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## Fluid Identity of Bod in Neil Gaiman's *The Graveyard Book*

**ORIGINAL ARTICLE**



### **Authors**

**Chandan Kumar Chhedaiya**

Research Scholar

School of Studies in Literature and Languages

Pt Ravishankar Shukla University

Raipur, Chhattisgarh, INDIA

**Dr Savita Singh**

Professor & Head

Department of English

Govt NPG College of Science

Raipur, Chhattisgarh, INDIA

### **Abstract**

This paper explores a fluid identity culture within society in Neil Gaiman's *The Graveyard Book* (2008), focusing on how the concept of identity functions in a society. The present study examines the journey of the protagonist, Nobody "Bod" Owens, who shows fluid identity while constantly shifting between the living and the dead worlds. The influences of the society and shifting relationships shape his identity with hybridity, moral agency, and liberation from lineage. Bod's journey proves that identity is a collaborative performance. The graveyard's ghosts educate him jointly to settle and carry the lessons of survival and resistance in the living world. Gaiman's Bod emerges as a self-defined hero with the collective help of the ghosts.

### **Key Words**

*Fluid Identity, Liminality, Postmodern Identity, Community.*

Fluid Identity is considered a postmodern concept because it denies the idea of fixed identity; instead, it sees identity as a fragmented, contextual, and constructed not innate. This identity crisis, where identity is formed by discoveries and power systems, not by fixed truths, is very much influenced by theorists like

Michel Foucault and Jacques Derrida. Michel Foucault dismantles traditional concepts of identity and proposes that identity appears through discursive practices and power relations. Michel Foucault's *The Archaeology of Knowledge* (1969) criticizes the idea that discourse is generated by a cohesive, coherent self. He frames the subject, as a dispersed, contextual, and constructed within language. "Thus conceived, discourse is not the majestically unfolding manifestation of a thinking, knowing, speaking subject, but, on the contrary, a totality, in which the dispersion of the subject and his discontinuity with himself may be determined" (Foucault 55).

Jacques Derrida presents his idea on the deconstruction of fixation in his books, *Of Grammatology* (1967). Judith Butler argues in her books, *Gender Trouble* (1990) and *Undoing Gender* (2004) that forming an identity is not an inborn or a natural process. It functions and is constructed through social connections and organized exercises. "There is no gender identity behind the expressions of gender; that identity is performatively constituted by the very 'expression' that are said to be its results" (Butler, *Gender Trouble* 25).

Fluidity is a reaction to the ideology of the grand narrative. It does not assert its own fixation from religion or nationality; instead, it follows fragmentation, where identity is constructed through environment,

conflict, and continuously changing aspects. Fluid identity is an assured key of postmodernism that shows skepticism towards established entities and openly accepts diversity. Fluid identity is not only limited to theories but it can be observed in an interconnected, constantly changing world, where identities are rewritten continuously.

Neil Gaiman's *The Graveyard Book* (2008) explores a fluid identity culture within society, exposing how the concept of identity functions in a society. The journey of the protagonist, Bod, shows various elements of a fluid identity in the novel. This identity crisis of the protagonist allows the inner development through various stages of his interaction with the outer world. The present research traces out the elements of the fluid identity of the protagonist, who constantly navigates between the living and the dead worlds.

The liminality of Bod's existence between two worlds is the center of his journey in *The Graveyard Book* (2008). Ian Buchanan describes the word "liminality" as "A ritual space or phase of transition in which a person is no longer what they were, but is not yet what they will be. The liminal is the in-between, the neither one thing nor the other" (294). The term liminality was first introduced by anthropologist, Arnold van Gennep in *The Rites of Passage* (1908) which was later elaborated by Victor Turner in his book, *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure* (1969). Gaiman's *The Graveyard Book* aligns with Victor Turner's liminality and ritual theory, where the graveyard is symbolized as a ritual doorstep. In the novel, Bod experiences both worlds: the graveyard's supernatural society, and the living community. Throughout the journey, he continuously shifts between the two worlds in seeking his relevance. He is adopted by the ghosts of the graveyard while escaping from the murderer of his family, The Man Jack. Mr and Mrs Owens adopt Bod as their son, and provide protection. Mrs Owens expresses her desire by saying: "I can look after him," she said. "As well as his own mama. She already gave him to me. Look- I'm holding him, aren't I? I'm touching him"... "Here", said Mrs Owens. "We could give him the Freedom of the Graveyard" (17). He learns all the dead and mystical tactics like fading and hunting from them and survives in the graveyard. The dead community still makes him suitable for the outside world.

