different conceptions of identity are "collective," "monological," and "dialogical." This chapter explains what I mean by each term and outlines what I believe to be, on the one hand, the serious limitations of the first two conceptions and, on the other, the rich possibilities offered by the third. I conclude the chapter with some thoughts on the value of literature as an expression of these limitations and possibilities. Before I embark on my discussion of the three conceptions, however, it is first necessary to provide a more global sense of what I mean by "identity." Here, as elsewhere in this discussion, I find Taylor's ideas to be particularly compelling.

Taylor connects the notion of identity, or selfhood, to morality — not merely the kind of morality that dictates how we should or should not conduct ourselves in the world, but, rather, a broader morality, concerned with "what it is good to be" (*Sources* 3). The three conceptions of identity that I propose to investigate can all be seen as interpretations of Taylor's contention that

[t]o know who you are is to be oriented in moral space, a space in which questions arise about what is good or bad, what is worth doing and what not, what has meaning and importance for you and what is trivial and secondary. (*Sources* 28)

This particular understanding of identity has two crucial implications. First, the multiplicity of "questions" that might arise in the vast realm of "moral space" and require us to orient ourselves suggests that identity is, as Taylor writes,

“complex and many-tiered” (*Sources* 29). It is impossible, in short, to capture the whole of one’s identity in a single label. Second, the idea of “orienting” oneself *somewhere* in a realm of possibilities — the specific possibilities that arise can certainly vary over time and from context to context — implies that identity is relational. In deciding what it is we value, who it is we are, we position ourselves in relation to other people, other possibilities. Moreover, as I will discuss further on, it is through our relationships with other people that the various possibilities available to us take on significance. In the moral space within which the self is constructed, then, that self “can never be described without reference to those who surround it” (*Sources* 35).

Importantly, Taylor tends, somewhat problematically, to conceive of the individual’s sense of who he or she is in positive terms. In his attaching of identity to notions of “what it is *good to be*,” in his description of identity as “the background against which our *tastes* and *desires* and opinions and *aspirations* make sense” (“Politics” 33-34, emphasis added), and in his endorsement of the claim that everyone “should be recognized for his or her *unique* identity” (“Politics” 38, emphasis added), he suggests that people’s identities are, generally, positive, something to enjoy and protect. But, of course, it is entirely possible for an individual to have a negative sense of self, to be self-loathing even. Taylor’s discussions of identity do not pay much attention to negative self-conceptions; nevertheless, his contention that identity is complex, relational, and connected to notions of the good does not preclude the possibility of such a self-concept developing. As my novel implies, and as I will argue in Chapter Three, a negative sense of self, like a positive one, is necessarily complex and emerges from ideas, established relationally, about what is valuable and worthwhile.

Of the three particular conceptions of identity that I wish to discuss, two — the collective and the monological — connect identity to morality, in its broad

sense, but fail to account for the implications of that connection. Certain discourses of collective identity recognize, in a limited sense, the relational character of identity<sup>11</sup> but disregard its complexity. The discourse of liberal individualism, on the other hand, acknowledges that identity is complex and multifaceted but tends to deny the importance of our relations to others in the achieving of self-definition. Both of these discourses offer fictions of the self, which, if accepted as realities, can have painful, even disastrous, consequences. The dialogical conception of identity, which I associate with certain features of communitarianism, succeeds, I believe, in more authentically representing human experience<sup>12</sup> by responding to both the complexity and the relational character of human identity. The following discussion elaborates on these claims, in terms that will facilitate my analysis of *Adam's Peak*.

### **I. The Fiction of Collective Identity**

Modern societies can be infinitely divided into groups of one sort or another. Religious affiliation, ethnicity, class, race, sexual orientation, and countless other banners are invoked as unifiers of particular segments of a wider population. Imagining one's identity as being partly constituted by membership in a group, whose other members one may never meet, is not in itself dangerous or undesirable. Quite the opposite, in fact. As Taylor points out, such collectivities give their members a frame "within which they can determine where they stand on questions of what is good, or worthwhile, or admirable, or of value" (*Sources*

<sup>11</sup> In his discussion of ethnic unrest in the Balkans, Michael Ignatieff argues, "A Serb can't define himself except in relation to Croats, and vice versa. They are brother enemies, the one a tragic mirror of the other" (92).

<sup>12</sup> Clearly, my terminology reveals my humanist tendencies. I believe that it is possible, with caution, to speak of "human experience." With regard to Taylor's descriptions of identity and morality, I would argue that they are loose and flexible enough to apply to members of all modern societies, or, at least, to those societies and cultures represented in *Adam's Peak*.

27). Collective identities, moreover, provide a vehicle for the social and political consolidation and mobilization of groups of people. Nations work because, as Benedict Anderson famously explains, their members are able to imagine themselves as being meaningfully connected to each other; oppression and inequality are more effectively combatted if victimized individuals identify with each other and act collectively, for the betterment of the group. In short, collective identities are indispensable in modern society. The problem with collective identities emerges when individual identities come to be equated entirely with the collective. This denial of the complex, multifaceted self in favour of a narrow, essentialized conception of the self is not only a distortion of “real life,” but, when taken to an extreme, becomes a source of hatred and violence.

Given the concerns of *Adam's Peak*, I will focus in this part of my discussion on the kind of collective identity that draws together people of a common ethnicity or cultural background, especially for the purpose of asserting national sovereignty. My arguments will pay particular attention to the nationalist rhetoric of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). As my introduction points out, the LTTE's sovereignty project emerged in part as a response to the biased policies of various Sinhalese nationalist governments and to increasing episodes of violence directed against Tamil people. My aim here is not to engage in the debate over the legitimacy of the LTTE's grievances and claims, but, rather, to examine and problematize the organization's implicit conception of identity.

The LTTE's vision statement — not significantly different in its emotional content or rhetorical thrust from the nationalist agendas of many Sinhalese-dominated governments — imposes on Sri Lanka's Tamil people a collective national identity that is narrow and essentialist:

The Tamil people of the island of Ceylon (now called Sri Lanka)

constitute a distinct nation. They form a social entity, with their own history, traditions, culture, language and traditional homeland. The Tamil people call their nation “Tamil Eelam.” [. . .] Today, the LTTE has evolved into a military and political organization representing the hopes and aspirations of the Tamil people.<sup>13</sup>

To return briefly to the connection between identity and morality, this statement can be understood to offer a vision of what it is good for a Sri Lankan Tamil to be — implicitly, someone interested and involved in the “history, traditions, culture, [and] language” of the Tamil people and living in the “traditional homeland.” Such a vision clearly relies on the problematic assumption that the Tamil people of Sri Lanka form what David Miller calls a “distinct, immutable chunk of humanity” (240). The diversity of the three or so million individuals who fit the label “Tamil people of the island of Ceylon” is homogenized in the claim that these individuals comprise, in the singular, “a distinct nation” and “a social entity,” with shared, measurable features — history, traditions, culture, language, even aspirations and hopes — which constitute the identity of the group. The passage suggests that these features, which are all in some way contingent,<sup>14</sup> *belong* to the Tamil ethnic group, are essential to its existence, and are acquired, as it were, by birth. In short, the LTTE’s vision statement implicitly treats individual identity as being “embedded in that of the community in a very strong sense,” such that individuals are encouraged to “identify themselves, perhaps first and foremost, as members of it” (Gilbert 115). Again, though, it is

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<sup>13</sup> This statement appears on the home page of the LTTE’s official web site, [www.eelam.com/tamil\\_eelam.html](http://www.eelam.com/tamil_eelam.html).

<sup>14</sup> It is worth noting, for example, that certain Tamil traditions, such as the making of pilgrimages to Adam’s Peak (*Sri Pada* in Sinhala; *Swangarrhanam* in Tamil), are shared by other Sri Lankan groups, and that the Tamil language is the native language of most Muslims living in eastern Sri Lanka.

important to note that the LTTE are not alone, in the Sri Lankan context, in essentializing identity in this way. Speaking more generally of this context, Suvendrini Perera writes that “identification as ‘Burgher,’ ‘Sinhala,’ ‘Muslim’ or ‘Tamil’ [has come] to be assumed as central to — even constitutive of — our identities” (15). These identifications are misleading in a variety of ways.

One notable problem with the adopting of ethnicity, or any other single collective identity, as a conception of the self is the assumption that identity does not *develop*. Rather, it is a birthright, an inheritance — or, at most, a limited set of characteristics passively acquired in a limited social context. Gilbert hints at this conception of identity when he writes that “if nations are thought of as peoples with a shared ethnicity, then they are not being characterised in terms of [their members’ social] relations, since ethnic group membership consists simply in individual possession of the racial or cultural features required” (71).

Conceptions of identity such as that implied by the LTTE clearly rest on the idea that possessing a particular set of racial and cultural features automatically fixes one’s identity. Yet the notion of a fixed identity, circumscribed early in one’s life, denies the influence on the self of those social “relations” that Gilbert mentions — relations that change and evolve over time, and do not necessarily bring together people of the same collective identity. If we think of identity as being negotiated in moral space, to use Taylor’s term, then these changing social relations are, as I suggested earlier, crucial to my sense of what constitutes a “good life” and, consequently, to my sense of who I am. Identity is thus, I would argue, a work in progress. Even if the social relations and circumstances that occupy my “moral space” do not alter significantly from day to day or year to year, the very possibility of change necessitates a conception of identity as being fluid.

A more serious problem with conceptions of identity based on collectively

shared characteristics is the untenable suggestion that people are uncomplicated. The LTTE vision statement would have us believe that there is an essential, measurable "Tamilness," which constitutes the individual Tamil person's identity. Even allowing that Tamil traditions and culture comprise a wide range of possible ways of being, the essentialization of identity offered by the LTTE is still inadequate. As a number of postcolonial theorists have been arguing for some time now, the existence of cultural "purity" has become a myth, if indeed it ever existed. Rey Chow insists that "the idealized native is, literally, topographically, *nowhere*" (49, emphasis original). Edward Said proposes that, "[p]artly because of empire, all cultures are involved in one another; none is single and pure, all are hybrid, heterogeneous, extraordinarily differentiated, and unmonolithic" (*Culture and Imperialism* xxv). Certainly in Sri Lanka, a country in which a preexisting multiplicity of cultures was colonized, in turn, by Portugal, the Netherlands, and Britain, and in which we find what Perera refers to as "complex, intertwined histories and enmeshed, interlocking identities" (15), the probability of an individual developing a culturally homogeneous identity is slim, to say the least.<sup>15</sup>

But the fiction of collective ethnic identity goes beyond a denial of the ways in which cultures have influenced each other; it also consists in a conception of identity that artificially foregrounds a pre-determined set of characteristics and fails to account for the realities of a multitude of infinitely complex individuals living their lives. As Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri characterize the problem,

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<sup>15</sup> I do not wish to align myself here with cultural hybridity theorists, such as Homi Bhabha, who, as Pheng Cheah argues, misguidedly reject the importance of the given cultural realities in which people exist and instead understand culture as "the realm of humanity's freedom from the given" (292). Clearly, Sri Lankan Tamil culture exists in a unique and observable way and is a crucial constituent of the identities of Sri Lankan Tamil people. My argument is that this particular "given culture," to use Cheah's term, is not as uncomplicated and monolithic as the LTTE's vision statement suggests.

“the multiplicity and singularity of the multitude are negated in the straightjacket of the identity and homogeneity of the people” (107). Michael Ignatieff criticizes the fiction of nationalist identity politics in similarly compelling terms.

“Nationalism,” he writes, “ does not simply ‘express’ a pre-existent identity: it ‘constitutes’ one. It divides/separates/reclassifies difference. It does so by abstracting from real life” (92).<sup>16</sup>

Ignatieff’s insightful analysis of the specific case of the brutal ethnic tensions that have arisen between Serbs and Croats in the former Yugoslavia can usefully be applied to the context of Sri Lanka. The questions he poses point to the serious limitations and dangers of understanding identity in collective, essentialist terms:

If Hobbesian fear explains why neighbors turned into enemies, how do we explain the earlier step, how they begin to conceive of their differences, which are always there, as being identities that seal them off from everyone else around them? How do they begin to think of themselves as Serbs, above all else, and Croats, above all else? These are people who share a common life, language, physical appearance, and a great deal of history. For nearly fifty years, being a Serb or Croat took second place to being Yugoslav; sometimes it took third or fourth place, to being a worker, or a mother, or any of the other identities that constitute the multiple range of our belongings. Nationalism is a fiction of

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<sup>16</sup> Iris Marion Young directs similar criticisms against the particular ideal of community that she finds in certain feminist groups. She argues that “a desire for unity or wholeness in discourse generates borders, dichotomies, and exclusions” and, further, that “the desire for mutual identification in social relations generates exclusions in a similar way” (301). Young’s use of the term “community” differs from my own, as will become apparent further on in my discussion; however, I agree with her claim that an ideal of community based on “mutual understanding and reciprocity [. . .] is similar to the desire for identification that underlies racial and ethnic chauvinism” (311).

identity, because it contradicts the multiple reality of belonging. It insists on the primacy of one of these belongings over all the others. (94)

In response to his own questions, Ignatieff posits that, in a world where “global integration of the economy and culture” (95) is reducing the observable differences between groups of people, those differences that remain take on added significance. The result, he argues, borrowing Freud’s term, is a “narcissism of minor differences” (94), a “systematic overvaluation of the self” (97), which ultimately breeds intolerance of others. But, to return to the above passage, Ignatieff’s astute description of the particular conception of identity that is at issue in the Balkans crisis is useful to my discussion, for a similar conception is also present in Sri Lanka’s ethnic conflict. In the years since independence (achieved in 1948), Tamil and Sinhalese Sri Lankans have been encouraged in a variety of ways to disregard the extensive areas of overlap in their day to day existence, the “multiple points of identification [. . .] between peoples” (Perera 14), and to downplay social belongings that do not foreground their connection to an ethnically-based collective. What is offered instead, by groups such as the LTTE, is a conception of cultural differences as constituting whole identities, which seal individuals off from those outside the prescribed collective.<sup>17</sup>

While collective identities undeniably offer to the individual a form of confidence and moral certitude, the potential dangers of understanding one’s identity in this way are poignantly evident in today’s world, in conflicts which demonstrate that identity is not a matter of purely theoretical interest. In the Balkans, in the Middle East, in Sudan, in Sri Lanka, conceptions of individual

<sup>17</sup> A counterpart of the LTTE and its nationalist rhetoric can be found in Sinhalese nationalist organizations such as the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP), which has engaged in systematic campaigns of violence against Tamils. Anti-Tamil violence was particularly widespread and brutal during the riots of July 1983, which resulted in extensive property damage in the Colombo area and between 500 and 600 deaths.

identity are tied to people's very existence. Collective, essentialized identities have the potential to fuel intolerance and arrogance — what Ignatieff refers to as “the ‘you just don't understand’ aspects of identity politics” (97) — and serve, in the most extreme circumstances, to justify the killing of individuals whose realities are necessarily far more complex than any collective identity can suggest. As I pointed out earlier, collective belongings serve a number of crucial functions in modern society. There are particular contexts in which it is clearly useful for an individual to identify him- or herself as, say, “woman” or “Muslim” or “queer” or “Latvian.” Broaden the context to encompass the individual's whole life, however, and each of those collective identifications becomes a stereotype, a fiction of identity.

## II. The Fiction of the Unencumbered Self <sup>18</sup>

The counterpart in modern society of the idea of collective identity is, arguably, the liberal individualist conception of a self that is constructed independently of other people. In contrast with the notion that identity is something into which we are born and which we share with others “like us,” we find in contemporary Western culture a powerful principle, rooted in late eighteenth-century philosophy, dictating that identity — our sense of what it is good to be — is something that each individual must figure out and construct for him- or herself — from the inside, as it were. Like the idea of collective identity, however, this sense that the self comes into being on its own fails to account for the ways in which people determine what it is good to be, the ways they orient themselves in moral space. The “self-made” identity is, thus, another fiction.

In *The Malaise of Modernity*, Charles Taylor traces the history of this

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<sup>18</sup> I take the term “unencumbered self” from Michael Sandel's essay “The Procedural Republic and the Unencumbered Self,” to which I refer later on.

conception of identity, which he connects to modern culture's<sup>19</sup> "ethic of authenticity" (25). The ethic of authenticity — being true to oneself — has its source, Taylor writes, "in the eighteenth-century notion that human beings are endowed with a moral sense, an intuitive feeling for what is right and wrong" (26). This view originally contrasted with a rival view, which stated that "knowing right and wrong was a matter of calculating consequences, in particular those concerned with divine reward and punishment" (26). Taylor finds important philosophical opponents to this latter view, and to the more general idea that the individual's moral and personal choices should be externally dictated, in Descartes, Locke, J.S. Mill, and, in particular, in Jean Jacques Rousseau, who "frequently presents the issue of morality as that of our following a voice of nature within us" (27). Importantly, Taylor points out that the ethic of authenticity, the ideal of following a voice within, has acquired a "crucial moral importance" of its own in modern culture (29). Understanding my inner, authentic self and leading my life in accordance with that self are seen not only as positive endeavours but as moral imperatives.

Just as it is neither false nor destructive to think of identity as being partly determined by communal belongings, there is nothing inherently problematic in conceiving of identity as a kind of "inner truth," a positive expression of individualism. In defence of modern individualism and the ethic of authenticity, Taylor points out that we "live in a world where people have a right to choose for themselves their own pattern of life, to decide in conscience what convictions to espouse, to determine the shape of their lives in a whole host of ways that their ancestors couldn't control" (*Malaise* 2). It is not my intention here to critique

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<sup>19</sup> I use the terms "modern culture" and "modernity," as Taylor does, to refer to the culture that has emerged from Enlightenment philosophy and that can be located, largely but not exclusively, in Europe and North America. These terms, as I use them, are descriptive, not normative.

or to delegitimize modernity's focus on the rights and freedoms of the individual. What I wish to challenge is the idea that the individual is able to, and indeed should, discover and express his or her inner truth independently, without any reference or obligation to the outside world. This idea is what I am calling the monological conception of identity.

The monological conception of the self, which Taylor attacks as a debased version of the ethic of authenticity, is evident in contemporary modern culture. A particularly striking example of this conception can be found in a successful self-help book of the mid-seventies, Gail Sheehy's *Passages: Predictable Crises of Adult Life*:<sup>20</sup>

You can't take everything with you when you leave on the midlife journey. You are moving away. Away from institutional claims and other people's agenda. Away from external valuations and accreditations, in search of an inner validation. You are moving out of roles and into the self. [. . .] No foreign power can direct our journey from now on. It is for each of us to find a course that is valid by our own reckoning. And for each of us there is the opportunity to emerge reborn, *authentically* unique [. . .]. (364, emphasis original)

Sheehy's text can be read as a set of guidelines for identity formation, for arriving at a full and authentic realization of the self. What is crucial to the realization of an authentic identity, Sheehy suggests, is that the "journey" to that identity be made independently. Other people, societal institutions, and social roles are treated as "foreign powers," external to the self and, implicitly, hostile to it. Sheehy's insistence on the need to move "away" from these external forces

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<sup>20</sup> Taylor also cites Sheehy in *The Malaise of Modernity* (44). His analysis focuses on Sheehy's treatment of relationships.

implies that identity can, and should, be formed and understood in isolation — monologically. Her guidelines can be read as an endorsement of what Michael Sandel terms “the unencumbered self, a self understood as prior to and independent of purposes and ends,” a self that is effectively “beyond the reach” of its own experiences, such that no role or commitment, no project “could be so essential that turning away from it would call into question the person I am” (86).

Like the LTTE’s vision statement, Sheehy’s guidelines for self realization attach identity to morality, in the sense that they suggest how an individual should go about determining “what it is good to be.” But her central guiding principle — independence — does not correspond to the dialogical nature of human social existence. As Taylor writes,

A self can never be described without reference to those who surround it. [. . .] My self-definition is understood as an answer to the question Who I am. And this question finds its original sense in the interchange of speakers. I define who I am by defining where I speak from, in the family tree, in social space, in the geography of social statuses and functions, in my intimate relations to the ones I love, and also crucially in the space of moral and spiritual orientations within which my most important defining relations are lived out. (*Sources* 35)

In other words, while it is entirely feasible for me to say that I am going to disregard the values, desires, and so forth of my significant others, or of society at large, I will still be defining myself in relation to those others. What I cannot do, barring some extraordinary act of physical and psychological isolation, is extract myself from the web of relations in which I am embedded as a social being. I can reject certain roles, but I cannot, as Gail Sheehy would have me do,

move “out of roles and into the self.” For roles, which situate me in relation to other people, are constitutive of that self.

Both Sandel and Taylor make the argument, with which I agree, that the unencumbered self is, like the ideal of the essentialized collective identity, a fiction. It is a fiction with the potential to impart a powerful sense of freedom — from painful relationships, from oppressive social obligations — but this sense of freedom comes at a cost. For denying altogether the constitutive nature of one’s relationships has negative consequences, consequences that are as damaging, potentially, as painful relationships and oppressive social obligations.

Taylor makes a convincing connection between the denial of the identity-forming potential of relationships and what he terms the chronic “malaise” of modern culture. Echoing Ignatieff’s criticisms of ethnic identity politics, Taylor connects this denial to a “‘culture of narcissism,’ the spread of an outlook that makes self-fulfilment the major value in life and that seems to recognize few external moral demands or serious commitments to others”<sup>21</sup> (*Malaise* 55). He sees the narcissism of radical individualism as a primary source of dissatisfaction and unhappiness — malaise — in the modern world. The “dark side of individualism,” he writes, “is a centring on the self, which both flattens and narrows our lives, makes them poorer in meaning, and less concerned with others or society” (*Malaise* 4). In his summary of Taylor’s take on the modern identity crisis, Robert Scott Stewart writes that “persons situated in the contemporary world have lost the capacity to articulate who and what they are” (49). The picture Stewart paints is grim, yet modern culture’s investment in individualism is so strong that we often fail to recognize the costs of this enormously influential ethic. We persist, as Taylor suggests, in attaching to

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<sup>21</sup> Taylor takes the expression “culture of narcissism” from Christopher Lasch’s book *The Culture of Narcissism : American Life in an Age of Diminishing Expectations* (New York: Warner Books, 1979).

individual freedom and the pursuit of authenticity a powerful moral force — more powerful, arguably, than is attached to relationships and their inherent obligations, or to the well-being of society as a whole. The Shakespearean dictum “To thine own self be true” strikes us as noble advice, based on a worthy ideal; however, ultimately, modern society’s apparent need for books such as Sheehy’s (which works to convince its reader that breaking free of relationships is a good thing), or, in a different vein, of books aimed at helping people to create relationships, traditions, and other forms of shared meaning in their lives, suggests that the modern implications of that ideal are not as decidedly untroubled as we would like them to be. The “flattening” and impoverishment of which Taylor speaks are, it seems, very real.

### **III. The Dialogical Nature of Human Identity**

In outlining what I believe to be the central problems of conceiving of identity in either collective or monological terms, I have necessarily said quite a bit about the assumptions behind my preferred conception of identity, the dialogical conception. The most important of these assumptions is, broadly speaking, that human identity is intrinsically tied to human relationships. To understand the implications of conceiving of identity in this way, it is useful to consider the ideas of communitarian philosophers such as Taylor and Sandel. Though there is debate and disagreement among them, most communitarians share the understanding that “individuals are constituted by the community of which they are a part,” that “the social attachments which determine the self are not necessarily chosen ones” (Avineri and de-Shalit 3), and that it is beneficial for the self to be “constituted by its communal ties” (Avineri and de-Shalit 7).

Before I say more about the “communitarian” conception of identity, it is necessary first to address the possible implications of “community,” for the term,

as it is sometimes used, invites reasonable criticisms. The concept of community is, as Markate Daly points out, “notoriously ambiguous” (xv) and can be attached to a broad range of social groupings, including those with very narrow, exclusionary conceptions of identity (Daly mentions Hitler’s Nazis as one extreme example of such a “community”). Marilyn Friedman, among others, criticizes communitarianism on the grounds that it “pays insufficient regard to the illegitimate claims which communities make on their members, linked, for example, to hierarchies of domination and subordination [. . .]” (307). Yet Friedman’s criticisms, while applicable to a certain conception of community as being inherently chauvinistic, homogeneous and conservative, do not apply to all conceptions of community. Seyla Benhabib’s theory of community, for instance, makes a distinction between what she calls “integrationist” community — the kind that Friedman attacks — and “participationist” community. Benhabib rejects the first as being incompatible with the pluralist and autonomist values of modern societies; she endorses the second as a kind of communal belonging grounded in the “political agency and efficacy” (77) of all its members. But while the participationist model of communal belonging makes sense as a social ideal, and while Benhabib points out that “a vibrant, participatory life can become central to the formation and flourishing of one’s self-identity” (81), the model does not focus on the lives of individuals, *as individuals* (rather than as abstract members of society), and thus does not translate into a useful tool for understanding just how it is that self-identity comes to be formed.

For the purposes of this discussion, I would like to suggest that “community” can be thought of in terms of what Taylor calls the “webs of interlocution” (*Sources* 36) in which individuals exist. In other words, I can think of “my community” as comprising the people with whom I share regular, meaningful interactions and who, through those interactions, contribute to my

sense of who I am in the world. These significant others need not be people with whom I get along, nor, as mentioned above, are they necessarily people I have chosen to have in my life. The neighbour with whom I have tense conversations about television volume and the homeless woman I see every day and sometimes give money to are part of my community, in the sense that my interactions with these people help to orient me in moral space.

I have suggested at various points in this discussion that identity — one's orientation in moral space — is constituted through relationships with other people. But more needs to be said about the nature of that process, about the fundamentally dialogical character of human self-definition. How does it work? For an answer, it is useful first to consider Taylor's examination of the "languages" of self-definition:

We become full human agents, capable of understanding ourselves, and hence defining an identity, through our acquisition of rich human languages of expression. [. . .] I want to take "language" in a broad sense, covering not only the words we speak but also other modes of expression whereby we define ourselves, including the "languages" of art, of gesture, of love, and the like. But we are inducted into these in exchange with others. No one acquires the languages needed for self-definition on their own. We are introduced to them through exchanges with others who matter to us — what George Herbert Mead called "significant others." The genesis of the human mind is in this sense not "monological," not something each accomplishes on his or her own, but dialogical.

*(Malaise 33)*

Taylor goes on to say, importantly, that it isn't simply the genesis of our identity, sometime in childhood, that is dialogical, as many people caught up in the ideal

of the monological self want to insist. Rather, “the making and sustaining of our identity,” he writes, “remains dialogical throughout our lives” (*Malaise* 35). This idea echoes Sandel’s response to the question of whether or not human beings are capable of understanding themselves independently of their social attachments. We cannot, Sandel maintains,

at least not without cost to those loyalties and convictions whose moral force consists partly in the fact that living by them is inseparable from understanding ourselves as the particular persons we are — as members of this family or community or nation or people, as bearers of that history, as citizens of this republic. (90)

Sandel’s comments challenge not only the idea that the self can be understood monologically but also the notion that the self is the product of a limited set of relationships, within a particular collective. As his comments reveal, the “memberships” of any one individual are many and varied, and each of those belongings contributes to the individual’s sense of who he or she is. Against Seyla Benhabib’s criticisms of Sandel’s and Taylor’s conceptions of the self, I would argue that neither of these philosophers denies, as Benhabib claims, “the right of the self to distance itself from social roles” (73) or the modern individual’s “achievement of being able to criticize, challenge and question the content of these constitutive identities” (74). Rather, what Sandel and Taylor are arguing is that we cannot *extract* ourselves from the fundamental condition of being constituted by social connections of one sort or another.

In my examination of the “collective” and “monological” conceptions of the self, I have devoted some attention to the implications — primarily negative — of each conception. But what of the dialogical self? What are the implications of understanding identity as being constituted by our relationships with others? While theorists such as Marilyn Friedman and Iris Marion Young point to the

limitations of attaching one's identity to a community of relationships, where "community" is understood to have potentially sinister undertones, I would like to suggest that the implications of the "communitarian" conception of the self, as I have described it above, are positive. For although this conception ties my identity to other people, and thus, in a certain sense, constrains me, it is those ties themselves that give meaning to the choices I make as an individual — choices that express my identity.