The name of the protagonist, Nobody shows vague belonging. Mrs Owens calls him nobody and Silas affirms the name: "He looks like nobody but himself", said Mrs Owens, firmly. "He looks like nobody." "Then Nobody it is," said Silas. "Nobody Owens" (19). The graveyard community sees him as nobody and later on, he also accepts himself as a variable being. The graveyard becomes a place where Bod stays safely and ghosts become his protectors; on the other hand, the living world seems to be very dangerous for him. It is Neil Gaiman's witty insight about the hidden dangers of the real world. He criticizes the frightful concept of the dead community that is understood to be the most devilish in the world. He safeguards the community of spirits and traces the real danger in the living society. Neil Gaiman highlights the dark side of a society through the novel, where a man is a threat to another man.

Neil Gaiman interprets the two worlds differently in *The Graveyard Book*. The novel mirrors the postmodern decaying society where no one is safe. When ghosts of the graveyard protect Bod from the living world, it indicates the barbarism of the society where a toddler is not safe. He exhibits in three liminal spaces: the graveyard boundary; the ghosts' stasis lives; and belonging to nowhere. The graveyard provides him shelter and protection from the living world. Mr and Mrs Owens' tomb becomes his home and he wanders freely among the other headstones, upsetting the lines between home and grave. The grave symbolizes the end for others, but it becomes the beginning for Bod. Belonging provides an initial identity of something, as Bod sees the graveyard as his home. The night offers a community of ghosts where he lives, but the day becomes lonely as the graveyard's ghosts disappear.

Gaiman's ghosts of the graveyard present a temporal liminal space where they live in a sort of timelessness. The age of the ghosts is static but Bod is alive and ages among them. This conflict of aging proposes the survival in timelessness. He is invited and provided experiences of every dead ritual and the cycle of the

ghosts, but still, he remains alive. Bod encounters the dead life cycles as a living boy, exploring the hidden and mystic layers of the dead community. Nobody Owens's initial identity emerges with the interaction of the graveyard's dead beings. Soon, the aging of Bod makes him conscious that he does not belong in the graveyard. He is told that he is alive by Silas who says:

"You're alive, Bod. That means you have infinite potential. You can do anything, make anything, dream anything. If you change the world, the world will change. Potential'. Once you're dead, it's gone. Over. You've made what you've made, dreamed your dream, written your name. You may be buried here, you may even walk. But that potential is finished." (165-166)

The confrontation with Silas in chapter, *Nobody Owens' School Days*, reveals the secret identity of Bod that he is alive, and his identity is not fixed. He needs to develop it by himself.

When Bod finds out that he is an alive being and not a ghost, he realizes that he belongs to neither the dead nor the living worlds. He learns skills of ghosts like fading, haunting, and dream-walking, but he is still unable to become a normal resident of the dead world. When he confronts the living world, everything seems strange to him. His graveyard identity makes him an outsider in the living world. He is unaware of the technologies, language of the streets, and social activities.

This in-between state of Bod pushes his identity crisis into ambiguity. The graveyard offers him safety but his desire demands freedom. He has the power of the dead community, but as he leaves the graveyard, his ghostly power fades. The identity of Bod resonates with Mr and Mrs Owens, but his aliveness forces him to make a new identity over his hybrid awareness. Neil Gaiman's creation of the in-betweenness state of Bod offers a postmodern flavor, where his fluid identity functions as liberation. The last chapter of the book, *Leavings and Partings*, highlights his desire to live life in the living world.

Bod said, "I want to see life. I want to hold it in my hands. I want to leave a footprint on the sand of a desert island. I want to play football with people. I want," he said, and then he paused and he thought. "I want everything."

"Good," said Silas. . . .

"Good-bye, then, Silas." Bod held out his hand, as he had when he was a small boy, and Silas took it, in a cold hand the color of old ivory, and shook it gravely.

"Good-bye, Nobody Owens." Bod picked up the little suitcase. He opened the door to let himself out of the crypt, walked back up the gentle slope to the path without looking back. (286)

His ambiguous identity does not become his weakness, but his hybrid identity, experiences, and lessons of the graveyard become his strength in the living world.

Bod's threshold existence resonates with the present identity crisis of the real world like immigrants, LGBTQ+ youth, and cultural hybrids. In postmodernism, identity is seen as flexible, evolving towards multiplicity. Neil Gaiman's transition of the graveyard from a dead place to a safe space makes Bod a self-made postmodern hero.