As Taylor explains, the choices we make as individuals take on significance against a "background of intelligibility," a "horizon" (*Malaise* 37), which is established socially. From the endless range of ways in which I might choose to define myself, only certain of those ways will strike me as worthy of recognition. Compare, for instance, the fact that I am exactly the same height as some tree in my back yard (I take this example from Taylor) with the fact that I have had four short stories published in literary journals. The first of these has no relevance to my identity; the second is quite significant to it, *because* publication in literary journals is something that has, through my interactions with significant others, acquired some importance in my life. In other words, the characteristics by which I choose to identify myself seem worthwhile to me, have meaning, because they have meaning for other people. The meaning for my significant others might be a negative one — think of the teenager who gets her tongue pierced in defiance of her parents' wishes — but it is, nevertheless, meaning, dialogically established.

This example of the adolescent constructing her identity in defiance of significant others is an important one, for it demonstrates that the dialogical conception of identity does not deny the individual's potential to intervene in the terms of his or her relationships. The fact that my identity depends on my relationships with others does not, in other words, mean that I have no power as

an individual in determining who or what I am going to be. To take another example, I might choose to break off contact with my significant others and to focus all my attention on my writing career. The “Sheehy school” of individualism would have me believe that I am moving away from “external valuations and accreditations” and determining entirely from within what I should do with my life. But such an assessment neglects the crucial role that my social relationships have played in the establishing of writing as something I deem to be a worthwhile activity. My choice to write full-time may involve a distancing from significant others, but that choice, and the self-definition I would derive from it, would take on significance, both positive and negative, against a horizon of meaning that has been constructed in dialogue, possibly with those same significant others. I mention “negative” significance here, for, as individualists such as Sheehy recognize, distancing oneself from relationships and commitments is not easy. But whereas the radical individualist might insist that any doubts or negative self-perceptions that I experience as a result of having distanced myself from significant others are unwarranted — I am simply fulfilling a moral obligation to be true to myself, such a person might say — the dialogical conception of the self acknowledges the validity of such feelings. Relationships and commitments are central to who I am, this conception recognizes. I am free to alter my relationships, but I cannot do so without changing my sense of who I am.

#### **IV. From Theory to Fiction**

To this point in my discussion, I have perhaps given the impression that I am suspicious of the imaginary, the fictional. After all, I criticize the collective and monological conceptions of the self in part because they seem to deny something “real” about human identity. My endorsement of the dialogical conception of the

self, on the other hand, is partly based on what I see as its correspondence to that same "reality." But it is not the fictiveness of the first two conceptions that troubles me — arguably, any attempt to understand and define human identity, even dialogically, involves the construction of something, a "self," that does not exist independently of the imagination. No, the problem with certain collective and monological conceptions of identity is, as I have suggested above, the ways in which those particular fictions of identity tend to influence people's behaviour and relationships in the "real world." It is against such phenomena as "ethnic cleansing" and chronic malaise that I foreground the connection between the dialogical conception of the self and the everyday realities of human social existence. Paradoxically, however, I believe that the most effective way of expressing the ideas I have just been discussing in theoretical terms is through literature.

My understanding of the relationship between "theory" and "literature" is crucial to the content and approach of this study and therefore merits some attention. First, although the distinction between the writings of such disciplines as philosophy or sociology and the kind of writing that generally falls under the category of "literature" is arbitrary and can certainly be challenged,<sup>22</sup> I am assuming here that the fictional work I will be analyzing later in this study is significantly different from the theoretical discussion of identity that I have just completed (I will say more about these differences below). At the same time, I want to insist on an important similarity between these two parts of my thesis — between theory and literature, in other words. In contrast with the claims of literary critics, from New Critics to post-structuralists, who challenge the notion

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<sup>22</sup> In his introduction to *Literary Theory*, Terry Eagleton discusses in detail the problems of concisely and objectively defining what is meant by "literature."

that literary texts assert ideas about the world,<sup>23</sup> this study clearly rests on that notion. I believe that literary texts and criticism that deny literature's capacity to express important ideas about the world — certain brands of formalist criticism, for instance, or, more recently, fiction that professes to be entirely "self-reflexive"<sup>24</sup> — are ultimately self-deceptive and uninteresting. Both the text of *Adam's Peak* and my analysis of the text assume that fiction has as much to say about the world as do philosophy, sociology, psychology and so forth, and that the ideas that literature expresses should be the primary focus of the literary critic.

But to return to my earlier claim, a significant difference between texts I am calling literature and texts I am calling theory is that the two express their ideas about the world in different languages, different forms. Without embarking on what would necessarily be a strained comparison of the features of these socially-constructed categories, I would nonetheless like to argue that the language and form of "literature" express certain ideas more compellingly than do the language and form of "theory." For whereas philosophy, psychology, and the like seek to describe and comment "objectively" on realities from which they are implicitly (if not actually) distanced, literary texts — novels, stories, even poems — venture not merely to describe and comment on those

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<sup>23</sup> In *Poetic Statement and Critical Dogma*, Gerald Graff examines arguments made against the "propositional" view of literature and against the "referentiality" of fiction. Graff shows how these arguments fail, and shows how the very theorists who make them demonstrate in their own criticism a belief that literary works express ideas. His work deals specifically with poetry, but, as he writes, "the thesis has obvious implications with respect to literary works in general" (xvi).

<sup>24</sup> Graff points to William Gass's *Willie Masters' Lonesome Wife* as a characteristic example of literature that denies its referentiality. Graff explains that in this novel "the reader is told explicitly that the words he reads are pure words (or pure concepts) and are not to be taken as referring to anything outside themselves" (ix).

realities but to re-create them.<sup>25</sup> I use the term “re-create” not to make a case for the existence of a potential one-to-one correspondence between world and text, but rather to suggest that literary texts participate more actively and explicitly in the world to which they refer than do theoretical texts. As Charles Newman argues in *The Post-Modern Aura*, his analysis of the role of fiction in late twentieth-century Western culture, “fiction remains an unequalled medium for fusing the imaginative and analytical faculties” (53). Fiction, and other “literary” genres are, in a sense, the genres of the pragmatist, who rejects abstract conceptual rigidities in favour of flexibility in practice<sup>26</sup> — genres that generate an intimacy and a complexity beyond the scope of “pure” theory’s language and form.

To better illustrate this difference, it is useful to consider how the subject of identity formation might be more compellingly addressed in literature than in theory. Obviously, as the content of this chapter reveals, I believe that theoretical language is useful — even necessary — for the articulation of certain ideas about human identity. Philosophical theories about such matters as selfhood and relationships provide tools for discussing and, in a necessarily abstract sense, understanding what is experienced “out in the world.” The kind of understanding that literature offers, however, is more immediate; it is, in a way that theory is not, *of* that world. Peter Esterhazy makes a forceful case for literature’s power to express ideas about human identity:

Is not literature meant to speak of our being a thousand different

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<sup>25</sup> As Graff suggests, even literary works that claim not to refer to anything outside themselves engage in a kind of re-creation of external reality. Graff’s analysis of Gass’s short novel goes on to say, “One does not need to read far in this novella to see that it offers a number of assertions about the world in the very process of justifying its avoidance of assertions” (ix).

<sup>26</sup> Richard Rorty is perhaps the best known contemporary proponent of this version of pragmatism, which is sometimes called subjective pragmatism or pragmatism of the left.

kinds of things, at times even creating this diversity? If literature gives up this purpose, this duty, it renounces all claim to legitimacy. I am Hungarian. I am Slovene. I am Serbian. You do not need literature for sentences like that. A bureaucrat will do, and a rubber stamp. A border guard. An army. (125)

In this attack on essentialized identities, Esterhazy reveals both the possibilities of literature and, implicitly, the limitations of theory in the treatment of the issue of identity. Literature, he suggests, succeeds in expressing the complexities and nuances of identity, the “thousand different kinds of things” that make up the self. Literature’s connection to human experience is so powerful, moreover, that it even contributes to the complexity of the reader’s identity. Though the only “non-literary” text that Esterhazy mentions here is the kind of bureaucratic stamp that one might find in a passport, that stamp evokes a range of textual forms — including, arguably, theoretical texts — that either fail to or have no responsibility to represent the complexities of the world. In theoretical texts, as in a passport, identity can be reduced, tidied up, made to fit a particular model. Literature, if it honours its “duty” to represent the diversity of human existence, cannot help but express the contingencies and complications of the self.<sup>27</sup>

Of course, the project of representing, or “re-creating,” the world in literature does not, as I suggested above, require that literature strive for an ultimately unattainable correspondence between the literary text and the world

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<sup>27</sup> This idea is related to Sartre’s famous claim that it is impossible “to write a good novel in praise of anti-Semitism” (58). But whereas Esterhazy writes of literature’s “duty” to the representation of human diversity, Sartre insists that the writer has a duty to recognize the freedom of all people.

outside the text.<sup>28</sup> Such a correspondence is undermined not only by the noncoincidence of signified and signifier, to use the Saussurian terms, but also by the fact that, as Fredric Jameson points out, readers apprehend texts not as things-in-themselves but, rather, through “sedimented layers of previous interpretations” and through “sedimented reading habits” (9). In short, literary texts “in-themselves” are distanced both from the world they represent and from their readers.

Yet these gaps arguably contribute to literature’s power to express the complexity of the world. We might understand this feature of literary texts by way of a spatial metaphor applied to two different reading scenarios. In the first scenario, I am reading a theoretical text such as Charles Taylor’s *Sources of the Self*. As I read, I can think of myself as being, in a certain sense, outside of the material world, in a place of streamlined and simplified (though not simple) abstractions, which I must then apply to my concrete experiences in the world. In the second scenario, I am reading a short story by Alice Munro. Here I can imagine myself as occupying a tighter, in-between space — between the world of the text and the extra-textual world in which I live the rest of my life. I sense that the former is striving on some level to coincide with the latter, to overlap it. This perpetual striving, but never altogether reaching, creates tensions in the space that I occupy as reader — “frictions,” perhaps, which continually remind me that the complexity of human existence exceeds the mimetic range of narrative. In terms of their respective capacities to help me understand human identity, then, Taylor’s book gives me certain tools to apply to my life “outside the text,” while Munro’s story, through its implicit striving to create complex

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<sup>28</sup> I am assuming here, contrary to Jacques Derrida’s famous assertion, that there *is* an “hors-texte,” an opposition between the content of a literary work and the world outside that work. For the purposes of this study, I do not accept Derrida’s claim that reading “cannot legitimately transgress the text toward something other than it, toward a referent” (158).

human identities, pushes me up against that outside world and calls attention to the infinitely complicated selves that inhabit it.

I have argued in this chapter that identity is not only complicated but also is developed and sustained in dialogue. The formal features of literary texts make them exceptionally well-suited to convey the dialogical nature of human existence. This power of literature, particularly novels, is a central concern of Mikhail Bakhtin's *The Dialogic Imagination*. Bakhtin's work, perhaps more than any other theorist's, offers an invaluable set of critical tools for examining the connection between literary form and questions of identity formation.

Just as human identity can be understood in monological or collective terms, for Bakhtin, so too can language and text be understood — problematically, he argues — in such terms. Bakhtin is critical of philosophical and stylistic theories that postulate, on the one hand, “a simple and unmediated relation of [the] speaker to his unitary and singular ‘own’ language,” and, on the other, “a simple realization of this language in the monologic utterance of the individual” (269). Such theories of language and praxis as being “unmediated,” “monologic” and “individual” parallel the monological conception of human identity that I addressed in the first part of this chapter. These theories also, significantly, are connected to the collective conception of the self. Bakhtin argues that the ideal of unitary language “gives expression to forces working toward concrete verbal and ideological unification and centralization” (271). The forces of “unification and centralization” that he identifies in European sociopolitical history<sup>29</sup> are, in important ways, comparable to the forces of collectivization that I have attributed to present-day nationalisms such as that of the LTTE. As

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<sup>29</sup> The particular forces of ideological unification and centralization to which Bakhtin is referring are, of course, connected to the growth of capitalism. As a Marxist, Bakhtin is therefore critical not only of the conception of language that the forces imply but also of the political and economic objectives of those forces.

Bakhtin suggests, the idea of a unitary language helps to accomplish “the task of cultural, national and political centralization” (273). The problem with this idea is, again according to Bakhtin, that “unitary language” is not a reality, but an ideal that is “posited” (270) — a fiction, in other words. The reality of language, he argues, is that all discourse, “in each and every of its factors, from the sound image to the furthest reaches of abstract meaning” is dialogic (259).

A full exploration of what Bakhtin means when he insists that all discourse is dialogic is beyond the scope of this discussion. For the purposes of my argument, however, it is useful to consider certain of his claims about discourse in the novel. The formal features of the novel, Bakhtin argues, give that genre, more so than others, a distinctively dialogic character:

Authorial speech, the speeches of narrators, inserted genres, the speech of characters are merely those fundamental compositional unities with whose help heteroglossia [raznorecie] can enter the novel; each of them permits a multiplicity of social voices and a wide variety of their links and interrelationships (always more or less dialogized). These distinctive links and interrelationships between utterances and languages, this movement of the theme through different languages and speech types, its dispersion into the rivulets and droplets of social heteroglossia, its dialogization — this is the basic distinguishing feature of the stylistics of the novel. (263)

Clearly, the kind of “multiplicity of social voices” and “dialogization” of theme (throughout the various strata and subdivisions of society) to which Bakhtin is referring here are more characteristic of some novels than of others. Bakhtin takes many of his textual examples from “sweeping” nineteenth-century English and Russian novels, which give voice to an often extraordinary range of people.

Nonetheless, Bakhtin's claims about the novel, especially when considered in light of his claims about the dialogicity of all language, can usefully be applied to a broad range of fictional narratives, as a means of investigating prose fiction's potential to convey the dialogic nature of human social existence and identity formation.

I will return to Bakhtin's ideas later on, in my analysis of my own novel. In anticipation of that discussion, however, it is necessary to comment briefly on the complicated relationship between Bakhtin's ideas and the traditions of literary modernism, in which *Adam's Peak* participates. As Stacy Burton claims in her comprehensive discussion of the relationship between Bakhtin and modernism, "Bakhtin's theories have proved popular among critics of modernist and postmodernist literatures" (520), and yet modernist tendencies to "stylize heteroglossia into high art, and thus to refashion a gap between life and art, seldom engage [Bakhtin] or, it seems, command his respect" (534).<sup>30</sup> Read in Bakhtinian terms, Burton argues, "much modernist writing turns out to be surprisingly monologic, given to highlighting the authority of the writer far more than dialogue does" (527). It is important to note here that the tensions Burton describes derive from a relatively narrow interpretation of a limited set of high modernist works. Arguably, there is much in modernist literature, conceived of more broadly, that is strikingly compatible both with Bakhtin's theories and with the idea that human identity is formed dialogically. Two formal features through which modernist texts, more than their predecessors, function dialogically are point of view shifts and temporal shifts (both of which are features of *Adam's Peak*). Virginia Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway*, to take one notable

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<sup>30</sup> Burton acknowledges a number of possible causes for Bakhtin's relative inattention to modernism, including the dangerous political climate in which he wrote the essays in *The Dialogic Imagination*. Ultimately, though, she finds the "critical reasons for this aporia in his work" (521) more intriguing and compelling than the circumstantial ones.

example, moves in and out of the consciousnesses of a group of related characters in such a way that the narrative becomes increasingly polyphonic, and each character's identity comes to be constructed through that character's relationships with other characters. The novel's temporal weave of past and present further contributes to its dialogism by rendering individual characters "multivoiced." While it is possible to argue that *Mrs. Dalloway* "stylizes heteroglossia into high art" or "highlights the authority of the author," an equally compelling case can be made for this text's, and other modernist texts', dialogical qualities. These are the qualities that invite a Bakhtinian interpretation and that ultimately offer powerful explorations — more powerful, in a sense, than those of theoretical texts, or of the sweeping realist novels that Bakhtin favours — of the dialogical manner in which human beings come to understand themselves and others *as selves*.

In a variety of ways, *Adam's Peak* attempts to exploit the possibilities of literature, specifically of the novel genre, in its treatment of identity. Through character development, plot, and form, the text strives to dramatize both the complexity of identity formation — the "thousand different kinds of things" that constitute the self — and its dialogical nature. While I am not yet certain whether or not these attempts have succeeded — a "successful" novel, for me, is one that readers find moving (as opposed to, say, clever) — I am confident that the text of *Adam's Peak* expresses a number of important and complex ideas concerning identity.

**Chapter Two**  
***Synopsis of Adam's Peak***

On a stifling August day, six-year-old Clare Fraser and seven-year-old Rudy Vantwest make eye contact from opposite sides of their suburban Montreal street. For a moment they are connected, then each turns away — Clare to the garden sprinkler, Rudy to the excitement of his baby brother's impending birth. Twenty-five years later, they and their families have had scarcely more contact. While there are cultural differences separating them — the Vantwests are from Sri Lanka, the Frasers from Scotland — the seemingly insurmountable barrier between the two homes has far more to do with the families' idiosyncrasies and troubled pasts than with simple xenophobia. But over a few tumultuous months in 1996, Clare and Rudy, now continents apart, are thrust by accident and choice into identity crises, or, rather, a long-delayed coming of age, which connect them and their families profoundly.

Clare Fraser is a jazz pianist, whose crippling social awkwardness makes intimate relationships impossible and threatens her very sanity. Since the death of her father, Alastair, whom she both resembles and resents, she has lived with her mother. Her social life is almost nonexistent, and most of her "conversations" are imagined. Desperate for a change, but paralyzed by fear and indecision, she languishes in her interior world until the Good Friday morning that Adam Vantwest, cleaning his motorcycle in the driveway, invites her to go for a ride. Clare accepts, and both the ride itself and the friendship that it sparks reveal to her possibilities, ways of being, that she has never imagined. But just as her new sense of self is beginning to blossom — starting with the unsettling discovery of her sexuality — she learns that Adam has crashed his motorcycle and is in a coma. Despite her awkwardness, Clare feels compelled to speak to Adam's family, and, for the first time ever, she and her mother pay a visit to the house across the street. Over the course of her meetings with the troubled Mr. Vantwest and his sister, Clare's impulse to change her life becomes

increasingly urgent. She decides to visit Sri Lanka, for Adam, but her plan is thwarted — first by a terrorist bombing in Colombo, then by her mother's revelation that Alastair Fraser was not Clare's biological father.

Rudy Vantwest, a political idealist, feels out of place in society and in his family, and is burdened by guilt and resentment over his relationship with Adam, the brother whose birth Rudy's mother did not survive. Rudy obsessively revisits the past and writes diary entries to Clare Fraser, a woman he has never spoken to but to whom he has felt allied since the day he secretly watched her scatter her father's ashes. In an attempt to redefine himself, Rudy has returned to Sri Lanka, where he lives with his aunt and teaches English at a private school. One of his students, a Tamil boy who endorses the terror tactics of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam, reminds him of Adam, and the resemblance intensifies Rudy's guilt and resentment. His sense of himself and his family relationships is radically transformed, however, by his brother's accident and by the bombing in Colombo, to which he is lured by his student. The bomb leaves him with a cracked pelvis and a collection of haunting visions and fears, yet it puts him in contact with his long-estranged uncle, Ernie Van Twest, who comes to check on him and who proves crucial to Rudy's development.

Rudy's and Clare's conflicts echo turmoils in the lives of Rudy's father, Alec, and Clare's mother, Isobel. As a boy, living on a tea estate in Ceylon, Alec Van Twest is exasperated with the dullness of his life and fantasizes about the excitement of the war in Europe and the Pacific. On one hot, slow day during the Easter holidays, he discovers his older brother, Ernie, kissing another man behind the tea factory. Alec, though traumatized by the discovery, "outs" his brother, hoping to stir up conflict at home. The result of his announcement is not, as he expects, a noisy row between his father and Ernie but, rather, Ernie's quiet departure from the family. Over the years, Alec comes to be haunted by

the consequences of his actions and by a belief that fate has singled him out for retribution — most emphatically through his homosexual son, Adam.

Like Alec, the teenage Isobel finds her world hopelessly dull and dreams of leaving her small town in Scotland. An opportunity arises when she meets Alastair Fraser, a man whom she finds boring and unattractive but who is planning to immigrate to Canada. She allows Alastair to court her, but the courtship is undermined by two developments: Isobel experiences a sexual awakening with her best friend, Margaret, and, to combat her guilt and confusion, she initiates a sexual relationship with her father's apprentice, Patrick Locke. Denying both her attraction to Margaret and her suspicions that she is pregnant, she accepts Alastair's proposal of marriage and moves with him to Montreal.

In response to the upheavals in their respective lives, Clare decides to find her biological father in Scotland, while Rudy, as an act of atonement, climbs Adam's Peak, the sacred mountain after which his brother is named. Clare's encounters with the compulsive talker Patrick Locke and with her mother's childhood friend Margaret, now a Church of Scotland minister, lead her to the chilling realization that her mother is as much a stranger to her as the father she never knew. Believing herself to be stripped of all attachments, Clare revives her plan to travel to Sri Lanka and conceives of this journey as a breaking away from her family, her past, and her debilitating awkwardness. Around the same time, Rudy, still weak in the aftermath of the bombing, makes the long, gruelling ascent of Adam's Peak with his Uncle Ernie. They reach the summit, barely, where Rudy is suddenly struck by the futility of his gesture. Desperate to strengthen his family relationships and his identity in a more meaningful, concrete way — a desire that is fuelled by Ernie's indifference to his own estrangement from the Vantwest family — Rudy decides to return to Canada as

soon as possible.

Rudy and Clare cross paths at Heathrow Airport. Clare spots Rudy first and spends several anxious minutes contemplating the nature of the force — is it coincidence? fate? choice? — that has brought them together. Summoning her new-found self-assurance, she walks across the concourse to speak to him, and their eyes meet, as they did on the August day when they were children.

Six years later, Rudy writes a letter to Clare, who is now living in the U.K. Rudy is in Toronto, where he lives with his sister and shares in the care of his niece. The letter contains a recent photograph, taken at Adam's graduation from the M.A. program he started before the accident. His tone friendly and familiar, Rudy updates Clare on his family's activities and reveals the extent to which his own life revolves around relationships and commitments he previously sought to escape. Rudy wishes Clare well on her upcoming recital. He also mentions Isobel's second marriage and the peace talks in Sri Lanka. His hope is that both are going well, but he acknowledges that looks can be deceiving.

As they struggle to resolve their various conflicts, Clare, Rudy, Alec, and Isobel are each forced to confront, on the one hand, the unknowability of people's inner lives and, on the other, the powerful connections between their relationships with other people and their own identities.

*Adam's Peak* is organized into four parts separated by three "interludes." The first three parts contain six chapters each, and these chapters alternate in their point of view between Rudy and Clare. Part Four has two chapters, one from Rudy's point of view and one from Clare's. Events from Isobel's and Alec's lives in Scotland and Sri Lanka are dramatized in the interludes, which are written from those characters' points of view. Interlude One has two sections, which introduce the two different storylines, Isobel's and Alec's. Interlude Two is the conclusion of Isobel's story; Interlude Three is the conclusion of Alec's. The

novel also features a short prologue, consisting of one of Clare's imagined conversations, and an epilogue, consisting of Rudy's letter to Clare. The narrative is written in the past tense, with the exception of the flashbacks to Rudy's childhood, which are in the present tense.

**Chapter Three**  
**Conceptions of Identity in *Adam's Peak***

The struggles in which the central characters of *Adam's Peak* are engaged are importantly connected to questions of identity and to the characters' attempts to construct meaningful identities for themselves. Through the characters of Rudy Vantwest and Clare Fraser, whose identities are in crisis, and through Kanda Selvarajah and Adam Vantwest, who share a much stronger sense of who they are, the text dramatizes — and complicates — the three conceptions of identity that I discussed in Chapter One. The collective and the monological conceptions, of which that chapter is critical, are revealed in *Adam's Peak* to have potentially positive implications. Those implications must, however, be understood in the context of the novel's criticisms and its broader commentary on the nature of human identity. We might usefully conceive of our identity in collective or monological terms, the text suggests, but those conceptions, if adopted without recognition of the dialogically determined horizons against which we determine who we are, are ultimately destructive.

Throughout much of *Adam's Peak*, Rudy and Clare exhibit what Taylor describes as "a radical uncertainty of where they stand" (*Sources* 27). Each, in other words, is experiencing a sort of identity crisis. Having uprooted himself from his life in Canada, Rudy asks himself what he was there — "An outsider? Maybe. A bystander? Usually. A resentful, cranky bastard in any case" (3) — and his responses confirm for him the wisdom of his decision to reconstruct himself in a new setting. As he later says to his uncle, "I expected that coming back [to Sri Lanka] would give me a sense of who I really am" (311). Clare, at the beginning of the novel, returns from a visit with her friend Emma, desperately frustrated with the "agonizing" familiarity of her existence (67) and with the "silent, stony person" (69) she believes she has become. She wants to reconstruct her identity, to "become someone new" (29), but she is initially more uncertain than Rudy is about the practical, concrete changes she should make in order to become a

different person ("I don't know what's right for me" [69], she says in an imagined conversation with her friend Emma). In their abstract conceptions of themselves, however, both Rudy and Clare adopt a monological view of identity.

Clare conceives of the identity she would like to have in terms of a distancing from significant others, particularly her parents and her boss. Significantly, Clare's sense of self at the beginning of the novel hints at a dialogical conception of identity. She understands herself in relation to other people: her father, whose crippling shyness and awkwardness she has "inherited"; her mother, in whose presence she has difficulty thinking of herself as an adult; her boss, Marcus, whose quietness and sexual repression serve as a "horizon of meaning," to use Taylor's term — a daily reminder to Clare of the kind of person she herself presents to the social world, the "kind of partner she was fated to be with" (101). Clare also understands herself in relation to Emma, with whom she implicitly establishes such things as social and sexual confidence as "horizons of meaning" — horizons against which Clare views herself as deficient, "stuck in a perpetual adolescence" (103). She conceives of her identity dialogically, then, but negatively, and her response to this conception is to strive for a monologically constructed self. Her idea of moving to Vancouver represents a detachment from her relationships with her father (who is associated, through winter imagery, with Montreal), her mother, with whom she has lived for most of her life, and Marcus. Later in the novel, when Clare considers travelling to Sri Lanka, she imagines a solitary self, free of the influences of those relationships: "[. . .] the person she saw, strolling breezily in sandals and a bright pink sarong, chestnut hair tied in a loose knot under a wide-brimmed hat, seemed an ideal of Clare Fraser" (314). This "ideal of Clare Fraser," strolling through a tropical country in warm colours, is implicitly an

unencumbered self, a self free of the metaphorical and actual frigidity of her Montreal existence and the relationships it comprises.

Rudy, too, sees himself as redefining his identity by detaching himself from relationships and connections. In Canada, his sense of himself is largely constituted — dialogically, like Clare's — by his relationships with his family. The identity he has acquired through these relationships is, again like Clare's, primarily a negative one. In the context of his roles within the Vantwest family, he views himself as "resentful," "cranky," and, most of all, "impotent" (6). He wants "to be helpful, to be significant in some way" (6), particularly in relation to his sister, but, sensing that it is Adam whom Susie "calls for" (6) in times of need, he retreats from any kind of meaningful interaction with Susie or her young daughter. Rudy's relationship with his brother also frustrates him. Since childhood, he has wanted "to be a decent brother" (83) to Adam, but resentment of Adam, combined with Rudy's own introversion, has undermined his desires. Rudy's identity within his web of family relationships is, thus, one of unfulfilled roles — a frustrated dialogicality, as it were. He responds to this frustration by detaching himself from his family and attempting to reconstruct himself, monologically, in Colombo: "The idea was to try things out for a school year, without commitments, then, assuming he adjusted well enough — he had no idea what he'd do if he didn't — settle down. Find a house, closer to the city, and eventually, perhaps, a companion" (16). Of particular significance in this one-year plan is Rudy's sense of being "without commitments" — an unencumbered self.<sup>31</sup> He allows that he may in time "settle down" and establish new commitments in the form of a career and a home, but the idea of forming an important *human* commitment, of defining himself in relation to "a companion," is only a

<sup>31</sup> While it is true that Rudy initially lives with his aunt in Colombo, he does not see his identity as being significantly constituted by his relationship with her. He lives with her, he implies, as a convenience, and plans to move out as soon as possible.

possibility, a “perhaps.”