The influence of the community and shifting relationships help Bod to shape his identity. The graveyard offers a community of dead beings, each carrying the load of past temporal memories. Their fixed and temporal memories become Bod's guardians and friends. The graveyard's beings and characters who shape his identity are Mr and Mrs Owens, Silas, Miss Lupescu, Liza Hempstock, Scarlett Amber Perkins, Caisus Pompeius, The Sler, Josiah Worthington, Miss Borrowes, and The Jacks of all Traders.

Mr and Mrs Owens are long-dead ghosts physically absent in the graveyard. They adopt Bod and nurture him emotionally because, physically, they are absent. Their parenting, care, and love transform the graveyard from a tomb to a cradle for Bod. Mrs Owens calls him Nobody and offers her surname, Owens,

to him. The Owens family's history and heritage give Bod his family identity. He carries this identity of Owens among the community of ghosts in the graveyard. The Owens' parenting provides a foundation of nurturing and emotional connection to Bod. Mr Owens offers an ethical framework of behavior to Bod who is respected in the graveyard. He teaches moral discipline and offers guidance to Bod. Their parenting is sacrificial and selfless. It is with a heavy heart that they allow Bod to go to the real world which is very dangerous.

Besides Mr and Mrs Owens, Silas has a great impact on Bod as a guardian. He is a vampire and provides education, food, and access to the living world to Bod. He explains to Bod that living a life is a gift to explore the infinite potential of changing himself and the world. Silas's survival tactics teach Bod essential lessons that help him in the confrontation with the villains. Silas's teachings offer Bod adaptability, while Silas's hybrid nature makes Bod belong to nowhere; he lives in an in-between space.

Miss Lupescu is a werewolf who takes the responsibility of a guardian to Bod in Silas's absence. She offers education and cultural flexibility. She helps Bod to learn language, folklore, and self-defense. Her rescue of Bod from monsters makes him aware that adaptability demands preparation and training. Her Eastern European cultural background offers him cultural knowledge, important for survival.

Liza Hempstock, being declared an outcast witch, buried in an unholy ground, resonates with Bod as an outsider. The outdated views of the ghost's community force Bod to apply his ethical judgments to Liza's outcast. Liza's empathy and resistance against injustice educate Bod to raise questions about unjust systems. The friendship of Liza helps Bod to learn adaptability in various social boundaries. Scarlett Amber Perkins is a living friend of Bod who offers real human experience to him like playing and deception. He explores the Sleer's tomb for adventure under the influence of Scarlett. She unknowingly helps the villain of Bod to trace him. Scarlett's prediction becomes real when Bod leaves the graveyard, showing the instability of a living human.

Caius Pompeius is a Roman ghost whose stories about history, the rise and fall of the empire, educate Bod that nothing is permanent in the living world. The Sleer is an ancient entity whose guardianship of an empty treasure teaches him that detaching from the past becomes a ground for progress and development. They both connect Bod to their historical legacies and obsessions. Ghosts like Josiah Worthington and Miss Borrows educate him with their lessons of history and social systems. The community of the graveyard collectively proposes wisdom and moral education to Bod. The graveyard becomes a responsible space when the ghosts vote for the protection and acceptance of Bod in the graveyard. The ghosts allow Bod the freedom of the graveyard and offer their supernatural ability. Altogether, the graveyard becomes a social environment, where Bod learns to maintain a balance between tradition and reason.

The Jacks of all Trades display adverse identification to Bod. The villains show static gestures to kill the target and disappear. The antagonists present the world as an inevitable entity that no one can escape. As Bod lives in both the dead and the living worlds, he learns how to adapt and use supernatural skills and human intelligence simultaneously. The Jacks force Bod to learn fighting skills and weaponize himself. Bod utilizes his acquired knowledge and experiences together and defeats his enemies.

## **CONCLUSION**

The influences of society and shifting relationships shape his identity with hybridity, moral agency, and liberation from lineage. Bod's journey proves that identity is a collaborative performance. Gaiman's Bod emerges as a self-defined hero with the collective help of the ghosts. Gaiman's novel, *The Graveyard Book*, proposes that a fluid identity is inevitable for growth. Bod's life and his survival show that identity is an unstable entity, which is acquired and shaped by a continuous process. Bod's deeds and actions at each and every step of his life make the novel a perfect example of fluid identity.

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