The other web of significant relationships from which Rudy wishes to extract himself — and in so doing redefine himself — is his Toronto social life. In relation to the women he dates, in particular, he has acquired an identity of exotic otherness, with which he is “fed up” (5). Having left Toronto, he recalls that in the presence of women who found him exotic, and therefore “incapable of being boring,” he would become “someone not quite himself, peppering his descriptions of ‘home’ with tropical flavours and smells, using Sinhalese words whose meanings had escaped him, admiring the contrast in their skin tones when they made love” (9). This “someone not quite himself” — the sensual, exotic lover — is a feature of Rudy’s identity that he has actively helped to create, in dialogue with the women he dates; yet he finds it uncomfortable, “embarrassing” (9), in part because of its essentializing of his Sri Lankan background (his partners assume that his exoticness prevents him from being boring). Instead of renegotiating his identity within the context of those relationships, however, Rudy chooses to reject the relationships. In conceiving of Sri Lanka as a place where he is “not exotic,” and where people acknowledge him “with little more than polite but indifferent nods” (15), he again hints at a desire to construct himself monologically. For in being an ordinary face in the crowd, whom people scarcely notice, he is, implicitly, unattached and unencumbered, free to make of himself what he will.

The monological conception of identity that Rudy and Clare adopt contrasts, in their experiences and in the novel as a whole, with the collective and dialogical conceptions of the self. The collective conception is dramatized most strikingly through the character of Kanda Selvarajah, a sixteen-year-old boy in Rudy’s English 12 class and a supporter of the LTTE’s sovereignty project. The dialogical conception finds its most explicit expression in Adam Vantwest, who

appears only briefly in the narrative's present, in an encounter with Clare.

Through his written communications with Rudy, Kanda suggests that his identity is constituted by his membership in a particular collective, namely the Tamil people of Sri Lanka. When Rudy asks the boy to write an essay discussing the country's political turmoils from the point of view of a Sinhalese person, Kanda responds with a letter, in which he invokes the idea of essentialized, collective identities as an explanation for his inability to complete the assignment:

I tried to write about Sri Lanka's problems from the viewpoint of someone else, but it was not possible. What I mean to say is that I am able to write the essay, but it would not be true. I was born as a Tamil and that is what is true for me. I can listen to another man's point of view but I cannot experience it. I cannot write about this country's difficulties as a Sinhalese, but only as a Tamil pretending to be Sinhalese. I do not see a purpose to this. My impressions of the Sinhalese life will be influenced by my Tamil thinking and therefore will be incorrect. [. . .] The assignment you gave is only fantasy. Every person is formed by his culture and his race, and that is how he should conduct himself in the world. You would not ask a gazelle to be a lion or to understand a lion's point of view. Human beings are no different. I am a Tamil. That is how I think and conduct myself. I do not dislike the Sinhalese. The gazelle does not dislike the lion, but it will do what it must to survive in the lion's presence. (203)

Kanda's assertion that every person is "formed by his culture and his race," and that he himself thinks and conducts himself as a Tamil, suggests that identity is something bestowed on the individual early in life, by virtue of his or her membership in a cultural collective, and that the particular identity that one is

given implies a limited range of ways of thinking and behaving in the world. These limitations are also evoked by his animal simile: human identity, he implies, is instinctual; we can no more escape our designated way of being than a lion could escape its impulse to kill its prey. Kanda's further claim that any attempt on his part to understand the Sinhalese point of view "would not be true" is suggestive of what Michael Ignatieff calls the "'you just don't understand' aspects of identity politics" (97). The idea that a Tamil person cannot authentically or usefully understand a Sinhalese person's point of view, and vice versa, implies not only that there exists an essential, measurable Tamil, or Sinhalese, point of view (an assumption that Rudy allows in his framing of the essay question) but also that such a perspective is inaccessible to someone who does not share the designated features of the group in question.

In contrast with Kanda, Adam Vantwest accepts and implicitly endorses the idea that we are constituted by our communal relationships, both chosen and unchosen. While Adam acknowledges the importance of collective belongings, including his own membership in a "gay community" and his niece Zoë's membership in a "deaf community" (25), and while he expresses a certain commitment to individualism and the ethic of authenticity in his desire to find a career that he is "meant to do" (24), his pivotal interaction with his neighbour Clare Fraser demonstrates a more dialogical understanding of the self. Adam offers to take Clare to the shops on his motorcycle not because he likes her or wants something from her but because he sees her, by virtue of her physical proximity, as a significant other. As he remarks in the *dépanneur*,

I've been living on that street for almost twenty-five years now, and do you know, I don't know a damn thing about any of my neighbours? Nothing important anyway — it's really pathetic. [. . .]  
I'm kind of a hypocrite. I complain about how impersonal

twentieth-century life has become, but I don't do anything about it.  
(77)

What Adam refers to as the "impersonal" nature of twentieth-century life is connected to the sort of extreme social atomism that Taylor discusses,<sup>32</sup> whereby individuals are so isolated and centred on themselves (or, at most, their immediate families) that they fail to engage in meaningful ways with those significant others who constitute their community (where "community" is taken to comprise the various people with whom one has regular interactions). Adam's comments imply that neighbours, because they are people with whom one has regular interactions, are significant others and are therefore worthy of attention. When Adam insists on paying for Clare's eggs, saying that an egg-borrowing arrangement will allow the Vantwests and the Frasers to become "real neighbours" (80), he endorses a dialogical understanding of the self. The relationship implied by the reciprocal borrowing will change the participants' identities, he suggests, for they will take on the role of "neighbour" in a more constitutive, "real" way — a change that Adam treats as positive. The eggs themselves further highlight the idea of dialogical identity construction through their connection to conception, creation, and relationships. On the return journey from the *dépanneur*, Clare looks down at the carton of eggs "wedged between herself and Adam" on the motorcycle seat (81), and this image evokes both their newly strengthened relationship and the embryonic identity changes that the relationship has generated, particularly in Clare. For through her brief interaction with Adam, Clare senses not only that she has become a "real neighbour," but that her identity has shifted away from "the Clare Fraser who needs more colour in her life" (75).

<sup>32</sup> Taylor's essay "Atomism" examines the issue of political atomism, a term he uses to characterize "a vision of society as in some sense constituted by individuals for the fulfilment of ends which [are] primarily individual" (29).

To this point in my analysis of *Adam's Peak*, I have outlined some of the important ways in which the novel dramatizes the three conceptions of identity that are central to this study. It is necessary now to turn to the attitudes that the text expresses toward those three conceptions. In very general terms, the novel's position can be described as a pragmatic one, which acknowledges that rigid abstract principles do not, nor should they, govern the way people conduct themselves in the world. More specifically, the text's endorsement of the dialogical conception of identity is tempered by a recognition that collective and monological understandings of the self can, and even should, be adopted under certain circumstances. In its criticisms of these understandings, however, as well as in its general plot development and form, the novel ultimately suggests that, as a "default" understanding of the self, the dialogical conception of identity is the most useful and beneficial of the three.

The potential benefits of understanding one's identity monologically are dramatized most obviously through Clare's eventual arrival at a positive sense of self. By the end of the novel, she has detached herself from her father's influence, as suggested by the gradual diminishment of her imagined conversations with him, and she has left her mother, her insular Morgan Road existence, and Marcus by travelling to Europe (and, metaphorically, by discovering her sexuality). She has even rejected the self she might become, dialogically, as "the unplanned biological daughter of Patrick Locke and Isobel McGuigan, adopted early on by Alastair Fraser" (333). Importantly, Clare begins to conceive of herself as "sovereign — neither Scottish nor Canadian, not Fraser or Locke or McGuigan" (334). This sense of detachedness, or "sovereignty," from relationships is treated by Clare, and by the text, as a positive development. For in distancing herself from her central defining relationships, she has finally succeeded in conceiving of her identity in positive terms. From a

chronic adolescent plagued by crippling awkwardness, she becomes a comfortable adult, capable of travelling and experiencing sexual pleasure — someone who might, as she imagines, live in Paris (359) and who, as Rudy's concluding letter implies, manages to pursue a career in music (363). In her adopting of what might be called a strategic monologism, Clare echoes Taylor's acknowledgment that our ties to others "can easily be in conflict with our personal development," and that, "in certain contexts, where one is struggling to define a fragile and conflicted identity, forgetting the constraints can seem the only path to survival" (*Malaise* 57). Like Taylor, then, the text of *Adam's Peak* allows that it can be useful to conceive of the self monologically, by "forgetting" the connections and relationships that have determined who we are.

Yet the novel works to point out, again through Clare, that a strategic forgetting of the dialogical nature of human identity does not alter or erase the existence of that nature. Clare senses that she is "sovereign," constructing herself independently, yet the concrete changes in her life suggest that she is in fact establishing stronger connections to the social world. Those connections, moreover, begin to have an important influence on her identity. Toward the end of the novel, Clare's willingness and ability to contact her biological father and her mother's friend Margaret (both strangers to her), as well as the diminishment of her interior conversations, signals that she has become more engaged with the social world, and that her existence, by extension, has become more dialogical. It is her relationship with Adam, however, that most strikingly dramatizes the persistently dialogical nature of her identity construction. Although she inwardly protests, when confronted with the seemingly unavoidable presence of the Vantwests in her life, that she wants "a new life, but on her own terms" (112), Clare's development is clearly shaped by her relationship with Adam Vantwest. The idea of travelling to Sri Lanka has

significance for her, becomes crucial to the way she imagines herself (her “ideal of Clare Fraser,” as I noted earlier, is situated in Sri Lanka), because she has experienced that idea in dialogue with Adam. She pictures herself alone in Sri Lanka, but her decision to go there is made against a “background of intelligibility,” to use Taylor’s term, that has been established socially — primarily with Adam, but also with Adam’s father and aunt, whom Clare and her mother visit, and with Patrick Locke, who describes for Clare his ascent of Adam’s Peak. Significantly, when Clare spots Rudy at Heathrow Airport, at the end of the novel, she recognizes that an encounter with him has the potential to change her. Such an encounter, she believes, “could not be ignored”; it must be permitted “to change her plans even” (359). This acceptance of the social nature of her existence — she cannot “ignore” other people, as she tried to do when she crossed paths with Adam — and of the potential of social connections to influence plans that are central to her identity<sup>33</sup> suggests that ultimately Clare’s monological sense of self is a fiction.

But while the fiction of the monological self proves useful to Clare, for Rudy it is detrimental. Rudy’s efforts to distance himself from significant others are not only unsuccessful; they make him unhappy. Having attempted, like Clare, to “shake off” his Morgan Road past, he finds that that past, and the relationships of which it is comprised, persistently “crowd his present” (4). His inability to “shake off” the identity he has acquired over his years in Canada is hinted at metonymically through his chronic sweating. Rudy’s identity, like his body — which once was comfortable in tropical heat but is no longer — has undergone “some sort of mutation” (2) while in Canada. The change that Rudy thinks of as a gradual “transformation of his cells” (3) is also a transformation of

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<sup>33</sup> At this point in the novel, Clare has decided that she will leave her Morgan Road life for good and study music in Paris.

his self, a change that has made it impossible for him to feel entirely comfortable in Sri Lanka. His inability to jettison his "Canadian" relationships and identity is revealed more explicitly through his obsessive memories of family interactions and of his own role in those interactions. These memories, by "crowding" his consciousness, effectively remain intrinsic to Rudy's identity and prevent him from reconstructing himself monologically. Throughout the novel, the tension between his inability to cast off his significant relationships and his desire to reconstruct himself monologically provokes in him a range of negative emotions. After recalling a childhood confrontation with Adam, for instance, Rudy lies in his aunt's garden, "trying to feel connected" to the tropical surroundings of his new home (64). In an important sense, he is trying to detach himself from his Morgan Road memories and to reimagine his identity in a Sri Lankan context. But the idea of feeling connected to Sri Lanka reminds him of Adam (who displays a keen interest in the country, even though he has never been there), and Rudy finds himself metaphorically stuck "in his Morgan Road bedroom," feeling, as he did during the long-ago confrontation, like a "lousy brother" (64). The fact that Adam's recent letter, which Rudy reads in the garden, does not attempt a reciprocal detachment from their relationship leaves Rudy with a sense of "self-loathing" (64). Implicitly, if Adam, as well as Rudy's own consciousness (and body), would allow him to shake off his Morgan Road identity and all of its troublesome features, he would have no cause to feel lousy or self-loathing — this is the sort of freedom from attachments that Gail Sheehy's text envisions. But such a detachment, the text of *Adam's Peak* suggests, is impossible. The options available to Rudy, ultimately, are either to carry on unhappily pursuing an impossible monologism; to adopt, like Clare, a "fictional" sense of self; or to reconstruct his identity within the context of his significant relationships (which are themselves subject to reconstruction).

Rudy's and Clare's identity crises dramatize the possibilities and limitations of the monological conception of the self; yet their crises are part of the novel's broader investigation of identity in modern culture, an investigation which also includes an exploration of the possibilities and limitations of the *collective* conception of the self. This exploration is woven through Clare's and, more emphatically, Rudy's stories. It is also crucial to the novel's treatment of its "real world" political context (Sri Lanka's and, to a lesser degree, Canada's sovereignty movements). As I suggested earlier, the character of Kanda Selvarajah dramatizes most strikingly the beliefs and assumptions behind the conception of identity offered by nationalist organizations such as the LTTE. The potential benefits and drawbacks of this conception are, similarly, revealed through Kanda; however, several of the novel's other characters engage in dialogues about Sri Lanka's politics and about the idea of collective identity, thereby contributing to the novel's overall commentary on the collective conception of the self.

Just as the character of Clare demonstrates that a monological understanding of identity can contribute to a more positive sense of self, Kanda demonstrates the confidence that might derive from a collective sense of self. Throughout the novel, Kanda exhibits tremendous confidence. His self-assurance at school comes in part from his intellect — his "command of the lessons" (44) and his broad range of scholarly reading. But it also comes, implicitly, from his sense of being firmly embedded in a collective — the Tamil people of Sri Lanka — which is much larger than himself. Kanda's letter to Rudy, quoted above, suggests a strong connection between the boy's repeated identification of himself "as a Tamil" (he mentions it four times) and the confidence, the audacity even, that he displays, not only in refusing to follow his teacher's instructions but in describing the assignment Rudy has given him as "only fantasy." The boy's

confidence, moreover, is not simply a matter of being able to express and act upon his convictions. It is also a confidence in his selfhood. Unlike Rudy and Clare, Kanda does not wonder who he is; his identity shows no signs of being in crisis. "I am a Tamil," he declares in his letter; "[t]hat is how I think and conduct myself." In identifying himself not as an individual teenage boy, who must discover his own way and place in the world, but as part of an entire people, from whom he has inherited a particular way of thinking and behaving, Kanda effectively thwarts the kind of self-doubt that torments Rudy and Clare as they struggle to figure out what it is that they value, what it is good to be.

Significantly, and paradoxically, one of the other characters in *Adam's Peak* to express, more explicitly than Kanda, the potential benefits of a collective conception of the self is Rudy. Despite his impulse to define himself monologically, and despite his ultimate rejection of the the collective conception of identity that Kanda espouses, Rudy acknowledges his own attraction to that conception. Strolling through the grounds of his aunt's church, he recalls an Easter Mass during which he "watched the rest of the congregation crowding the railing for Holy Communion" and "envied them their collective sense of importance" (14-15). Most striking in this recollection is the fact that it is not the faith of the worshippers that Rudy envies — he himself is "not a believer" (49) — but rather the strength, the "sense of importance," that those worshippers experience by virtue of their collectiveness, their shared identity. Climbing Adam's Peak with his uncle, Rudy revisits this idea. He characterizes his decision to move back to Sri Lanka not as a means of detaching himself from his Morgan Road relationships and identity but as an attempt to participate in a form of collective identity:

[. . .] I actually thought I'd come back here and there'd be some kind of mystical vibe, some essential Sri Lankanness, connecting

me to everything. [. . .] I think I expected that the moment I stepped off the plane I'd notice something. [. . .] I thought I'd be in my groove. (312)

Evident in Rudy's use of the terms "mystical" and "everything" is a desire to be connected to something greater than himself. His expectation that such a connection would put him in his "groove" suggests — if "being in one's groove" can be understood as a state of being comfortable with one's identity — that identification with a collective is crucial to the forming and sustaining of a sense of self. In short, Rudy's desires demonstrate that, as Michael Ignatieff points out, "we're not just individuals — we need collective belongings" (96).

Importantly, though, Rudy's account of his search for a connection that would put him in "his groove" hints at the naivety of relying on a particular collective belonging as a source of selfhood. His tone as he describes his desires is "mocking" (312), while his implicitly self-critical recollection that he "actually thought" he would discover an "essential Sri Lankanness" suggests that he now finds such an expectation naive. Returning to Sri Lanka was not, Rudy concludes, what he "was hoping for" (312) — he did not feel connected to everything and did not, he suggests, discover his groove, his identity. As he observes, he is not "a complete stranger" in Sri Lanka (312). He is able to identify, to some extent, with the people and situations he encounters there. But what he has not managed to do is to reconstruct his identity simply by placing himself among people with whom he shares the label of "Sri Lankan." As his encounter with the Canadian teenagers — with whom "he could easily have chatted [. . .] about an infinite number of topics" (310) — reveals, his years in Canada have shaped his identity significantly. He has become, we could say, more Canadian than Sri Lankan. Rudy's connection to the teenagers, however, suggests something more complicated than a diluting of an originally-pure "Sri Lankan" identity, or a

merging of such an identity with a “Canadian” one. The idea that he is able to “chat” with the teenagers about a variety of topics calls attention to the dialogic nature of identity formation. Rudy’s identity has changed in Canada not because he has been assimilated into a collective of “Canadians,” but because he has been in dialogue with a particular web of people, a web that is different from the one in which he was embedded when he first lived in Sri Lanka. In returning to Sri Lanka and cultivating for himself a new “web of interlocution,” to borrow Taylor’s term, Rudy has presumably subjected his identity to new transformations. But just as the web of roles and relationships of his existence in Canada has prevented him from reconstructing himself monologically, so too does the ongoing influence of those roles and relationships make it impossible for him to conceive of himself unproblematically in terms of his connection to an abstract collective of Sri Lankans.

Rudy’s suggestion that collective conceptions of the self are untenable takes on further weight in *Adam’s Peak* through the novel’s political context. In Chapter One of this study, I discussed the rhetoric of important Sri Lankan political groups, groups who invoke essentialized collective identities and who, in the recent past, have resorted to or implicitly condoned violence as a means of asserting and preserving those identities. In *Adam’s Peak*, significant plot and character developments stem from a historically-based bombing of a Colombo office building — an incident that is linked to the LTTE’s sovereignty project.<sup>34</sup> The novel’s treatment of this project, and of the ideas expressed by Rudy’s

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<sup>34</sup> On the morning of January 31, 1996, a truck loaded with explosives drove into the Central Bank of Ceylon, in Colombo’s downtown business district, destroying the building and killing or injuring over a thousand people. The LTTE never officially claimed, nor denied, responsibility for the attack, though they are widely thought to have organized it in response to the army’s capturing of the Jaffna Peninsula in December 1995. In *Adam’s Peak*, the bombing is shifted from January to March, and the targeted building is identified simply as an office building.

student Kanda (who is possibly implicated in the Colombo bombing), serve to foreground not only the theoretical problems but also the dangers of collective conceptions of identity.

Kanda's letter to Rudy — a response to Rudy's request that he consider Sri Lanka's political troubles from a Sinhalese perspective — expresses an understanding of identity that is similar to, though more polemical than, that of the LTTE's vision statement. Both texts treat individual identity as being, to use Gilbert's terms, "embedded in that of the community in a very strong sense" (115). Earlier in this chapter, I discussed Kanda's letter, in fairly neutral terms, as an expression of this collective conception of identity; yet the letter invites a more oppositional reading. For in conceiving of his identity as being entirely determined by his membership in a particular collective, Kanda makes two highly problematic moves: first, he imposes on his society (and, by extension, on humanity) a rigid, divisive, and artificial system of classification; secondly, he abdicates his own political and moral responsibility to an entity based on that system.

In his letter, Kanda not only constructs a rigid cultural, even ontological, difference between Tamil people and Sinhalese people, he does so in a manner that problematically assumes the existence of tension and intolerance between the two groups. As I suggested earlier, Kanda's letter, with its references to such things as "Tamil thinking" and "Sinhalese life" (203), implies that members of each group exhibit a particular way of thinking and behaving and that those ways of thinking and behaving do not transcend cultural boundaries. In comparing Tamil people and Sinhalese people to gazelles and lions<sup>35</sup> — different,

<sup>35</sup> Kanda's choice of animals is not arbitrary. The lion is associated with Sri Lanka's Sinhalese population (*sinha* = lion) and is pictured on the national flag. Kanda connects the symbolic lion and the people it represents with the aggressive hunting behaviours of the African lion. The non-aggressive, "victimized" gazelle is, Kanda suggests, representative of the Tamil population.

socially incompatible species — Kanda further implies the existence of what Hardt and Negri call “an absolute racial difference” (103) between the two groups, a difference that is natural, immutable, and, moreover, an inescapable source of conflict. In other words, Kanda’s animal metaphor essentializes the tensions between Tamil people and Sinhalese people. The theoretical problem with this characterization of the two groups is, of course, that the differences and tensions which he attempts to naturalize are socially and historically contingent (Kanda himself acknowledges the historical contingency of the Tamil-Sinhalese conflict when he writes in an essay that the “Tamil cause has not always been violent, and it has not always tried to gain independence” [49-50]). Like his notion of a collective Tamil identity, then, Kanda’s conception of the differences between, and incompatibility of, Tamil people and Sinhalese people is a fiction. The danger of this construction of an “absolute racial difference” on the theoretical, “imaginary plane,” is, as Hardt and Negri point out, that such constructions correspond “on the practical plane to racial subordination and social purification”<sup>36</sup> (103). Though Kanda does not explicitly argue for the superiority of Tamil people over Sinhalese people, his implied assumption that there is a fundamental, and conflict-provoking, ontological difference between the two is precisely the sort of assumption that fuels projects of racial discrimination, segregation and, at a particularly sinister extreme, “ethnic cleansing.”

Importantly, while the divisions and tensions that Kanda describes may seem strikingly present when events such as the Colombo bank bombing occur, generalizations based on such events do not reflect the day to day realities of Sri Lankan society. To say that the violent clashes that have plagued Sri Lanka for

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<sup>36</sup> Hardt and Negri are discussing here the conflating of nation and race in European nationalist movements. They argue that “European societies and peoples were never really pure and uniform” (103).

decades are reflective of the quotidian interactions between Tamil and Sinhalese people is to distort and reduce what Suvendrini Perera calls the complex “coexistence” of people “who have lived together over centuries, in love and war, conflict and collaboration” (16). Essentialized characterizations of Sri Lanka’s people and conflicts are fictions, Perera suggests — fictions through which “[a]reas of cultural, linguistic and religious overlap, of common regional affiliations and daily interactions in shared spaces, are overwritten by the organisation of a various population into distinct racial/ethnic categories [. . .]” (15). Against this narrative of discrete, essentialized collective identities, Perera calls attention to the “complex, intertwined histories and enmeshed, interlocking identities,” the “dense, untidy tapestry of interactions, peaceful and otherwise,” that characterize the people of Sri Lanka (15). The language that Perera uses to describe Sri Lankan society is worth noting, for it powerfully evokes a dialogical conception of identity formation. The ideas of “coexistence” and cultural “overlap,” of “interlocking identities” and “daily interactions in shared spaces” call to mind a multiplicity of complex individuals engaging in a multiplicity of exchanges, in which the values and choices that constitute the self are negotiated. These negotiations are, as the dialogical conception of identity implies, and as Perera recognizes, “complex” and “untidy.” They also result in “areas of cultural, linguistic and religious overlap” — shared understandings of the world, shared “horizons of meaning,” to use Taylor’s term — which transcend the divisions imposed by essentialized ethnic categories.

*Adam’s Peak* challenges Kanda’s essentializing narrative with a view of Sri Lankan society that parallels Perera’s. Kanda himself offers an example of “daily interactions in shared spaces” when he spends time, as Rudy notes, “chumming around with a group of other students, none of them Tamil” (285). In other words, though the boy insists that his identity is shaped entirely by Tamil

culture, the dialogical interactions — the “chumming around” — of his day to day existence as a student in an ethnically mixed school suggest that he is influenced by people and ideas outside the realm of “Tamil culture.” More emphatically than through Kanda’s school life, however, the novel dramatizes Sri Lanka’s culture of dialogical coexistence through references to the pilgrimage site of Adam’s Peak.

Adam’s Peak (*Sri Pada* in Sinhala, *Swangarrhanam* in Tamil) is recognized by members of all of Sri Lanka’s major religious and ethnic communities as a sacred place, and the novel treats this shared sacred space as a metonym of the “coexistence” and “interlocking identities” of the country’s people. Ascents of the peak are made, recalled, or anticipated throughout the novel, and at several of these points the text calls attention to the dialogical relations that exist between those groups that Kanda would keep separate. Clare’s biological father, Patrick Locke, remarks on the communal spirit he observed while climbing the peak as a young man (334). Rudy’s Uncle Ernie reveals, as he and Rudy make their ascent, that although Buddhists, Hindus, Muslims, and Christians connect the peak with different myths, each of those myths, by virtue of cultural and religious overlap, involves the footprint of a sacred figure (Buddha, Shiva, or Adam) and has led to the tradition of making pilgrimages to the peak to view a single concrete footprint (283). In a more subtle way, Rudy’s grandfather’s account of climbing Adam’s Peak with the young Ernie and the deaf tea taster, Amitha, also connects the site to the ideas of cultural overlap and dialogically formed identities. The account, written in Grandpa’s diary, says that when he went looking for Ernie at the summit, to explain to him the true “greatness of the peak,” he found “the bugger cavorting with a pair of village louts, the lot of them giggling and prattling away in Sinhalese,” while Amitha “seemed in a foul mood, for reasons unknown” (94). What Grandpa’s diary offers, in spite of its clear disapproval of

Ernie's behaviour and of the villagers, is a glimpse at what Perera calls the "dense, untidy tapestry of interactions" — the cross-cultural, dialogical relationships — that characterizes the day to day existence of the people of Sri Lanka. Grandpa wants to insist that the significance of Adam's Peak consists in the individual's capacity to conquer it; yet Ernie challenges his father's individualistic interpretation by spending his time at the summit engaged in interactions that are dialogical, as implied by the fact that he and the villagers are "giggling and prattling away" together. Of course, Ernie and his companions also, through their interactions, challenge "official narratives" (Perera 15) of collective identity and partition. Ernie, a Burgher, speaks Sinhala; Amitha, who "should" speak Sinhala, does not, because he is deaf; the villagers, who could be Tamil or Sinhalese, are comfortable socializing with someone of European descent. And Amitha's "foul mood" is, as the text elsewhere implies, connected to his intimate relationship with Ernie, a relationship that defies both cultural and sexual boundaries. In short, this ethnically mixed group fails to respect the linguistic and cultural divisions through which narratives like Kanda's (and the LTTE's) insist that Sri Lanka's ethnic communities are fundamentally different and incompatible.

As I suggested earlier, Kanda's insistence on the existence of rigid, mutually antagonistic collective identities in Sri Lanka is problematic not only because it denies the country's social realities and naturalizes intolerance but also because it implies an abdication of moral responsibility. In his letter, Kanda declares, "I am a Tamil. That is how I think and conduct myself" (203). His comments suggest that he thinks and acts not as Kanda Selvarajah, an individual with multiple concerns and belongings, but as part of a collective, whose shared ways of thinking and behaving provide a model to which he conforms. In Michael Ignatieff's terms, Kanda allows himself "to be spoken for by the

collective discourses that have taken [him] over" (99). My criticism of this surrendering of voice (where voice is understood in a very broad sense) is based on an assumption, central to individualism and crucial to existentialism, that human beings must take responsibility for the choosing of their values and beliefs and for the consequences of those moral choices. Our moral choices are, as I have been arguing throughout this study, made in dialogue with significant others. But the dialogical genesis of those choices does not mean that we are released from responsibility for them. One of the theoretical problems with conceiving of the way one thinks and acts (one's moral constitution, in other words) as being determined by membership in a particular collective is that such a conception — not unlike a belief in fate or predestiny — effectively denies the individual's responsibility for him- or herself. If I believe that my ways of thinking and acting are determined by the fact that I am, for example, French Canadian or female or Jewish, then it is not I who am responsible for my beliefs and behaviours but, rather, the collective that has shaped me.

In practical terms, the problem with such a conception is that it facilitates intolerance and violence. As Ignatieff argues, if people "cannot see themselves as the makers of their individualities," then it follows that "they cannot see others as the makers of theirs either" (99). Tolerance of others, he goes on to say, "depends, critically, on being able to individualize oneself and others" (100). Other people, when understood as unindividuated components of a collective, are not altogether human. If I perceive that certain members of that collective are threatening to me in some way, my failure to acknowledge the individuality, and therefore the humanity, of the collective's other members will make it easier for me to reciprocate the threat in a generalized manner: to tell racist jokes, to segregate schools, to exterminate an entire population. And, of course, if I do not conceive of myself as being personally responsible for my beliefs and my

actions, then such practices become even easier.

Over the course of *Adam's Peak*, certain features of the politics of collective identity come under the scrutiny of the novel's central characters, particularly those on the "Vantwest" side of the narrative. Uncle Ernie expresses considerable sympathy for views and strategies such as those that Kanda endorses; however, Ernie's sympathy is overshadowed by the attacks of other characters. Through their conversations about Sri Lankan politics, Rudy, Alec, and Mary — all of whom the text treats as reasonable and reliable (if not consistently likable) — contribute to the novel's criticisms of the collective conception of identity.

Expressing an idea similar to one I introduced in Chapter One — that there are circumstances in which it can be politically useful to think of oneself as part of a collective and to act for the benefit of that collective — Ernie Van Twest implies that Tamil nationalism represents a necessary strategic adopting of collective identity. With regard to Sri Lanka's political turmoils, he hypothesizes that "[t]hings would have been fine and dandy if [the country had] gotten off on the right foot after independence," then he argues that, in reality, Tamils "have been exploited and excluded, and they've had enough" (284). Ernie's remarks suggest that Tamil nationalism — and, by extension, the identity politics that accompany it — is a product of the attempts of post-colonial, pro-Sinhalese governments to disenfranchise Tamil people. He implies that were it not for such moves on the part of the government, political relations in the country would be "fine and dandy" — in keeping with the peaceful coexistence of everyday life — and Tamil people would have no need to assert either a collective identity or a collective difference from the rest of the country's people. In response to Rudy's rhetorical query as to "just how small a group should have the right to self-government" (284), Ernie acknowledges the insubstantiality of essentialized

collective identities but also reminds Rudy of their strategic usefulness:

'You musn't misunderstand me, Rudy, when I speak of homelands. I'm not saying we should allow all the green-eyed, English-speaking Burghers with Dutch grandfathers to declare a homeland on the outskirts of Colombo. As you say, it makes no sense. All those things — language, race, religion and whatnot — those are the least interesting aspects of who we are. They're just circumstances. It's what we do with our circumstances that matters. But it's just those sorts of meaningless circumstances that have been used against the Tamil people. It's a wretched bloody mess, and I think the government should give the buggers whatever political autonomy they want. Or expect to keep having their country bombed to bits.' (285)

Ernie's analysis of, on the one hand, the "meaninglessness" of the kinds of features that serve to define collective identities and, on the other, of the real-world significance of those features parallels Michael Ignatieff's comments on the tensions between Serbs and Croats. The differences between Serbs and Croats, he writes, "are tiny — when seen from the outside — but from the inside they are worth dying for *because* someone will kill you for them" (96, emphasis original). Ernie Van Twest suggests, in his prediction of ongoing violence, that the best response to chronic ethnic tensions is political secession, a move which implies the asserting of a collective ethnic identity. Ernie's conclusion is similar to that of Anthony D. Smith, who argues in *The Ethnic Origins of Nations* that the de-linking of ethnicity and statehood through confederal states "must remain a utopian dream" (225). Ultimately, the text of *Adam's Peak* does not suggest that there is an unquestionably better response to crises such as those in Sri Lanka or the Balkans. But the novel's other characters do reveal several serious limitations

of the politics of collective identity.

Rudy, despite his attraction to certain features of collective identities, and despite his persistent tendency to question his own convictions, is the text's most consistent critic of nationalist identity politics. The question to which his uncle is responding in the passage quoted above is, significantly, more complex than Ernie's comments acknowledge. After asking "just how small a group should have the right to self-government," Rudy pursues the matter:

'And what's supposed to happen to all the non-Tamils in a so-called Tamil homeland? Or all the non-Francophones in an independent Quebec? People move around and mix themselves up so much these days. I don't think it makes sense to define a country in terms of things like language, or ethnic background, or . . .' (284-285)

From a certain perspective, it is possible to criticize Rudy's comments as falling into what Leela Gandhi terms the "current bias of Western anti-nationalism" (103). Smith, who is far more critical of that perceived bias than is Gandhi, attacks Western observers who too easily dismiss the nationalist causes of people who have "known exile or subjugation of land and culture" (2). Smith's argument is an important one, for it is indeed far easier for someone whose ethnic identity has never been insulted or attacked, someone with the means to "move around," to view certain nationalisms — in particular very small-scale ones — as problematic and even pointless. Yet Rudy's questions, though put forth by a relatively privileged "Westerner," point to a real and ultimately unresolvable dilemma: how to conceive of a "homeland" for a narrowly defined group of people without suggesting that those who inhabit the land but do not fit the

definition are not entirely “at home”?<sup>37</sup> Arguably, it is not possible. Moreover, the dilemma is an unavoidable one. For even if we disregard the complex, dialogical nature of human identity formation, the geographic, ethnic, and cultural intermingling of the world’s population has still, as Rudy’s comment about people moving around and mixing themselves up points out, made the bracketing off of any homogeneous, monolithic chunk of humanity an impossibility. In a nation conceived in terms of an essentialized collective identity, in other words, there will always be people who don’t quite fit, people whom L.C. Buchheit refers to as “trapped minorities” (29). These are the people to whom Rudy refers when he asks, “what’s supposed to happen to all the non-Tamils in a Tamil homeland?” The question is a valid one, for it hints at the fact that nations conceived in this way ultimately propose, explicitly or implicitly, an ethnocultural norm, against which citizens might be measured and, conceivably, found deficient — second-class, even undesirable. To say that a particular territory is to be the “homeland” of Tamil people or Serbs or “*pure laine*” Quebecers is, thus, to foster the same kind of suspicion and intolerance that ethnically-based nationalisms often seek to escape.

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<sup>37</sup> In Canada, the Bloc Québécois’s awkward efforts to construct itself and its proposed nation as ethnically diverse and tolerant demonstrate the tremendous difficulty of reconciling the modern valuing of universal rights with the exclusionary ideals of ethnic nationalism. Cautious not to appear racist or xenophobic, yet still committed to the idea of a distinct collective identity — a “*particularité identitaire*” — Maria Mourani, president of the BQ’s “Commission sur la citoyenneté” describes a sovereign Quebec as “une nation ouverte à la diversité ethnoculturelle, en constante évolution et unie par une langue commune: le français” (p1). This vision of an inclusive, multiethnic society, unified by a common language (which, for many Quebecers, is not a first language) is significantly different from the more radical vision of a white, Francophone, “*pure laine*” society, which has been endorsed by numerous Bloc Québécois and Parti Québécois members and supporters over the years. The desire to assert an *exclusive* identity was again evident in the BQ’s 2004 federal election campaign slogan — “Parce qu’on est différents.” But the striking diversity of the people proclaiming the slogan on television and radio suggested that the same words could have been used in almost any Canadian province. For instead of asserting a collective difference from the rest of the country, the actors in the BQ advertisements ultimately, and far more emphatically, asserted their individual differences from each other.

Rudy's query about the fate of "non-conformists" in ethnic homelands also, of course, alludes to the problem of ethnic violence, and the way in which collective conceptions of identity serve to efface people's individuality and humanity. What frequently "happens" to people when a multiplicity of individuals is recast as a pair, or a handful, of collectives is that those individual people become scapegoats, pawns, victims. After reading Kanda's pro-LTTE essay, Rudy imagines asking the boy, "What if your sister got in the way of a Tiger attack, Kanda?" (50-51). Such an event does not occur in the novel; nevertheless, Rudy's question foreshadows the Colombo bombing, in which, as Alec Vantwest points out, the Tigers "kill off even their own kind" (221). What the indiscriminate, even self-destructive, violence of this bombing suggests is that the individuality of the people who happen to be in the office building, as well as that of the suicide bombers who carry out the deed, has been, to use Hardt and Negri's terms, "negated in the straitjacket of the identity and homogeneity" (107) of the collective. The deaths of a few hundred individuals — Sinhalese, Tamils, others — are, implicitly, unimportant when those individuals are understood as reproducible components of a collective self. And, as I suggested earlier, when the responsibility for personal identity is ascribed to abstract collectives, then it is easier, morally, to attack, to reject, to kill than it is when one conceives of oneself as a responsible individual, a moral agent, in interaction with other individuals.

Through Rudy's reaction to the victims he encounters in the aftermath of the bombing, *Adam's Peak* challenges both the dehumanizing tendency and the tendency to abdicate moral responsibility that accompany collective conceptions of the self. Rudy's impulse, on reaching the "six or seven people lying in the shade," looking to him like "synthetic dummies," is to "dismiss them altogether" (211). This initial reaction evokes the implicit attitude of the LTTE in organizing

and executing the attack on the downtown office building. To the Tigers, the occupants of the building are, in a sense, no more human than “synthetic dummies”; they are “dismissible,” dispensable. Yet Rudy, forced into face-to-face contact with the bomb victims — he must go past them to reach the boy he thinks is Kanda — is unable to be morally indifferent or to ignore the victims’ humanity. He sees the victims as individuals: a “pair of middle-aged businessmen; a woman of thirty or so in a pink, bloodstained blouse; another woman, fortyish, her hair in a dishevelled bun” (211). The features he notices — age, sex, occupation, clothing, hair — are noteworthy not only for the way they individuate (if crudely) the people, but also for their lack of explicit connection to the collective identities that are at stake in the Tigers’ bombing of the building. Rudy does not see collective identities — Tamil, Sinhalese, Burgher, and so forth — in the faces of the victims (though ethnicity could, conceivably, be *one* of the features he notices); rather, he sees individuals, for whom, he concludes, “he [has] to be responsible” (211). His sense of moral responsibility for the nameless victims comes from his ability to extrapolate from the individuality of his student. “If Kanda were to be alive,” Rudy posits, “then these grim bodies on the pavement had to be real” (211). In other words, if the individual life in which he is particularly interested is to be valued and spared, then he must acknowledge the individuality and humanity — the realness — of the strangers, and he must, implicitly, take responsibility for mourning them. This capacity on Rudy’s part to acknowledge the individuality of others and to conceive of himself as a moral agent is, the novel suggests, tragically absent in those who understand identity in collective terms.

Along with Rudy, Alec Vantwest also contributes to the novel’s critique of the politics of collective identity. Alec’s attack on ethnic nationalism is more biting and impatient than is Rudy’s: “I can understand these people wanting to

be treated properly," he says to Clare and her mother, referring to the 1995 Quebec referendum, "but what is the sense in insisting that everyone in a country speak the same language or have the same beliefs? If that's to be our understanding of what makes a country, we should take a big knife to the world and start hacking away. And when we're done, make sure every man stays in his own little compartment" (194). In a different vein, Alec also criticizes the way in which the politics of collective identity divert people's attention from other issues and concerns by conceiving of the desired nation in utopian terms. The Tigers, he says, "carry on about their homeland as if it would be some kind of paradise, and all the troubles of the underdeveloped third world country would magically disappear" (195). Michael Ignatieff makes a similar criticism when he writes that the "nationalist dream" is a "politics of fantasy, leading the population away from 'real' issues, like the stubborn backwardness of the south Balkans, into dreams of national greatness" (93).

Aunty Mary, finally, offers an implicit critique of the reductiveness of collective conceptions of the self, and of their denial of the dialogical nature of identity formation. She alludes to both of these features when she attacks what she sees as Kanda's misplaced preoccupation with language and culture. In response to Rudy's suggestion that Kanda sees his Tamil identity — his language and culture — as "the most important thing he is" (51), she says, "What's most important is our family, no? We should worry about those people, whether they are healthy and living a good life. Language and culture will look after themselves, isn't it" (52). Clearly, Aunty Mary's focus on family demonstrates that she, too, has a somewhat limited conception of selfhood. Still, her own preoccupation with family relationships and obligations challenges Kanda's understanding of identity and, in doing so, serves as a reminder of what Ignatieff calls the "multiple range of our belongings" (94). More importantly, Aunty

Mary's suggestion that language and culture are contingent upon relationships, and not vice versa, calls to mind a dialogical understanding of the self. For in saying that we should "worry about" our family — in other words, devote our attention to a certain kind of relationship — and that "language and culture will look after themselves," she implies that it is in the context of relationships that horizons of meaning — language, culture, and so forth — are established. This idea contrasts with collective conceptions of the self, which imply that those horizons are non-contingent, external to relationships, and that they shape individuals' identities, from the outside.

To this point in my argument I have focussed on the ways in which the text of *Adam's Peak* both complicates and criticizes the monological conception of identity and, more explicitly, the collective conception. Throughout this discussion I have pointed out the novel's tendency, through particular scenes and characters, to endorse a dialogical understanding of the self. What remains to be discussed is the novel's more global endorsement of this understanding, which it expresses through its principal narrative developments and its form.

The idea that identity is formed in dialogue with others is expressed in the novel's central developments: Rudy's and Clare's ultimate constructing of new identities. Simply put, both characters are in the midst of identity crises at the start of the novel, and both arrive at a new sense of self, primarily through their relationships with Adam. Clare's brief interaction with Adam and her subsequent responses to that interaction drive the important developments in her character. Beginning with their shared motorcycle ride, during which she senses that she has left behind "the old Clare Fraser" (76), Clare comes to conceive of herself as someone who is capable of taking risks — meeting new people, exploring her sexuality, travelling. And, as I suggested earlier, her relationship with Adam brings about a shift in her interests and values. The

journey on which she embarks at the end of the novel — a journey that signals the establishment of a new identity — is the product of interests and abilities she has discovered in dialogue with Adam. Rudy's adopting of a new identity — as a caregiver, a supportive brother, a user of sign language — is, like Clare's, signalled by a journey that comes about through his relationship with Adam. In deciding to return to Canada to help care for his niece and to try to be "a decent brother" to Adam (83), Rudy is responding both to his sense that he has "failed" as a brother to Adam (317), and to Adam's encouragement of, and modelling of, a certain kind of direct, intimate family support. It is significant that both Rudy's and Clare's developments are initiated by interactions with Adam that occur just before the accident that leaves Adam in a coma (Clare goes on the motorcycle ride; Rudy receives and responds to a letter from his brother). Understood metaphorically, Adam's gradual emergence from his coma — his regaining of a sense of self — is connected to the gradual emergence of Rudy's and Clare's new identities. This metaphorical relationship between the characters calls further attention to the social, dialogical relationship that exists between them.

As I proposed at the end of Chapter One of this study, certain formal features of *Adam's Peak* also contribute to the novel's thematic concern with the dialogical nature of identity formation. The most important of these formal features are point of view shifts, temporal shifts, and the incorporation into the narrative of a variety of genres. All of these features can usefully be considered through the lens of Bakhtin's theories of dialogical discourse in the novel.

Through its shifts in point of view, time, and place, *Adam's Peak* enacts a textual dialogue, which parallels and calls attention to the dialogues between characters. First, the alternating point of view of the novel's chapters, which switch between Rudy's consciousness and Clare's, creates an emphatic back-and-forth quality suggestive of a conversation. This "back-and-forthness" is further

emphasized through the analepses that occur in the novel's three "interludes" and in Rudy's habitual flashbacks, all of which serve to establish a conversation between voices of the past and those of the present. Lastly, there is a cultural and geographical back-and-forthness in the novel's movement between Sri Lanka (of which the Vantwests' house on Morgan Road could be considered a part) and Canada, and between Scotland and Canada.<sup>38</sup> To use Bakhtin's terms, these shifts in voice, time, and place contribute to the "dialogized heteroglossia" (272) of the text. Although *Adam's Peak* does not feature quite the sprawling "multiplicity of social voices" (263) that Bakhtin identifies in nineteenth-century realist novels, the psychological immediacy of the novel's central-consciousness points of view offers an intimate and significant sense of the impact of social "links and interrelationships" (Bakhtin 263) on characters and their identities. The four characters whose consciousness the narrative enters (Rudy, Clare, Alec, and Isobel) are key participants in the three ongoing conversations — between the Vantwests and the Frasers, between the past and the present, and between Canada and Sri Lanka/Scotland — that shape the novel and drive its development. The identities of these characters are, in very broad terms, the products of those conversations. Clare's identity, for example, is significantly influenced by her interactions with the Vantwests; Alec's is more a product of relationships and interactions from his past in Sri Lanka. There are, of course, many other dialogues going on in the novel, and the characters' identities are, as I have tried to demonstrate, complex. What the novel's three-part "conversational" structure achieves, however, is a foregrounding of the idea that human social existence is multivocal and dialogic, and that human identity is

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<sup>38</sup> The temporal and spatial "conversations" in *Adam's Peak* are suggestive of Bakhtin's work on the literary "chronotope," the term he uses to refer to "the intrinsic connectedness of temporal and spatial relationships that are artistically expressed in literature" (84).

shaped by that existence.

Another formal feature that contributes to the text's heteroglossia is the inclusion of a variety of different genres within the novel. Embedded in the overall third-person, central-consciousness narrative are numerous letters, written in different voices (Rudy's, Adam's, Kanda's, Clare's, Cousin Archie's), entries from Rudy's and Grandpa's diaries, and an essay written by Kanda. In Bakhtin's terms, "these genres, as they enter the novel, bring into it their own languages, and therefore stratify the linguistic unity of the novel and further intensify its speech diversity in fresh ways" (321). Like the new voices that emerge from shifts in point of view, time, and place, the voices that these generic shifts introduce serve to emphasize the multivocal and, moreover, the dialogic nature of human existence. For not only do the inserted genres carry with them "their own languages," they are also, for the most part, dialogic in their content. The letters and the essay, in particular, are written manifestations of ongoing interactions between characters, while Grandpa's diary is read aloud to Rudy in the context of a conversation. Even Rudy's diary, which does not ultimately reach its intended audience, is directed toward a real person — Clare Fraser — and demonstrates the ways in which Rudy's sense of self is shaped by his interactions with the Frasers.

In various ways, then, the formal features of *Adam's Peak* support the text's thematic concern with the dialogical nature of human social existence and identity formation. Through dialogue between a range of voices and genres, the novel implicitly challenges both the unitary, monological conception of language (discussed in Chapter One)<sup>39</sup> and the monological conception of identity. The

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<sup>39</sup> A full exploration of the ways in which *Adam's Peak* challenges the monological conception of language is beyond the scope of this discussion. One example of this challenge, however, is the text's juxtaposing of a variety of forms of English: "Burgher English," "Tamil English," "Scottish English," Canadian "teenspeak," and so forth.

novel's heteroglossia also, importantly, challenges the kinds of essentializations that accompany collective conceptions of identity. Bakhtin writes that in the context of novelistic heteroglossia, "[f]ewer and fewer neutral, hard elements ('rock bottom truths') remain that are not drawn into dialogue" (300). In other words, in a text that strives to represent the diversity of voices of the social world, totalizing assertions about life tend to be problematized through dialogue. While it is certainly possible to challenge Bakhtin's claim that "social heteroglossia" is "the prerequisite for authentic novelistic prose" (264), *Adam's Peak* is a novel that does indeed strive to include the "variety of individual voices" (264) of which Bakhtin writes. Essentializing statements about culture and identity are significant examples of the kinds of totalizing assertions, or "rock bottom truths," that the text draws into dialogue and, in doing so, problematizes. The claims about identity that Kanda makes in his letter to Rudy are filtered over the course of the novel through a variety of belief systems — Rudy's, Alec's, Ernie's, Aunt Mary's — such that those claims gradually destabilize and lose their integrity, their totality. Similarly, Clare's and Rudy's conviction that their identity can be reconstructed monologically is questioned and destabilized over the course of the novel's many dialogues.

*Adam's Peak* is, ultimately, a dialogically structured text *about* the dialogues and relationships that shape who we are. The three conceptions of identity that I presented in Chapter One — the collective, the monological, and the dialogical — are central to the novel's conflicts, the two most important of which involve identity crises. The resolution of those conflicts, as well as the novel's general problematizing of the monological and collective conceptions of the self, suggests that, no matter how we choose to understand ourselves as selves, human identity is complex, multifaceted, and is formed in dialogue with others.

**Conclusion**

This study, like most explorations of complex issues, has left important matters unaddressed and has, in its attempts to answer certain questions, raised a number of others. I will conclude, then, with a few brief comments on those unexplored, unanswered questions that seem to me particularly compelling. My comments will focus on three areas of investigation: the politics of collective identity, the process of dialogical identity formation, and identity formation as a guiding concept for literary criticism.

First, this study begs further investigation into the complicated “real-world” politics of collective identity and secession. I have argued that the identity politics that often accompany sovereignist movements are problematic; however, assessments of the validity of such movements must consider a much broader range of complicated factors. In his essay titled “The Right to Secession: an Antisecessionist Defence,” Daryl J. Glaser offers a compelling pragmatist analysis of the range of factors that advisors both to secessionists and to leaders of existing states must take into consideration. Glaser argues that “it is morally coherent to oppose secession in the [former] advisory role and support it in the [latter]” (370). He goes on to say, demonstrating a political pragmatism with which I am sympathetic, that “a readiness to adjust moral advice to audiences in this way, and on this matter, is necessary for the proper performance of the task of promoting a genuinely democratic and just peace” (370).

Though an antisecessionist himself, Glaser makes a convincing case for the potential advantages of political secession. “There is nothing natural or pre-given about existing state boundaries,” he points out early in his argument, “and if those boundaries could be determined democratically rather than by, say, chance or conquest, that would be, other things being equal, a good thing for democracy (371). Among the potential benefits of secession that Glaser mentions are the decentralizing of power, the removal of ethnicity from the centre of

political life, and the protecting of threatened cultures (376). Assuming that it is undertaken peacefully, equitably, and in a manner that provides for the respectful treatment of minority populations, secession is, Glaser allows, a viable political option, and a right that must be defended by existing governments and their advisors.

The complications and disadvantages associated with the exercising of this right are, however, so numerous, in Glaser's view, that he advises secessionists "to stand and fight for desirable changes in an existing state rather than to initiate the further fragmentation of the state system (378). In support of this view, Glaser problematizes all of the potential benefits of secession that he has identified, pointing out, for example, that changes such as political decentralization or ethnic homogenization tend to "foster parochialism and, by engendering more homogeneous political units, increase pressures to conform in ways that threaten individual liberty" (377). He also argues that, in addition to problems connected to the protection of justice and individual liberty, the difficulty of equitably dividing resources which, under an existing state, are shared by all citizens should be a powerful incentive for secessionists and governments to seek alternatives to secession. Glaser proposes a few such alternatives, including "forms of federalism, asymmetric devolution, consociationalism or multiculturalism" (380).

What is striking about Glaser's suggestions, and about most liberal-humanist "solutions" to the "problem" of secession, is the tremendous gap that seems to exist between the cool reasonableness of the theoretical solutions and the volatile emotionality of the real-world problem. The pragmatism of Glaser's solutions is, as I said, admirable; still, it is possible that the best insights and "solutions" to conflicts such as those in Sri Lanka or the Balkans are ultimately to be found in the real-world emotionality and complexity of fiction.

A second area of investigation to which this study points is the dialogical process of identity formation. I have argued throughout this study that human identity, which I equate, following Taylor, with the individual's orientation in moral space, is formed in dialogue with significant others. In other words, the choices we make about what we value, what it is good to be, take on significance for us against horizons of meaning, which are established through our relationships with other people and through what Taylor calls "the languages needed for self-definition" (*Malaise* 33). But how, exactly, do those moral choices happen? What are the internal processes that lead an individual to value one choice, or way of being, over another? And what can be said about the process of identity formation when an individual's sense of self is negative?

In the context of clinical and educational psychology, Fran Hagstrom and James Wertsch examine the kinds of cognitive processes through which individuals construct for themselves a sense of who they are in the social world, and argue that selfhood arises from the various "self-narratives" (163), positive or negative, that emerge as we construct meaning in dialogue with others. Hagstrom and Wertsch, whose work draws significantly on the ideas of Bakhtin and the notion of dialogicality,<sup>40</sup> propose that "identity is an ongoing construction within social dynamics" (163). Shifting the focus from identity as a *thing* to the *process* of identity formation, they go on to say that "[e]ach of us in our socially bound interactions is continually *identiting*" (164, emphasis original). This process of "identiting" involves an ongoing making and remaking of meaning through "mastery and appropriation of changing cultural tools" (167). "Cultural tools" include everything from words to water coolers — abstract and concrete things that come to acquire meaning for us in particular sociocultural

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<sup>40</sup> In his book *Voices of the Mind: A Sociocultural Approach to Mediated Action* (Harvard UP, 1991), Wertsch also draws on Charles Taylor's ideas about individualism and the monological conception of the self.

contexts. According to Hagstrom and Wertsch, we acquire mastery of these tools through our interactions with others, and the *quality* of those interactions, or the “self-narratives” that emerge from the interactions, contributes to our sense of what is worthwhile and valuable and what is not. An example from primary school pedagogy is useful here: if I, in making meaning from the expression “ $2+3=5$ ,” have a sense, from my interactions with my teacher, that the meaning of that expression is a worthwhile thing and that I am a person capable — or, importantly, not — of dealing with such meanings, then the interaction will help to establish mathematical knowledge as a significant horizon of meaning, against which I can understand and define myself.

Hagstrom and Wertsch’s conception of identity formation points to two important implications: first, our sense of self comes as much from others’ constructions of us as from our own, and, second, “identities can be beneficial or be a hindrance” (163). As professors of clinical and educational psychology, Hagstrom and Wertsch are interested in the ways in which therapists and teachers, as significant others, might help an individual under their care to develop a “beneficial” sense of self. As a literary critic, I find the idea that individuals have the capacity, through their dialogical meaning-making, to influence the quality of each other’s sense of self to be a compelling hypothesis from which to analyze character and theme in works of literature.

Given that the implications and possibilities of literature are the governing concern of this study, I want to conclude with some remarks on the use of identity formation as a guiding critical concept. Georg Lukács writes that the form of the novel can be understood as “the process of the problematic individual’s journeying towards himself” (80). This idea that the journey to selfhood is a crucial feature of the novel suggests, on the one hand, that the classification of “Bildungsroman” can, potentially, be applied to a much broader

set of works than it conventionally is, and, on the other, that conceptions of identity formation, such as those presented in this study, can usefully guide interpretations of literary works.

If we accept Lukács's claim that "the content of the novel is the story of the soul that goes to find itself" (89), then, perhaps, all novels are novels of formation and development — Bildungsromans.<sup>41</sup> Arguably, this label is more useful if reserved for a limited collection of texts; however, if identity formation — the process by which individuals come to construct themselves as selves — is indeed central to a broad range of literary works, then further attention to that feature and its thematic and critical implications is merited. Are there patterns in the ways identity is conceived of and constructed across the spectrum of literature? What do these patterns reveal about the social and political contexts of particular works? In what ways is "identity-based" criticism compatible, or incompatible, with other critical approaches, such as feminist criticism, deconstruction, or postcolonial criticism? These questions have certainly been approached in various ways and contexts, though not, to my knowledge, in a manner that explicitly treats identity formation as a guiding critical concept. Such an investigation would be important and worthwhile.

For, in significant ways, modern human life is characterized by identity crises. Charles Taylor traces our concern with selfhood to the dissolution of traditional society's "sacred structure" (*Malaise* 5); Lukács claims that the novel is "the epic of a world that has been abandoned by God" (88). In short, without traditional social structures and beliefs to tell us who we are, we have turned to ourselves and to each other for that knowledge. The three conceptions of identity that I present in this study — the monological, the collective, and the

<sup>41</sup> Significantly, Lukács devotes a chapter of his book to Goethe's *Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship* (1795-1796), a work widely acknowledged as the first Bildungsroman.

dialogical — are, I believe, apt tools for understanding how we go about achieving that knowledge.

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